

Me, Earl and the Dying Girl

(Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, USA, 2015)

Component 1: Key Developments in US Film

Focus Area: Specialist Writing on Film (see separate resource for set Specialist Writing passages)

INTRODUCTION:

Me, Earl and the Dying Girl (Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, USA, 2015) could be classified as a ‘postmodern’ teen anti-love story. Postmodern films often remind the viewer they are watching a constructed movie or have references to lots of other media texts as an integral part of their narrative. *Me, Earl and the Dying Girl*’s imitation of Wes Anderson’s visual style, and obsession with arthouse or classic cinema, as well as Greg’s voiceover (which is constantly deconstructing the story as it unfolds) would fit with this. It balances naturalistic performances and events with surreal moments (like posters coming to life) and the intercutting of animated sequences. Greg is also an unreliable narrator - at numerous points he reassures us that Rachel *won’t* die - which is a feature of postmodern cinema.

Critical Reception

Whilst some critics found these features charming and original, others criticised the film for being too self-consciously ‘quirky’. Some negative reviews accused the film of following all the clichés of a melodrama while pretending it is ‘above’ them. Others said Rachel’s character is a stereotypical representation of disability/illness, where their role becomes little more than someone who teaches the other characters ‘how to live’. The filter of Greg’s narrative does often reduce Rachel to being little more than someone who is helping him understand the world better and achieve greater art (the film he makes for her) whilst ignoring her own creativity until the final scene. Some critics also pointed out the two-dimensional role of Earl, and that he seems like a racial ‘other’ to Greg: living in rough neighbourhood, profane and uncouth, but ultimately ‘wiser’ than the main (white) character.

Questions

What do you think? Do you feel the portrayal of

illness is patronising? Or does Rachel emerge as a fully realised character as the story progresses? What about the portrayal of Earl? Which African-American stereotypes does he fulfil or challenge? Seeing as the story is being told by Greg, do these criticisms hold any value?

PART 1: Key Sequence(s) and timings and/or links

Sequence 1 - Introduction 00:00 – 00:05:03

Sequence 2 - Days of Doomed

Friendship 1:00:10 - 1:06:57

PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography (including Lighting)

- Sequence 1: The opening sequence sets the tone for the rest of the film: defying our expectations of a film about a terminally ill teenager through the use of dynamic, kinetic camera work and unusual angles (like bird’s eye view) and movement (like pivots and whip-pans). They also reflect Greg’s attitude to school, the high-angle shots linking to his feeling of being elevated above the social scrum of school life. Occasionally, the camera dips down into the crowds, into tracking shots that follow Greg as he negotiates through the different social groups. The camera movement is energetic, but also restless, reflecting Greg’s disassociation with his peers.
- Sequence 2: Repeated use of unusual shots (Greg’s POV entering the house, entering Rachel’s room, the pivot shot from him climbing the steps up to her window) show his dedication to her and the comfortable routine they have fallen into. It is also in keeping with the visual style of the rest of the film until 1:01:32.
- Still image: For the next five minutes the camera remains in this single, fixed shot; in contrast with the kinetic cinematography of the rest of the film - lending it weight and significance. Unusually, Rachel is in the foreground, filling the left-hand side of the screen where we can see the emotional

reactions on her face. Greg is in the background, far smaller on the right. For once, the film seems to stop being about Greg and instead focuses on Rachel's experience - and her decision to stop her chemotherapy. The huge space between the characters visually links to what she says about Greg being "invisible and detached" (they also barely look at each other during this scene).

Mise-en-Scène

- Sequence 1: Initial contrast between the dimly-lit bedroom where Greg attempts to start the story, and the brightly-coloured, primary colours of the animations. Again, suggests that this won't be a depressing story despite the subject matter.
- Typical 'high school' imagery is used to introduce the school: yellow buses, US flag in courtyard, bustling locker rooms and cafeteria. But costume is also used to swiftly establish each of the different school subcultures (or 'countries'): stoners, jocks, 'drama geeks' etc. Greg's costume doesn't fit into any of these groups, emphasising his social detachment.
- Sequence 2: Location and props: throughout, the 'quirky' decor of Rachel's room is a subject of joking between her and Greg - especially her cushions, which she now uses to defuse the awkwardness. There is also a glow from the window that makes her seem almost angelic. Her shaved head indicates the impact chemo is having on her and visually stresses her reasons for giving up treatment.

Editing

- Sequence 1: The stop-motion animation is crude, but colourful and funny; it also introduces Greg and Earl's hobby, and establishes them as creative and imaginative. The 'chapter captions' that begin each section are also witty and self-reflective.
- As Greg walks around the school, the camera cuts from high-angle shots that 'float' above the crowds to shots of Greg at eye-level, immersed (however briefly) in each social scene. We see him interact with the other teenagers in each group for only a few seconds, before there is a jump-cut to a different 'country', reflecting what Greg tells us in the voiceover.
- Sequence 2: The first minute is a repeated montage of Greg arriving and Rachel in different emotional states. After 01:01:32, this ceases and the shot is still and unbroken - this marks its significance in the narrative and, for the first time, the fact we are seeing things from

Rachel's perspective, 'outside' Greg's narrative.

Sound

- Sequence 1: Greg's voiceover narrates the action throughout the entire film, but he begins his story by reflecting on how most stories' openings are meaningless and inadequate. This sets the irreverent tone of the film. It also introduces us to Greg's imaginative but meandering stream-of-consciousness; and his sense of detachment from the other high school social groups.
- Sequence 2: The voiceover counters the emotional warmth of the montage at the start of the sequence, foreshadowing the college rejection letter later. The rest of the scene starts light-heartedly (about Greg in a tux), moves into more serious territory (Rachel reveals she knows about the film), and then she drops the 'bombshell' - that she is stopping her treatment. We don't hear Greg's reactions in voiceover during this scene, which combines with the framing of the shot to put the emphasis on Rachel's experience.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- Representations of teenagers: Though *Me, Earl and the Dying Girl* does name-check the youth stereotypes that are familiar from other 'high school' movies, the eponymous characters contradict these superficial types. All three are vulnerable but emotionally intelligent, from families that are eccentric rather than dysfunctional, and are intensely creative (Greg and Earl's films, especially the one for Rachel; her mini-sculptures inside books). Greg and Rachel's relationship is notable for being unsentimentally honest and platonic. Similar to the teenage characters of *Juno* (2007) they are awkward yet aware of their awkwardness, and Greg (like Juno) is conscious of the clichés of the story he is telling. Another good comparison would be the films of John Hughes (especially *Pretty in Pink*) which tend to be more about mismatched friendship than outright teen romance.

Historical

- Though it has similar subject matter (young protagonists deal with terminal illness and/or disability), *Me, Earl...* differs greatly from more sentimental films with a similar plot like *The Fault in Our Stars* or *Me Before You*. Instead, it more closely resembles the films

of Wes Anderson (particularly *Rushmore* and *Moonrise Kingdom*). The formalised yet imaginative camera and editing style (using lots of bird's eye view and other unusual angles), and eccentric characters (often young people who have maturity and sophistication beyond their years, or troubled adolescent-seeming adults) are very similar to those used in *Me, Earl and*

the Dying Girl. *Rushmore*'s protagonist is a schoolboy who makes detailed recreations of famous films in his drama club, similar to the films of Greg and Earl. The symmetrical framing of each shot is also reminiscent of Anderson's work - compare shots from *Me, Earl and the Dying Girl* and *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001).