

Boyhood

(2014, Linklater, USA)

Component 1: Varieties of Film & Film-Making (AL)
Component 1: American film (AS)

Core Study Areas:
Key Elements of Film Form
Meaning & Response
The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area:
Spectatorship
Ideology (AL)

Rationale for study

- This film provides a truly unique approach to viewing childhood through the film-making process. Richard Linklater shot the film in short bursts over 12 consecutive years, following Mason who's 6 when the film opens right up to 18 when he leaves for college. We follow him and his family, through their trials and tribulations. What marks this film out are the obvious physical changes of all the characters and the elliptical jumps in time which are signified by this. It is a moving and at times profound meditation on growing up and what that entails for all including parents.

STARTING POINTS- Useful Sequences and timings/links

- (00.00 -03.00) The opening three minutes of the film provide a great deal of expositional information about Mason Junior's character and his relationships with this mother Olivia and sister Samantha. There is clear alignment with his point of view and this offers a clear sense of where this film is going to take us.
- (42.05 – 46.27) This sequence is very important in establishing Mason Senior's relationship with his children in direct contrast to how Bill treats them. A set of binary oppositions are set

up here which juxtapose the laid back attitude of Mason Senior with the harsh, irrational disciplinarian approach of Bill as evidenced by the enforced cutting of Mason Junior's hair.

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- The film was started in 2002 just as the digitalised camera was starting to hold sway in Hollywood (and eventually most types of film-making). However Linklater knowing that this would be an on-going project over a very long period of time decided to shoot in standard 35 mm film. This ensured a consistency that went right through to the film's eventual completion in 2014 and the film offers a great testament to the celluloid image in terms of its feel and aesthetic quality.
- The lighting style is predominately naturalistic throughout the film establishing an 'indie' sensibility in the mise-en-scène. Equally this adds to the feeling of realism that permeates in a number of key sequences.
- Linklater is very aware of capturing particular moments in the film that add to character relationships and development. His camera is often unobtrusive, focusing on conversations in standard two shots, but also giving a sense of what is going on beyond the main image by subtly drawing our attention to what is being shown in the background to good effect.

Mise-en-Scène

- The film captures the Texan suburban experience beautifully quite clearly marking out the different homes that the family live in during the time-frame of the film. This is accentuated by how individual rooms are shown and what they might represent about character change. The compositions are largely unfussy but all do hint at a change in the status and condition of Olivia's

various relationships with unsuitable men.

- There is limited symbolism in the film but one of the most interesting aspects is Mason senior's 1968 GTO car. This isn't a typical Dad car, but typifies Mason senior's rather feckless attitude to parenting (although he is still a loving and interested father). However by the end of the film he has remarried and has another child on the way and has swapped his GTO for a far more conventional (and appropriate) people carrier.
- The most obvious and distinctive point to make about the *mise-en-scène* is the gradual change in the main protagonist's appearance. This is most evident in Mason and Susanna's physical transformation over time. In the lead protagonist's case the change from chubby faced, angelic six year old to an angular, lean teenager with facial hair is outlined in unannounced stages throughout the narrative. The lines on the parents faces also show this ongoing, unrelenting shift in time adding to the uniquely realist look of the film.

Editing

- The editing predominately places Mason Jnr's point of view as central to practically all the events in the film and this is largely rooted in traditional continuity editing, which is by and large unobtrusive.
- The eschewing of the use of captions to organise the narrative is extremely effective. The temporal shifts are indicated by remarkable understated approach linked directly to the *mise-en-scène*. This captures the changes in the appearance of the main protagonists. In young Mason's case it can be seen in how his hairstyle changes (quite literally in one sequence) and how he shifts from childhood to adolescence and onto young adulthood.
- Another fundamental part of the editing style here is the use of ellipsis. As the timeframe moves on, the spectator has to fill in the gaps between these shifts. The transitions in some cases are imperceptible. At one moment Mason Jnr is watching his mother speaking with her tutor and very soon afterwards this man is his stepfather. As in life, events unfurl one after the other as opposed to in drama where things happen because of something else happening before. This elliptical style captures the real life feel of the film brilliantly.

Sound

- What is also distinctive about the sound in

Boyhood is the way that (like the more overt physical changes) voices change moving into the next stage of adulthood. The nature of the dialogue is transformed as a result of this. It is also worth saying that although the dialogue does have an improvisational feel, Linklater rehearsed and rewrote the screenplay sections as he went along.

- The musical soundtrack beautifully captures the way that we actually engage and listen to pop music in real life and it moves between a diegetic and non-diegetic soundscape. It avoids a mix-tape approach and also doesn't succumb to tying the songs directly into the times of their production. So it doesn't always use the tracks as an aural clue to what we are watching in terms of time.
- The opening of the film's non-diegetic use of Coldplay's *Yellow* captures Mason Junior's childlike wonder magnificently. The film uses music in a very inventive way from performance (Samantha's taunting of her brother with *Oops! I Did It Again*) to live bands and also characters playing each other CDs.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

- The most obvious example of representation in this film is how *Boyhood* captures the experience of growing up in America suburbia. That said this is hardly a new subject for most spectators, but despite the unique approach to shooting the film over this long period of time the film avoids the apparent issues associated with the *bildungsroman*. There are some major staging posts covered for example graduation and leaving for college but other issues are avoided such as loss of virginity and peer group pressure. So the film takes a more unconventional approach and not at all generic like a teen film. It is more expansive and as realist as an American film can be dealing with this subject matter.
- The film's treatment of women is interesting. While Olivia primarily fulfils the maternal role she is also seen as a person who is determined to better herself. With her divorce from Mason Senior, she enrolls in college and later qualifies as a teacher. However she also picks men who are totally unsuitable for her and her children, Bill and Jim. Her lack of judgement here isn't explicitly commented on, but is viewed from the perspective of the children. It is also

interesting to look at the change in Samantha's role in the film. At the outset of the film she is a lively presence, dominating and teasing her younger brother. She also has a challenging relationship with Bill regarding the household chores. However as the film further develops her role in the film fades. She speaks less and her language use becomes more uncertain. This is in direct contrast to her brother who develops a much rounded character and seems to be more directly encouraged than Samantha.

- The film can also be viewed as an example of the failure of patriarchy. Mason Senior – while being a good, loving presence to his children he is only drawn as a weekend dad. He is absent when his children most need him and he is by and large the 'good cop' while Olivia has to deal with the day to day routines of parenting. Bill is a violent, domineering alcoholic martinet who attempts to impose his will on Mason and his own children show that the dictatorial approach also holds no sway. The younger Jim, a corrections officer also with a drinking problem (and trauma from fighting in the US's noughties wars) fails to connect with Mason during his teenage years and a battle of wills develops between the two characters. That said the rather fractured nature of the reconstituted family here and the failure of these largely unsuitable father figures doesn't prevent Mason Junior from growing into a well-adjusted young adult.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- The film acts as a series of extended snapshots capturing the at times messy nature of Mason's formative years. Despite the film being shot in this interesting way, it never feels like a series of shots pieced together. While there is an episodic feeling at times within the narrative, Linklater captures the sense of life as an ongoing journey which sometimes changes a great deal, and at other times just seems to meander. The aesthetic quality of that is captured in the naturalistic fashion by which the director shoots the film. Nothing at all seems forced. As a result the spectator is complicit in how extra-textual meaning is provided (see Specialist Study below).
- One of Linklater's main signatures as an auteur director is the way that he uses time as an important element in his narratives and in a variety of different ways. His first major film *Slacker* (1991) connects a series

of largely random characters through chance meetings and it is a film with little or no plot. *Dazed and Confused* (1993) was a one-night snapshot of the last moments of high school life, *Waking Life* (2001) also stretched and pulled time out of shape. That said perhaps the best example of returning to the same characters is the *Before* trilogy (1995, 2004, 2013) which follows the courtship, marriage and dissolution of a relationship over a number of years.

- What is evident is the collaborative nature of the film and given the long gestation time – it was crucial for the director to respond to the wider changes in the actor's lives in particular his lead. Linklater encouraged Ellar to respond to changes in his own life (interest in the opposite sex, developing skill as a photographer). He wanted the sense that only someone of that age could understand what was happening to him at that moment. This was also true in terms of his work with Ethan Hawke and Patricia Arquette here and this adds greatly to the verisimilitude.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- In terms of the social contexts the changing nature of the family unit is extremely important. The US Bureau of Census relates that over 50% of US families are remarried or re-coupled. The average marriage in America lasts only seven years. One out of two marriages ends in divorce. 75% remarry and 66% of those living together or remarried break up, when children are involved. Certainly *Boyhood* reflects this ongoing trend, but also crucially the impact on the children. The film steadfastly avoids sugar-coating the 'family' experience.

Historical

- It is interesting that the film captures the early part of the 21st Century where it seems that there is minimal change in terms of the explicit impact of historical events on the characters. Instead popular culture seems to take a firmer hold with reference to the Harry Potter phenomenon and also a discussion on the possibility of a new Star Wars film. That said the rapid growth in terms of technological change is hinted at and offers concrete temporal signposts for the spectator.

Political

- The aftermath of 9.11 is dealt with implicitly,

but the most telling political moment in the film is Olivia's support for Obama as President. In many respects the small (and large) incidents in the character's lives offer far more implicit points regarding the personal as political – certainly in terms of Olivia's development. Certainly Jim offers a reminder of the causalities of America's recent wars.

Technological

- The resolutely old fashioned method of shooting on 35mm for aesthetic and practical reasons is a vital point here although the film was digitally edited.

Institutional

- The support of IFC Films, who are largely involved in independent film production in the US, meant that the film did have a yearly budget which took care of logistical issues. This budget was for \$200,000 per year, or \$2.4 million over the 12-year shooting period and was never adjusted from year one to year twelve. Throughout the period the film was shot over 39 days and had roughly 140 different scenes. This was on average three days a year, so time and pressure to get things right was tight. The film was later picked up by Universal at Sundance for worldwide distribution.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Spectatorship & Ideology - STARTING POINTS

- From the start the spectator is directly aligned with Mason Junior and it is his point of view that we follow throughout the narrative. His character journey is given the most prominence, despite the clear changes in other protagonist's development – namely Olivia.
- While Mason Junior's young life passes before the spectator's eyes, there is active engagement with where we are as spectators in terms of the subtle temporal shifts. There is then a clear sense of engaging with the way that editing and mise-en-scène show these changes.
- There might also be an interesting way of assessing how different spectators might respond to this film which may have a direct connection to their age or gender or even their position as a parent. Certainly the scene when Mason Junior is about to leave home to go to college might be read very differently by a young person in that position than by a parent. The spectator's response here is likely to show a great deal of diversity.