

Chronicles of Cognitive and Emotional Development on the Move: A Critical Exploration of Linklater's Boyhood as a Road Movie



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Abstract: A road movie is a genre of film in which the characters leave their home to embark on a journey, essentially different from their everyday lives. The genre has its origin in the stories of mythical journeys such as *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*. Road movies portray the journey of the characters through the wild, with the movies discussing themes of oppression, alienation and an examination of the persisting cultural tensions in the nation. The characters in road movies delineate a sense of frustration, anxiety and desperation. A road movie can be technically defined as a movie which begins at a certain point, and passes through several pit-stops, before finally reaching the destination. Road movies are well known for their striking portrayal of picturesque narrations, scenic views and vivid dynamics. The characters undergo transformations, experience epiphanies and they develop a deeper and better understanding of their inner conflicts and emotions. The present paper explores the themes of alienation, oppression and transformation of the protagonist, outlined in Richard Linklater's *Boyhood*. The paper would further delve into the emotional changes that occur in the behaviors of the characters during their travel. The focus of road movies is more on the journey than on the destination. Jack Kerouac's "*On the Road*" dramatically changed the genre of road movies, with picaresque narratives and sequences, in which the characters transformed for the better or the worst.

Keywords: road movies, alienation, journey, music, technical peculiarities

I. INTRODUCTION

"Cinematography is the art of motion-picture photography and filming either electronically by means of an image sensor, or chemically by means of a light-sensitive material such as film stock" (Spencer). The creators of cinema employ lens to focus on the light that is reflected from a body into a real image. This image is then transmitted to an image sensor or a light-sensitive material that is inside a movie camera. The exposures are later arranged serially for further editing and processing as motion picture.

The late nineteenth to the early twentieth century brought rise to the use of film not only for entertainment purposes but for scientific exploration as well.

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French biologist and filmmaker Jean Painlevé lobbied heavily for the use of film in the scientific field, as the new medium was more efficient in capturing and documenting the behavior, movement, and environment of microorganisms, cells, and bacteria, than the naked eye. (Landecker, 124)

The inception of celluloid photographic film and the founding of cine-camera played a significant role in photographing perpetual sequences of images using one lens, thereby allowing a wide array of actions to be recorded in one film reel. During the 1880's some films were viewed using certain peep devices called *Kinetoscope* and the *mutoscope*, using which the viewer could see the film by peeping through these devices. Projectors would transmit light through a printed film into the projection lens so that the cinema could be projected on a larger screen and could therefore be viewed by a larger audience in one sitting. Initially films contained single static shots with absolutely no editing and scant use of techniques.

The burgeoning of electronic sound recording in the mid nineteenth century offered a pragmatic approach to integrate soundtrack of speech, sound effects, music and synchronize them with the action sequence on screen, thus creating what is known as sound film. Sound films became popular as it was arguably different from silent motion picture, which were now called talking pictures or talkies. Andrew Dix, in his *Beginning Film Studies* states:

As the complexity of soundtracks accompanying the image increased – from the vitaphone discs attempting rudimentary and partial synchronization that were supplied for *Don Juan* (1926) and the *Jazz Singer* (1927) to the fuller acoustic track imprinted on the filmstrip-voices could be heard pronouncing that this development was the death of cinema or on the contrary, its liberation. Rudolf Arnheim, whose despondency regarding the arrival of color was mentioned in chapter 1, was just as melancholy about the sound era. Writing in 1928, he concedes that it might benefit cinema in the areas of instruction and journalism but adds that it threatens the integrity of silent film art that had been carefully elaborated over three decades. [78-79]. (Andrew Dix, 2010)

The technological development of natural color was a major revolution in cinema as the viewers could finally see the photographically captured natural colors in the movies and say goodbye to black-and-white prints. While the advent of sound films quickly made silent films and theater musicians obsolete, color replaced black-and-white much more gradually.

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The pivotal innovation was the introduction of the three-strip version of the Technicolor process, first used for animated cartoons in 1932, then also for live-action short films and isolated sequences in a few feature films, then for an entire feature film, *Becky Sharp*, in 1935. The expense of the process was daunting, but favorable public response in the form of increased box office receipts usually justified the added cost. The number of films made in color slowly increased year after year. (Film)

Travel documentary can be defined as a documentary film or a television program that documents and elaborates travel experiences and destinations through of episodes. "Travel Film" is notably a later addition to the travel documentary genre which evolved only during the late nineteenth century. Road movies can be categorized as a subgenre of travel "film", where the characters cut loose of the restrictions and boundaries construed by the society. Music is an expression of the inner dilemma and chain of thoughts that the characters experience, thus playing a decisive role in road movies. Not only do songs soothe the minds, they also offer a narration of the action in most cases. Diegetic music, unique sequences, travel shots and scenic images are some of the technical quirks of road movies.

II. AN ANALYTIC OVERVIEW OF BOYHOOD

Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* is a 2014 coming of age movie which is considered to be his most ambitious and truthful work. Richard began working on the film in the year 2001, when the actor Ellar Coltrane, who plays the role of the protagonist, Mason Evans Jr, is seven years old. The project was completed only in the year 2013 as the creator's intention was to trace the developments and transformations of his characters and offer a truthful portrayal. He kept shooting for the movie at regular intervals from the year 2001 to 2013, in which he produced a genuinely convincing and authentic drama. Linklater received Best Director award at Golden Globe Awards, BAFTA awards and won the Silver Bear for Best Director. The film was noted for its emotional depth and originality, and won Best Motion Picture-Drama at Golden Globe Awards and Best Film at BAFTA awards; and a whopping six Academy Awards.

At the beginning of the movie, the protagonist, six year old Mason is introduced. He and his elder sister, Samantha, live in Texas along with their mother, Olivia. Olivia is divorced from her husband and is seen juggling her domestic duties and professional duties, struggling to make both ends meet. The family travels from places to places, finding a new home, a better landscape to survive. Mason's father, Mason Sr. visits them often and takes them out for dinner and games once in a while. He loves the children deeply but is depicted as a careless father. Olivia later moves the family to Houston so that she could earn a degree from University of Houston and receive better job opportunities. This moving is emotionally difficult for the Mason and Samantha as they had already established friendships here in Texas. There is a scene in the movie in which Mason Sr. is seen having a heated argument with Olivia as he comes to drop off the kids, after their outing. This scene evidently establishes the fact that the possibility of Mason's parents getting back together is practically nil. Olivia introduces Mason to Bill Wellbrock, one of her professors at the university. Mason watches them flirting and they end up getting married, later in the movie. Bill and Olivia live together with four kids, that each brought

from their previous marriage. All of them live together peacefully under the dogmatic rule of Bill. But circumstances change and Bill turns into an alcoholic and abusive husband. He becomes violent towards the kids and Olivia herself. He begins to physically torture Olivia, and compelled by his violent behavior she leaves Bill's house with Mason and Samantha. They stay temporarily at Olivia's friend's home. Samantha, who is now a teenager, is annoyed by everything happening in her life and to her family. The constant moving, switching families, staying with a random woman and the thought of going to yet another school agitates her. The family now moves to a small town named San Marcos, near Austin. Mason appears to have grown into a young handsome boy and has interests in girl, and Samantha is in a relationship. Mason Sr. lectures them elaborately on contraception, when he learns his daughter is in a relationship. Mason and his father go camping where they eloquently discuss several topics such as music, films and girls. Olivia takes up a teaching job at a college where she tutors students in Psychology. She then moves in with Jim, her student and a retired Iraq War soldier. In the year 2010, Mason embarks on his high school education and like any other young American teen, he experiments marijuana and alcohol. His father remarries and has a baby with his new wife. He takes Mason and Samantha to his wife's place and introduces them to his new family. On Mason's birthday his father gifts him a suit and some CD's and his wife's parents gift him a Bible and a shotgun. Matters don't go well between Jim and Olivia at this juncture. Mason is a potential artist but is an unambitious individual, who is lethargic to put any effort to work on his talent in photography. Mason meets Sheena at a party and they get into a relationship which ends in a breakup later. Jim and Olivia separate and the family's financial condition worsens even further. At the end of his high school Mason breaks up with Sheena and also bags a Silver medal for a state photography contest, paving way for a college education with scholarship. A party is thrown to celebrate Mason's graduation and success. Olivia breaks down upon realizing that Mason was abjectly unperturbed at leaving his mother and shift to a new environment. She realizes that her kids have grown old and will no longer be under her wings, or even with her. She has been struggling all her life to find sanity and make both ends meet. She studied, worked and graciously performed all her domestic duties and endured several men in a desperate attempt to create a family for herself and the kids. And at this point in her life, she feels more lonely than ever, as she sees her kids moving away from her. Mason begins attending Sul Ross State University in Alpine along with his dorm mate Dalton. The final scene of the movie is shot at Big Bend Ranch State Park, where Mason, Dalton and his girlfriend Barb are hanging out. Nicole is Barb's roommate and she shares her opinion that maybe people don't seize moments, moments seize them, to which Mason evidently agrees.

III. DISCUSSION

Boyhood qualifies as a road movie, as the whole movie revolves around the evolving cognitive and emotional development of characters where temperament and environment combine to shape the person's individuality.

Like any other typical road movie, *Boyhood* is set against the backdrop of well constructed cultural ideologies where Linklater explores the themes of loneliness, separation and an existential quest whose answer can only be attained in nature. The film's scenes depict culturally recognizable institutions, events, themes, and objects in modern American life. Some are widespread. They include the family, the family home, the school, the automobile, the guitar, the bowling alley, dates, homophobic sneers, alcohol, drugs, video games, mobile phones, and the aspiration to do something with one's life. Others are recognizable but less common: family conflict and divorce, physical abuse, return of veterans from military service, gifts of guns to adolescents, camping in the wild. (Oatley)

What manifested from Linklater's more than a decade long perseverance is a sequence of conscientiously fabricated and meticulously constructed episodes synchronized to the rhythm of life. The plot structure of the movie is crucial and significant. His movies are oftentimes misrepresented as possessing no plot, probably because they do not appear as a unified whole, when paralleled along with antipathetic action-oriented stereotype movies. One of the most unique and strikingly fascinating details about *Boyhood* is that there are several incidents — the movie includes scenes of parties, bullying, intoxication, laughter and tears — although, all the events occur in a remotely quotidian chronicle.

Psychological understanding of how each of us selects among life episodes to construct an identity has been greatly influenced by the work of McAdams (1988). He proposed that modern people give themselves a sense of unity and purpose by constructing, from such episodes, narratives of selfhood: life stories. This theoretical proposal has been linked to issues in cognitive, cultural, developmental, and personality psychology. Piaget (see Gruber & Vonache, 1995) observed that, between about the age of six or seven and the age of 11, children's abilities pass through the preoperational stage and the stage of concrete operations. Using McAdams's work, Habermas and Bluck (2000) showed that, during these stages, children can remember events in their lives but don't yet have the cognitive means to link them together. Only in adolescence do young people become able to relate events to each other and to their current plans, in narrative accounts of their lives. (Oatley)

The film also delineates the development of the character of Mason's mother, Olivia. Olivia, much like any other road movie character travels from one destination to another yearning for fulfillment in life. She wanted to bring financial stability into the family and worked really hard for the same. Every new place she found presented her newer challenges and circumstances. She marries several men and all of them eventually end in divorce and separation. Towards the end of the movie, as both Samantha and Mason are ready to leave her, Olivia's deep sense of loneliness is articulated, "I thought there would be more" (*Boyhood*). Thus it can be emphatically stated that the plot of the movie evidently justifies the themes of oppression, alienation and even self-discovery, where the characters are on a quest for the meaning of life as they travel. As the movie comes to a conclusion Mason shadows towards an innate nihilistic tendency and Olivia learns to accept life as it happens.

The movie's visual extravaganza is determinate and rigorous, unobtrusive to the point of semblant invisibility and in the ministration of the characters, with a certain amount harmony that remains insouciant and unobstructed, even

when the rooms are swamped. When Mr. Linklater captures an exquisite landscape, the viewer's eye is stuck not merely on the sheer camerawork employed by him, but on the artistry of these places and the characters in them — the encompassing greenness of the vicinity in which Mason roams about with his friends, for instance, and the placid imperturbable stillness of the waters, in which, few years later he would swim with his father. Linklater is notably keen on presenting two or more people walking and conversing along the way and the viewer's evidently learn more about the characters' relationships through such casual conversations.

IV. CONCLUSION

For the past twenty-five years, Richard Linklater has managed to lead a singularly selective and scopious career, and scrutinizing efficaciously with the narrative form. Although Linklater has substantiated and proven himself adept at creating films possessing a unified and gratifying plot structure, in movies such as *The Newton Boys*, *School Of Rock*, *Bad News Bears*, *Me And Orson Welles*, he apparently expresses a desire to search for newer and better story-telling techniques. Iconoclastic in its analogies, mundane in details, *Boyhood* prevails at the crossroads of classical cinema and the modern art film without being abjectly subservient to either of the two traditions. It is essentially an illustration of cinematic realism, and its gratifications are discernible yet cryptic.

Road movies quintessentially delineate a group of characters, moving from a certain place in search of new meanings and ideologies in a culturally dogmatic institution. The characters are either victims of true horrors in the past or individuals who possess a deep seated need to prove themselves. They yearn to express and articulate their inner conflicts through these travels. It is a delineation of the changing sociological and cultural patterns of the country and how it affects the characters. Nature offers the most soothing influence for these characters and it is in Nature that they look for answers to their questions about life. *Boyhood* ends in ambiguity leaving the viewers to interpret the future of the characters. It is not unusual for road movies to end in ambiguity, as it offers a flavor of artistic plurality to the film.

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