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Kyle Edward Ball's *Skinamarink*

By Troy Sherman

The line in art between affectation and innovation is often very thin.

Skinamarink (2022), Kyle Edward Ball's feature debut, is a deeply affected movie. It



Courtesy BayView Entertainment.

would be wrong, though, to say that its mannerisms were born out of anything other than Ball's desire to make something that looks different from what else is on offer. Inarguably there's value in this, especially to a culture as stuck as ours can seem. But Ball's attempt at novelty results instead in simple difficulty.

Kyle Edward Ball
Skinamarink
(2022)

Skinamarink's difficulty has nourished rather than hindered its success, facilitating a social media rumble that has garnered the fifteen thousand dollar movie two million dollars at the box office and an exclusive deal with Shudder. But this shouldn't affect our judgment of *Skinamarink*; our experience of it should. Ball's obsession with atmosphere, paired with the questionable provenance of his entire visual language, leads to a superficially cohesive movie composed of many unresolved parts. This makes *Skinamarink*'s difficulty entirely arbitrary, and hardly new—it makes it seem like little more than an affectation.

To be fair, I found several of *Skinamarink*'s formal quirks more justified on my second watch. I first saw the movie in a theater and later on my laptop. The latter captured with much greater fidelity the diffusion of each image into an almost abstract field of granular, luminous fuzz, which was Ball's intention. In the theater, little sense of the picture's surface came across. My laptop screen, instead, conveyed a teeming

synthetic quality to the visuals that served both to efface any developing sense of depth in them and to give the resulting undifferentiated pictorial plane a restless feel. Ball and cinematographer Jamie McRae achieve this processed look by putting their camera's light sensitivity settings somewhere in the ungodly range and shooting very dark. The restlessness is digital noise, and digital noise registers most clearly on an LCD screen. On my second viewing, the noise much more effectively cut against the static nature of every shot and the sparseness of *Skinamarink*'s plot, which consists of two young kids getting stranded in their haunted, supernaturally doorless and windowless home. During the movie's best moments, the little that happens becomes suffused by digital noise with a nervous energy that is both narratively propulsive and visually potent on its own terms. In the theater, however, this all read as an overexposed flatness.

It's not surprising that Ball's first feature exhibits some difficulties with the scale-up to cinema: he's been cutting his teeth for the past five years or so with YouTube shorts. In fact, the



Courtesy BayView Entertainment.

sensitivity for its medium which *Skinamarink*, under the right

viewing conditions, displays—Ball understands the affordances of the particular visual qualities of video as aesthetic—is extraordinary for any movie, but especially one of *Skinamarink*'s relative popularity and derivation. Ball has been developing his style (which, besides the noise, includes a limited but supple palette of dark, simple colors; outré means of editing sound and conveying dialogue; and a quiver of dutch angles and abstracting close crops) in the trenches of “Analog Horror (AH).” AH is a genre of immersive online video whose defining feature is a cheesy predilection for VHS aesthetics. An offshoot of creepypasta, AH conceives of its entries less as discrete works of art than as serial components of perhaps infinitely expansive, occasionally multimedia, universes. Often, there is some degree to which the viewer is incorporated narratively into the work. The result is a style that, grabbing as much from *Goosebumps* as from Structural film, privileges interesting effects over all else, but seldom develops them once they've served their purpose as plot devices or scares.

The premium which AH puts on atmosphere and immersion, as well as its restriction to the web, granted Ball a faculty for expressing mood (specifically, a mood of consuming dread) through the optical particularities of digital video (like digital noise and its simultaneous tendency to flatten and congeal a moving image). By obeying AH's lamer as well as its more

promising precepts, however, Ball stumbles into his biggest mistake. The genre's nostalgia fetish compelled him to run *Skinamarink* through some gauche grainy filter, giving it the ersatz appearance of film stock and mostly wrecking its hyperbolic digital surface. *Skinamarink*'s noise is the hard-won result of a technical experiment that got baked into the movie's narrative structure and visual language. The way it sometimes manages to pull the abysses Ball has created up to the very threshold of the screen, making them seethe there threateningly, is crucial to *Skinamarink*'s elaboration of a space both shallow and limitless for its stilted action to play out within. Its grain, however, is just an idea poured thickly over. Both conceptually and visually, the added grain negates almost all the expressive potential of the noise: the one is almost entirely subsumed into the other.

Skinamarink's faux-analog caul isn't just its most damaging and pervasive artistic issue. It is also broadly indicative of the way the movie fumbles reasonably good formal ideas at just about every turn. Each one of *Skinamarink*'s discrete formal components—abstruse framing, muddled



Courtesy BayView Entertainment.

sound, exaggerated special effects--seems to have been painstakingly calibrated to denature domestic space in service of the whole movie's uncanny ambiance. But they all do so at a certain remove from each other, and so come off more as ideas bunched together than as interlocking parts of a unified whole.

This manifests most clearly as an overemphasis on plot, and a corollary tendency of Ball's to resolve problems that should have been tackled visually through narrative means. This may seem to anyone who's seen the movie like a strange claim to make. But Ball's choice to tell a coherent if fractured story through a series of vanguardist close-crops and canted studies led him to subordinate the latter to the former. A nearly abstract frame, for instance, might be coupled with a sound, like footsteps or a light switching on, that reminds you much too crisply of its functional purpose as a narrative device. Shots end before they should, cut at random into new ones, and reveal the methods that forged them far too readily. That Ball has a knack for good angles and smart pans makes it a shame that he was unable to integrate these things into a structure that would have given them any sense of inevitability.

It's this failure that makes Ball's movie arbitrarily, not productively, challenging. Never does it articulate why, exactly, it couldn't have been filmed another way. It *tells* us,

but fails to show us, that its appearance is fit for its subject matter. This “telling,” it seems, is what made the movie into a small success: in a culture like ours that has an ambient and rather generalized desire for newness but no real expectation that it will come, technical dalliances like *Skinamarink* are satisfying as conceptual exercises, but not as actual experiences. “Experimentalism” has been for a long time not a mode of practice but an artistic style, long enough that objects as barbed as *Skinamarink* can satisfy popular needs. But again, it’s only a conceptual, and so not really an achieved, sort of satisfaction this movie gives us. The critic Herbert Read once observed that “experimental period[s] in the arts [are like] harvest-time for the charlatan.” *Skinamarink* is a large but not too nourishing crop.

Skinamarink is available on Shudder.

Troy Sherman is an art and occasionally a film critic. He lives in Illinois and Missouri.

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