

## Specialist Writing Option C: Film Criticism

### *Little Miss Sunshine: A 'feel good' smart film*

#### **(Excerpt) Adapted from 'Mapping Contemporary Cinema' by Kristof Zetenyi (2009)**

*Little Miss Sunshine* comes from the new genre called 'smart cinema'. **'Smart cinema' emerged in the 1990s and uses irony and black humor and has an overall gloomy outlook.** These films are marketed in direct opposition to mainstream Hollywood products, as 'smarter', 'artier', and *more* 'independent'. The emergence of 'smart cinema' goes back to the mainstream success of television shows such as *South Park* (1997-ongoing) and *The Simpsons* (1989-ongoing), which openly criticise aspects of life and popular culture. This gave rise to 'smart cinema', in which dark, clever comedies showcase disaffection and boredom, as seen in films such as *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004) and the work of Wes Anderson for example.

**Depicting an emotionally dysfunctional white middle-class nuclear family in a bid to criticise traditional American values further conforms *Little Miss Sunshine* to the template of smart cinema.**

The film begins with a close-up on two dreamy eyes framed with glasses watching and re-watching the crowning of Miss America on television. The camera changes view-point, unveiling Olive, a chubby, slightly unappealingly looking eight year-old Olive practicing the winning reaction of a beauty queen in the living room of a modest home. The camera shifts rapidly again, now framing Olive from behind, positioning her such that she seems to shrink compared to the beauty queen on the huge screen, suggesting that the film will play on this unlikely character's unlikely dream. The voice from the next scene cuts in early: "There are two kinds of people in this world, winners and losers." With such a dramatic effect, the viewer instantly registers which group to classify Olive into, marking the **film's commitment to a deeply ironic tone.**

At its core, *Little Miss Sunshine* would seem to present a fairly conventional narrative of triumph over adversity. The film focuses on Olive's struggle to fit in and succeed as a beauty queen contestant, but it is important to note that there is no conventional happy ending. Olive is slightly overweight, has no talent as a dancer, and fails in her quest. That said, **the film layers all the trappings of a happy ending onto these narrative events, the bringing together of the Hoovers as a loving family unit replaces the more obvious goal of winning the beauty pageant.** The epic journey of the VW campervan is the symbolic journey of the individual who keeps pursuing an unattainable dream on a road paved with markers of weakness and signs of failure. Dwayne sums up the film's underlying principle when he states, "Life is one f\*\*king beauty contest after another... Do what you love, and f\*\*k the rest!" The last scene of the film, in which the whole Hoover family gets on the stage of the beauty pageant's Talent Competition, in support of Olive, is particularly striking in its joyous commitment to laughter in the face of difficulty.

By these means, **the film maintains its 'indie' feel while also violating one of the unwritten taboos of 'indie' filmmaking—it has a happy ending.** The film intertwines the dark, grim elements of smart cinema with a lighthearted atmosphere full of life and sunshine. **Instead of the usual indie fare *Little Miss Sunshine* is designed to make you feel better about yourself.**

## Acknowledgement

Adapted excerpt of review <http://www.mcc.sllf.qmul.ac.uk/?p=269> [g.r.westwell@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:g.r.westwell@qmul.ac.uk)