

Film Explication—*Little Miss Sunshine*

Director: Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris

General Guidelines: In 2-3 typed written pages, you will present an informed discussion of a scene or two from the film *Little Miss Sunshine*. I expect you in this paper to explicate the scene in *close* detail, with particular attention to the various techniques Dayton and Faris, the directors, draw upon to relay the film's underlying arguments, themes, ideas and messages.

Revising the Film/Pre-Writing:

- 1) Annotate & analyze (exhaustively) the sequence: (these will form the basis of your body paragraphs in the final paper)
 - a. You can do this one of two ways: walk the class through an image-by-image replay of the scene, explicating it as you go; or, you can show the scene in its entirety and then explicate the images afterwards. Sometimes, however, it's more effective for your audience to connect your discussion to the text visually; hence, you might freeze frame the screen in order to single out, highlight and discuss the visual composition of a particular image before moving on to the next image.
 - b. Move beyond plot observations. We already know "what happens" in the scene. It is your task to offer interpretations of the scene's key themes and underlying themes and ideas. You need to address such questions as: How is meaning constructed? Why does the director utilize various techniques (to what effect—to reinforce a theme, to convey the internal world of the character, etc?)?
 - c. Focus your annotations and analysis on the components of film discussed below: character, themes, and technical elements like lighting, sound, *mise-en-scene*, editing, shots, etc.
- 2) In your paper's introduction: Present a working "thesis" for this scene—the guiding lens that shapes: (a) how you interpret the meaning and message of this particular scene and (b) its significance to the film at large. **You must justify how and why you came to this conclusion.** For example, make a case about how *the technical elements reinforce an argument, theme, or main idea in the film*. How does this scene provide a "window" within which to view the film's main ideas? How does this scene comment upon the film at large: its themes, conflicts, characters, etc.?

Written Requirement

In 2-3 full pages, typed and single-spaced, provide your written response to questions #1 and #2 above. Set up #2 in your introduction. #1 will provide the direction of the body paragraphs, in which you break down your sequence and explicate its meaning and significance as you go. Make sure topic sentences offer claims (x=z). This response should be well-framed, carefully considered, and meticulously proofread.

Tips in analyzing your scene:	
■	Watch the clip <u>multiple times</u> in order to develop a habit of looking for key moments, patterns, or images.
■	Watch the clip <u>without the sound</u> (put the sound on mute). This will help you to focus on the purely visual.
■	Watch the clip again, this time <u>with the sound</u> . How do sound and music add to the composition, meaning, and impact of the sequence and its images?
■	Take detailed notes upon second and additional screenings. Develop a shorthand system of notation that allows you to quickly record technical information
■	Note which elements of the scene strike you as unfamiliar or perplexing.
■	Note which elements are repeated to emphasize a point or perception (an image in your scene may be repeated elsewhere in the film, often with a slightly different take to show

4. **Point of view**—The relationship a camera has to a person or action. Usually movies use an objective point of view, so that most of what is shown is not confined to anyone person's perspective.

Point of view is the central term in writing about films because films are basically about seeing the world in a certain way. Pay attention to point of view by using these two general guidelines:

- ✦ Observe how and when the camera creates the point of view of a character—and to what effect.
- ✦ Notice if the story is told mostly from an objective point of view or from the subjective perspective of one person.

5. **Narrative Films**—Usually when we refer to movies, we are referring to narrative films, not documentaries or experimental films. Most narrative films take the form of classical narratives which have:

- a. A plot development in which there is a logical relation between one event and another.
- b. A sense of closure at the end (a happy or tragic ending for example).
- c. Stories that are focused on characters.
- d. A narrative style that attempts to be more or less objective.

6. **Mise-en-scene**—a French term roughly translated as “what is put into the scene” (put before the camera), referring to all those properties of a cinematic image that exists independently of camera position, camera movement, and editing.

- a. *Mise-en-scene* includes: lighting, costumes, sets, the quality of the acting, and other shapes and characters in the scene.
- b. Analyze *mise-en-scene* by asking the following questions:
 - i. Do the objects and props in the setting, whether natural ones (like rivers and trees) or artificial ones (like paintings, posters, and buildings) have a special significance that relates to the characters, theme, and story?
 - ii. Does the arrangement of objects, props, and characters within that setting have some significance? (for example, are they crowded together? Do inanimate objects seem to have a life?)
 - iii. What does the lighting suggest about the tone or mood of a scene, even about the psychological mindsets of characters?
- c. In any film, it is the camera that eventually films *mise-en-scene*: when you watch a movie, you see not only the setting, actors, and lighting but all of these elements as they are recorded and then projected. The composition of a scene through the film image is what distinguishes film from drama.

7. **Shots**—A shot is what is recorded between the time a camera starts and the time it stops, that is, between the director's call for “action” and the call to “cut.”

- a. Three most common shots
 - i. Long shot or establishing shot: Showing the main object at a considerable distance from the camera and thus presenting it in relation to its general surroundings
 - ii. Medium shot: the camera records an area equal to the height or a seated figure or a figure from the waist up.
 - iii. Close-up shot: an image in which the distance between the subject and the point of view is very short, as in a close-up of a person's face. It is considered the director's chief way of directing our vision and of emphasizing a detail.
- b. Moving shots:
 - i. Pan shot: The camera is mounted on a non-moving base and films while pivoting on its axis along the line of the horizon from left to right to right to left.
 - ii. Tilt shot: The camera can move up or down while fixed on its axis.
 - iii. Traveling shot (dolly shot): The camera can move forward or backward while fixed on its axis.

- ii. In films that break away from continuity editing, why are there so few long (establishing) shots in them? Is it difficult to say where an action takes place because the scene begins with a close-up of a character or inside an unidentified room? Do the characters seem to share our disorientation? Is the disorientation related to the themes of the film?
- iii. Is there a point of view we can identify with? Does the filmmaker force his audience to remain detached from the ordinary people and to identify instead with something or someone else? Does the film contain images that seem to have no place in the story? A film about a war may cut to an image of a cherry tree time and time again. Is it a symbol? Is it part of the character's memory? Why is the continuity of the action broken by this unexplained image?

Signifier (shot)	Definition	Signified
close-up	face only	intimacy
medium shot	most of the body	personal relationship
long shot	setting & characters	context, scope, public distance, character in relation to surroundings
full shot	full body of person	social relationship
pan down	camera looks down	power, authority
pan up	camera looks up	smallness, weakness, vulnerability
zoom in	camera moves in	observation, focus
fade in	image appears on blank screen	beginning
fade out	image screen goes blank	ending
cut	switch from one image to another	simultaneity, excitement
wipe	image wiped off screen	imposed

9. **Sound**—Film sound can have a multitude of relations to the image and the narrative: it can be background music; its source may be on-or off-screen; and it can even precede or follow the image it is linked to (as when a character's remarks form a bridge into the next image). In some film, sound alone could make a major topic for analysis. When analyzing sound in film, consider the following questions:

- a. What is the relation of the sound to the image in specific scenes or sequences? How might the answer to that question be refined to reveal the aims, achievements, or even failures of sound in the movie?
- b. Is the sound used to link images, or does the sound have the conventional role of beginning and terminating with the image?
- c. Does the sound ever become more important than the image, and what is the reason for this unusual strategy?
- d. Do the musical numbers have any special relation to the narrative structure? (for instance, do they occur when the characters need to escape into fantasy?)
- e. Why does the dialogue of the characters overlap or seem mumbled in some recent movies, so that it is difficult to understand the characters? Does the dialogue serve some other purpose than to help tell the story?
- f. What role does silence play in the film?
- g. Are there sound motifs that identify the characters' mindsets or actions? Does the rhythm of the sound support or serve as a counterpoint to the rhythm of the editing?

- h. If you had to pick three key sound sequences from this film, which would they be and why?

10. **Literary techniques**

- a. Metaphors & Symbols: In *Little Miss Sunshine*, consider the directors' visual uses of mirrors (a repeated trope in the film), the yellow microbus as a structuring metaphor in the film, the journey west, the use of stages, American commodities such as McDonald's glasses, bucket chicken, pornography, ice cream, fake air and spray-on tans. How do these images invoke a metaphorical context? How do such metaphors reinforce the film's themes and conflicts?
- b. Allusions: references to outside literary texts or historical events and/or people. I.E., the references to Marcel Proust, French novelist, and Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher. How do these intertextual elements reinforce meaning and theme, perhaps even a conflict of two philosophies in the film?
- c. Foreshadowing: hints of events to come (this can be achieved through lighting, sound, music, etc...)
- d. Irony: For example, the family's journey invokes an ironic critique of the American West myth.

- iv. Crane shot: The camera can move in and out and up and down while mounted on a mechanical crane.
- v. High angle shot: The camera is placed higher than the subject, often suggesting a God's-eye view of helpless and vulnerable people.
- vi. Low angle shot: The camera is placed lower than the subject. It often produces a towering figure or object.

8. Edited images

- a. Sequences—A series of scenes or shots unified by a shared action or motif. A sequence corresponds roughly to a chapter in a novel, the shots being sentences and the sequences being paragraphs.
 - i. Intercut: Within a sequence may be an intercut, a switch to another action that, for example, provides an ironic comment on the main action of the sequence.
 - ii. Parallel editing: Occurs when intercuts are so abundant in a sequence that two or more sequences are going on at once.
- b. Transitions—Movements from one sequence to another.
 - i. Straight cut: transitional device in which a strip of film is spliced to another, resulting in an instantaneous transfer from one shot to the next. The most common form of transition.
 - ii. Double cutting: Splicing the same image multiple times.
 - iii. Dissolve: Old transitional device in which a shot dissolves while a new shot appears to emerge beneath it. As a result, there is a moment when we get a superimposition of both scenes.
 - iv. Fade: Old transitional device.
 - 1. Fade-out: the screen grows darker until black.
 - 2. Fade-in: the screen grows lighter until the new screen is fully visible.
 - v. Wipe: Older transitional device found in many old films and some modern films that seek an archaic effect. The wipe acts as a sort of windshield wiper that wipes off the first scene, revealing the next.
 - vi. Iris: Older transitional device also found in older films.
 - 1. Iris-in: The new scene first appears in the center of the previous scene and then this circle expands until it fills the screen.
 - 2. Iris-out: Shows the new scene first appearing along the perimeter and then the circle closes in on the previous scene.
- c. All transitions discussed above are examples of editing techniques. Films are nothing more than scenes and sequences of scenes that have been pasted together in some way. A filmmaker chooses to assemble scenes in a way that establishes a certain meaning or creates a certain emotion which ultimately embodies the filmmaker's vision.
 - i. Montage: (the French word for editing). According to Barnett, a montage has different meanings for Russian, French, and American filmmakers. In Hollywood it refers to any sequence of rapidly edited images that suggests the passage of time or events. It sketches but does not develop information about characters. The opening scene of the film, "The Hoovers Plus One," is a montage.
 - ii. Continuity editing or invisible editing: most of us pay little attention to editing because we enjoy most the continuity editing of classical cinema. This editing style is appropriately called invisible because the filmmaker, not wanting to distract from the story, avoids cuts and distractions between images that would be too obvious.
- d. As you begin analyzing the editing techniques in film, consider the following questions:
 - i. When a filmmaker uses continuity editing, are there implications concerning the world and society in the "continuity"? Is the film trying to create a sense of a logical and safe world? Do long (establishing) shots, for instance, indicate that the characters (and audience) know where they are and should feel at home?

an evolving perception).
■ Decipher why patterns and images are important.
■ Analyze the director's use of technical elements: why a dolly shot? Why a long shot versus a short shot? Why no sound?
■ Develop conclusions and discuss them with your peers (don't be surprised to find that any given scene may impact viewers differently—the beauty of interpretation is that there are multiple ways to interpret texts).

Components of Film for Study and Analysis

Films share many of the same elements as other forms of literature (theme, character, setting, point of view, metaphors, symbols, foreshadowing techniques), but it also has elements specific to the genre (*mise-en-scene*, shots)

1. **Theme**—Themes or what the film is “about” become the foundation for a film analysis since they point to the main ideas in a movie. Asking the following questions can help you understand a film's theme:
 - a. Who are the central characters
 - b. What do they represent in themselves and in relation to each other? The importance of individuality in society? Human strength or human compassion? Human fallibility?
 - c. How do their actions create a story with some meanings or constellation of meanings?
 - d. Does the story emphasize the benefits of change or endurance?
 - e. What kind of life or what actions does the film wish you to value or criticize, and why?
 - f. If there is not a coherent message or story, why not?
 - g. How does the movie make you feel at the end? Happy? Depressed? Confused? And why? (how does the director manipulate your response to the film?)
2. **Characters**—The individuals who populate narrative and non-narrative films. As you begin an analysis of characters, you should ask yourself the following questions:
 - a. Do the characters seem realistic? Are they meant to seem realistic?
 - b. Are they defined by their clothes, their conversation, a commitment to a core philosophy, outlook, or ideology?
 - c. If they are not realistic, why not, and why are they meant to seem strange or fantastic?
 - d. Do the characters seem to fit the setting of the story?
 - e. Does the film focus mainly on one or two characters or on many?
 - f. Do the characters change, and if so, in what ways?
 - g. What values do the characters seem to represent: What do they say about such matters as independence, sexuality, morality, political belief?
3. **Setting**—not merely peripheral but integral to a film. Location establishes the film's tone, historical and cultural context, and can serve as a backdrop to a character's psychological state of mind. In *Little Miss Sunshine*, setting is intricately connected to individual characters, but it also establishes the American cultural “state of mind,” deeply immersed in the American dream ideology, as the characters undertake a literal journey “West”.
 - a. Setting can be literal and symbolic (it may reveal, for example, “where” a character is psychologically or suggest something about a character's fate).
 - b. The setting is part of the symbolic structure of the film: consider, for example, the symbolic setting of stages and beauty pageants (a microcosm of American culture). How is the microbus a type of setting or space that functions both literally and metaphorically?