Beautiful Vessels

Children and Gender in Anglophone Cinema

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Preface: Children, Cinema, and Gender

SARA MARTÍN

The e-book now in the hands of the reader is the result of the work carried out by the students enrolled in the elective course 'Gender Studies' of the MA in Advanced English Studies of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, during the Winter-Spring semester of the academic year 2023-24. This is the twelfth project of this nature that I produce with BA and MA students, following a teaching methodology I first used in 2013-14 for a course on *Harry Potter*. As I have often narrated,[1] I realized then that the articles and papers written by students could and should be published, and I found in the digital repository of my university (http://ddd.uab.cat) the perfect solution to the problem of who would want to publish this type of text.

In all the elective courses that followed the one on *Harry Potter*, I have organized my teaching around the target of publishing an e-book, which has resulted, as I have noted, in eleven previous volumes generating thousands of downloads (see https://webs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/books/). Students react with puzzlement and surprise to my announcement on the first day of class that we will be writing an e-book together, but all respond wonderfully to the teacher's crazy proposal. This has been the case in this volume again, which has a truly international list of contributors, with authors from China, Tunisia, Iran, Ukraine, Poland and diverse places all over Spain.

This is the second time I teach a course on children and cinema, and this requires some kind of justification being, as I am, a Literature teacher.[2] It is obvious to me that most of us, born in the 1960s and later, who chose to study for a degree in English did (or do) so out of an interest in Anglophone culture in general. I have always been a keen reader but my initiation into English also came through cinema in its original version. I recently published a post[3] in my blog about how Film Studies have been consolidated in English Studies in Spain thanks to the effort of Prof. Celestino Deleyto of the Universidad de Zaragoza, as I explained to my MA students, too. I myself have published books on cinema and series[4] and it is my intention to walk further down that road with, to begin with, an exploration of miniseries in the same MA subject next year. My students have

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[1] See 'Producing E-books on Fantasy and Science Fiction with University Students: Classroom Projects'. *Mapping the Imaginative II*, Christian Ludwig and Elizabeth Shipley (eds.), Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020, 163-184.

[2] The previous occasion resulted in the publication in 2021 of the e-book by my students *Gender in 21st Century Animated Children's Cinema*, available from https://ddd.uab.cat/record/236285; see the post in my blog on this volume: https://webs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/2021/02/08/gender-in-21st-century-animated-childrens-cinema-new-e-book-by-students/.

[3] See 'Seeing Film Studies within English Studies: Yes, We Should', *The Joys of Teaching Literature*, 7 April 2024, https://webs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/2024/04/07/doing-film-studies-within-english-studies-yes-we-should/

[4] See for a complete list of my publications https://webs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/books/.

often shown their surprise at being asked to discuss films in the same way they comment on books, a sign that something is missing in secondary and higher education in which cinema is not yet seen as an integral part of culture, despite being 125 years old by now.

Why children? Or why children again? In the 2021 subject, which I taught partly online because of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the focus fell on animated films addressing children directly. This time, I decided to focus on children in live-action cinema of any type, from family movies to horror, passing through indie productions and superhero blockbusters. My students were given a list of 58 films, of which they finally chose 46 (four by student, plus one film explored by a student auditor).[5] I myself chose to work on Uberto Pasolini's *Nowhere Special* (2020), with my classroom presentation and my own essay (published here) serving as models and guides for what I asked my students to do. Classes have consisted of two or three 15-minute presentations, followed by debate and complemented with secondary sources. Our focus has been gender and how this is represented in relation to children, but also to the adults around them. The films are all of them Anglophone because the subject is part of an MA in English Studies.

I have called the volume *Beautiful Vessels* because we have been quite disappointed to find out that the child is used in cinema as an empty signifier to pour adult concerns, related to gender and other matters. In her introduction to *The Child in Cinema* (BFI 2022), key scholar Karen Lury frontally attacks both the use of children in live-action cinema and its study in academic film criticism precisely because the child appears to be used rather than focused on. We were initially resistant to her thesis but have come to the conclusion that Lury is absolutely right. A major problem is that, logically, children cannot self-represent and are thus subjected to the whims of adults, sometimes nostalgic of an innocent childhood that never existed, sometimes appalled by the naughtiness of real children which they may even (mis)read as evil. Children cannot contest their (mis)representation on the screen, so what we have is a rather large collection of child characters often played by exploited (or even traumatized) child actors that, on the whole, generate quite a distorted view of childhood. Gender, as we have proven, is treated is a rather conventional fashion, though it is evident than little girls are gaining ground as strong, solid characters while the interest in boys is waning. Cinema is most likely losing boys to videogames and social media, but it still retains the interest of girls, fueled by more and more women directors.

The essays are organized in chronological order with the intention of inviting readers to judge for themselves whether there has been any progress in the representation of children (most of them ages 4 to 12) in the Anglophone films selected. The students and I hope that their research illuminates the ways in which films approach children in the 21st century and inspires new ways of representing them, hopefully in works closer to their point of view. Enjoy!

Sara Martín
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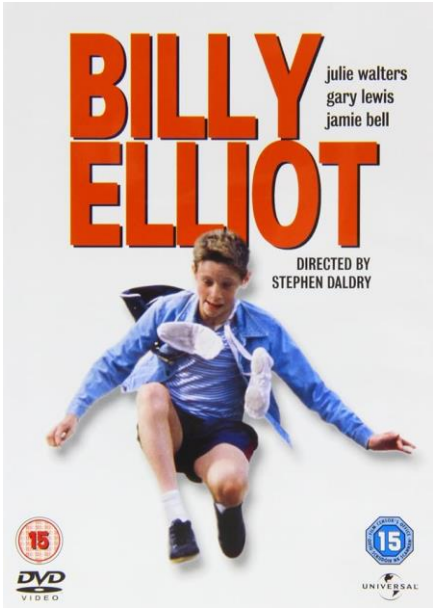
Barcelona, June 2024

[5] I did not find volunteers for *Off the Map* (2003), *Millions* (2004), *Ender's Game* (2012), *Safe* (2012), *Boyhood* (2014), *Maggie* (2015), *BFG* (2016), *Midnight Special* (2016), *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016), *The Book of Henry* (2017), *Good Boys* (2019), *C'mon, c'mon* (2021), or *Palmer* (2021). I excluded the exquisite *The Quiet Girl* (2022) because it is mostly spoken in Irish Gaelic.

Billy Elliot: Breaking Boundaries in Ballet

ESTEFANÍA CORTÉS GÓMEZ

Release Date: 29 September 2000
Director: Stephen Daldry
Producers: Greg Brenman and Jon Finn
Cast: Julie Walters (Sandra), Gary Lewis (Jackie Elliot), Jamie Bell (Young Billy), Jamie Draven (Tony), Adam Cooper (Grown Billy)
Companies: Universal Pictures, StudioCanal, BBC Films, Tigger Aspect Pictures.
Genre: drama
Nationality: UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0249462/



Summary: Of mining strikes and ballet

The miners' strike in England (1984-1985) was one of the most significant trade union actions led by the National Union of Mineworkers to protest against the Conservative government headed by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The strike sought to ensure that the coal mines remained open, fearing that their closure would lead to loss of jobs and of related economic activities. Characterized by extreme violence, major economic losses, and the cleavage of political loyalties, the strike finally finished with the miners' defeat and a far-reaching curtailment of the mining movement, with severe social consequences for the working-class coalfields. This is central for the setting of *Billy Elliot*. The Elliots are portrayed by Jamie Bell as the eleven-year-old Billy, Jamie Draven as his older brother Tony and Gary Lewis as their father. Striking miners Tony and Jackie are trying to provide a decent childhood for Billy in their motherless household. Learning to box is a part of Billy's proper boyhood. However, during one of these lessons, Billy comes across an all-girl ballet class and decides to join it. The plot revolves around the conflict between Billy's family's expectations that he will pursue more masculine activities and Billy's passion for ballet and his dream to become a professional dancer.

Analysis: Ways of being a man in Northern England

Billy Elliot, the popular movie directed by Stephen Daldry,[6] is a British drama that reached the screens on May 19th, 2000. Jamie Bell plays Billy in a distinct performance that shows the character's determination and his success in his struggle to dance, the main motifs of the movie. This is based on the original screenplay by Lee Hall and successfully combines the idea of the fight for self-fulfillment with the traditions of family and society. *Billy Elliot* received very positive reviews and swept a remarkable number of awards, such as three BAFTAs and three Oscar nominations. It was later followed in 2005 by a successful stage production, a musical with songs by Elton John which proves that the story touched the heart of audiences and is still cherished today all over the world.

The film is set during Margaret Thatcher's tenure as Prime Minister (1979-1991). When Thatcher was elected, the country's economy was devastated and its mining sector in a chaotic state. Her harsh policies and the excessive inflation generated enormous unemployment, exacerbating the social class differences. In the coalfields of Northern England, gender stereotypes and the expectations placed on men to always be manly, became part of the central problem of how to dismantle the coal mining industry.

Billy's father makes his eleven-year-old son enroll in boxing lessons in order to perpetuate the prevalent idea that men must defend themselves by using physical abilities like the ones taught in that sport, since men are trained to fight off physical threats assumed to be part of ordinary life. Instead of continuing boxing, however, Billy decides to take up ballet, against his father's explicit opinion that it is for "poofs." The boy immediately feels the burden of being the only boy in the all-girl ballet class from which, aghast, his father pulls him out, forbidding Billy to attend any further sessions. Billy, however, feels let down by his father's refusal to let him dance and continues his ballet classes in secret, with the complicity of his teacher Sandra; this leaves Billy with a growing feeling of being misunderstood. Nonetheless, seeing how much his son cares for dancing and the collapse of mining plunges the father into a crisis of his own masculinity that he projects onto his son.

The 1980s were a chaotic decade in Thatcher's UK. The "new man" appeared then as a man claimed to be in touch with his feminine side and show empathy and compassion. The Cambridge Dictionary defines the term as a "man who believes that women and men are equal and should be free to do the same things, and who does tasks and shows emotions that were traditionally considered only suitable for women." Thus, the movie portraits this "new man" with the help of Billy's character, a boy who manages to open the eyes of the other "manly men" in the story, while still being normatively heterosexual. This movie contributes, thus, to a wider understanding of gender roles in English society from a masculine viewpoint which opposes the traditional one. Daldry's film helps to illustrate how men are held back because of their desire to be recognized as "manly" within patriarchy; it definitely provides a different insight into the traditional gender debates.

The story also addresses the oppression of LGBTIQ+ people in English society, both in public and in private. In her article, Rachel Leishman argues that the movie "is

[6] See on Daldry's film career his IMDB entry, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0197636/.

surprisingly about the growth of men and their acceptance of one another" though "it shows us now that we're still regressive in the way we view the typical 'norms' for children" (1), since Billy's triumph appears to be personal rather than social. Throughout the film, the term "poof" (a slur for 'gay') is used to continuously denigrate gays and those who might not be gay but show an interest in activities coded feminine. According to Llompart "gender is not the result of sex, but rather it is culturally produced and constructed by the performing of certain practices. However, the use of the offensive terms 'poofs' reveals that these men are performing their gender wrong" (11). Billy is labeled a "poof" because he aspires to be a ballet dancer. Yet, as Alan Sinfield notes, Billy might not be "entirely convinced himself" of his identity: "He's eleven, so he doesn't have to be straight or gay." Even though at diverse points Billy claims that he's not gay, as Sinfield points out he is a child who need not rush to acknowledge his sexuality, whether this is homosexual or not.

This is an aspect of the movie which feels very powerful because of the lesson it teaches parents. In Western Europe and the USA ballet has been traditionally considered a feminine activity; therefore the use of any negative terms highlights the gender division in this art. Gendered bodies are constrained by cultural and societal norms, limiting them to specific spaces, and the male body is also expected to understand and perform gender within restrictions, replicating established norms and expectations. Billy Elliot simply wants to dance; he is not gay, or he might be, however that is not an important aspect in his life. This was a crucial message 24 years ago and it is still as important nowadays. It's crucial to let boys know that they can pursue gendered interests while maintaining their straight identity. Nonetheless, it is clear that the underlying presumption here is that if Billy turned up to be gay, this would be a very different story.

In fact, not Billy but his best friend Michael, is the direct representative of the LGBTIQ+ community in the movie. Michael tries to kiss Billy, dresses like a woman, and experiments with his mom's lipstick, which causes him to be ostracized by his Northern English community. Fourteen years later, when Michael goes to see Billy perform in *Swan Lake* in London, he is free to express his sexuality as it is shown by his sitting next to a man who appears to be his partner and who wears makeup in public. By contrasting the characters of Billy and Michael, the film sheds light on a few of the difficulties faced by the LGBTIQ+ population as a whole, rather than concentrating on Billy's odyssey in particular. According to Singh "the manner in which genders are represented in children's literature impacts children's attitudes and perceptions of gender-appropriate behavior in society" (3), something that also applies to films with children. Billy can motivate the heterosexual boys in the audience to embrace more equitable gender perspectives by serving as an alternative role model, whereas Michael can do the same for little boys who already suspect or know they are gay.

According to Cynthia Weber, "To understand how the film [*Billy Eliot*] sets up its masculinity crisis, it is important to grasp how father and son are positioned in the film generally and in relation to one another" (21). The figure of the widowed miner Jackie Elliot is indeed crucial to the development of the term "masculinity" for his sons. The plot highlights the centrality of his role and offers the fascinating narrative by which the manly, traditional father manages to grow out of his preconceived ideas about masculinity out of love for his brilliant youngest son. Billy Elliot's father and elder brother fight for him

and embrace his vocation in the end, seeing how talented the boy is. Watching Billy's father gasp with pride, surprised by his son's elegant dancing in a key scene, is very moving.

The movie also does a great job of highlighting the issues of the working-class struggle. Overlying the miners' strike of 1984 to 1985, *Billy Elliot* depicts the hardships faced by hard-working miners and their families. Billy's professional transition to ballet is actually the only way for him to escape proletarian misery. His father suddenly changes his mind at the end thus proving that love can change people and that people must be willing to rise up and challenge society's norms. The key moral of the story is acceptance of those from different class and calling for proper consideration for those in the lower class especially in artistic jobs. Yet, part of that acceptance clearly connects with class issues: Billy is extremely lucky to have a talent that allows him to leave his mining community behind, as the father's approval implicitly acknowledges.

Billy Elliot enlightens the audience about the strength children with an artistic vocation may have and their ability to withstand difficult situations. Perseverance and belief in oneself are skills that can truly change the world, and Billy's story is a manifest example. The movie shows the significance of fostering and promoting the child's interests and giving any boy the liberty to cultivate their gifts. Ultimately, the movie provides a good message, namely, that with some help from their parents every talented working-class child can come out of shadows and reach success by fighting against prejudice and discrimination.

Billy Elliot, in short, delivers serious messages on issues such as gender, class and children's ability to prevail. In its essence, the film rejects conformity and proposes to embrace deviation from the stereotypical expectations of traditional male roles. Billy's love for ballet in this context represents a rebellion against the norm within Billy's lower-class working-class environment, where boys are expected to take up boxing or other physical activities that are considered appropriate for their sex. It portrays gender assignation as random and shows how boys should be free to follow whatever they are passionate about despite their gender. This narrative thereby ensures that the viewers appreciate and celebrate talents that are out of the norm and calls for working-class boys with unusual artistic talents to be respected.

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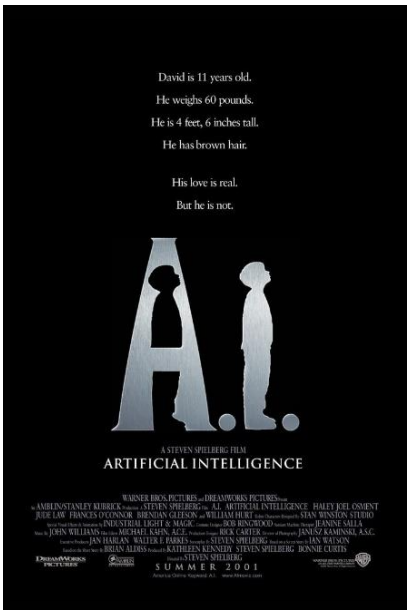
A.I. Artificial Intelligence: Parenting and Unconditional Love in the Age of the Machines

Anastasiia Lytvyn

Release date: 29 June 2001
Director: Steven Spielberg
Screenwriter: Ian Watson (story), Steven Spielberg
Based on Brian Aldiss's short story "Supertoys Last All Summer"
Producers: Bonnie Curtis, Jan Harlan, Kathleen Kennedy, Walter F. Parkes, Steven Spielberg
Cast: Haley Joel Osment (David), Frances O'Connor (Monica), Sam Robards (Henry), Jake Thomas (Martin), Jude Law (Gigolo Joe)
Companies: Dreamworks Pictures, Amblin Entertainment, Stanley Kubrick Productions, Warner Bros Pictures
Genre: sci-fi, drama, adventure
Nationality: USA
IMDb: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0212720/



Summary: A futuristic fairy-tale

Steven Spielberg's film is set in the early 22nd century when global warming has reached its catastrophic peak and most of the world is flooded. At the center of the narrative are the Swinton family, whose biological son Martin is in a coma because of a rare illness. To relieve their grief, the Swintons buy a robot child, David, among the first of its kind. He quickly becomes a part of the family, though his bliss does not last for long: Martin wakes up from his coma and soon becomes jealous of his robotic sibling. Believing that David poses a danger to Martin, the mother, Monica, is forced to abandon the robot. Heartbroken, David determines that he might earn his mother's love back if he becomes a real boy, much like Pinocchio. So, he sets out on a dangerous adventure to find the Blue Fairy and finally become real. In the end, 2000 years later, he is reunited with his mother for one day in a projection that the Specialists, a group of ultra-advanced robots, make for him. In this vision, David finally gets the redemption he seeks and falls asleep with Monica, eventually becoming 'real'.

Analysis: Disposable children and humans others

While the movie was directed by Steven Spielberg, one of the most influential directors in the world, *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* initially was a passion project of another

famous director, Stanley Kubrick. After reading a short story called "Supertoys Last All Summer Long" (1969) by Brian Aldiss, Kubrick got the idea of making a movie about robots that looked like people, or better yet, like children. He entertained the idea for a while and told his close friend, Steven Spielberg, about the potential project. He intended to produce the movie and let Spielberg direct it, but unfortunately, Kubrick died in 1999 before starting work on an actual production (Greiving). After his death, Spielberg decided to direct the film himself, staying faithful to Kubrick's initial idea but adding fairy-tale-like details, typical of some of his work, for example, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). This dual approach of the directors turned *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) into a mix of an eerie sci-fi story about a global catastrophe and a fairy-tale story about a robot boy who can love and have dreams.

The movie touches upon several moral dilemmas that humanity might face in the future if the production of robots becomes as common as it is in the film. One of them is connected to parenthood and the parent-child dynamics within a nuclear family. Heffernan claims that David and Monica form "an uncomfortable Oedipal-like relationship" (12); nevertheless, it is hard to judge the psychology of a character that is not human but merely a program, even if he is advanced enough to experience feelings. Since Monica is the only female in the family, David's desire to get rid of his "competitors," Martin and Henry, suggests the Oedipal complex that Heffernan is referring to. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether David understands his biological sex and his gender identity. It is even less clear whether he has an understanding of sexuality or has unconscious sexual desires. Judging by the nature of his programming, aimed at his being a perfect child, it seems improbable that David's creator would have included any sexuality component. Actually, since David will never age, he might never develop sexually. Moreover, his extreme child-like innocence is juxtaposed with the personality of his companion, Gigolo Joe, a heteronormative sex robot made to please women. Gigolo Joe does not experience emotions, and his vision of sex does not include love, whereas David's love does not seem to include any sexual component.

While the movie heavily accentuates the relationship between mother and son, it is all the more salient how absent the father is. In his movie review, Tibbetts calls the father a "vaguely defined figure" (258). While being present in the family, he is merely a background character. Henry is a perfect example of hegemonic manhood: he is the strong male figure who suppresses his emotions and functions as a mere provider of the family (Ozieblo 106). His sole function in the plot is buying David for his grieving wife and saving Martin from drowning in the pool. Besides that, he does not have much screen time or an impact on the plot. Henry is portrayed as self-sufficient and pragmatic, while Monica seems to be portrayed as emotionally dependent on other people, which is why she needs David to process her grief.

After Henry presents Monica with David, she is initially wary of the robot child and hesitates to initiate the program that will imprint David on her. She is not sure that she will be able to reciprocate the love David has for her, which poses an intricate question about whether a mother's love is biological or acquired. Monica's experience and worrying could be transferred onto the universal parental experience—the parents are supposed to love their children from the moment they are conceived, but what if they do not? Finally, Monica initiates the imprinting and quickly becomes the center of David's

universe. He focuses all his attention on her and feels lost when she is not there to guide him. Monica only fully realizes her responsibility towards David when forced to abandon him. Because his love for her cannot be reset, David will have to be destroyed if Monica rejects him. Monica does not want this to happen, so she leaves him in the forest simply declaring "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the world" (00:51:58-00:52:00).

Due to his artificial nature, David lacks life experience, so he heavily relies on the adults in his life for guidance; however, they fail him countless times. For David, there is no distinction between a story and real life. When he asks Monica if he can return when he becomes a real boy, like in Carlo Collodi's story about Pinocchio, she tells David that this is just a tale, to which he stubbornly responds: "But a story tells what happened" (01:34:43-01:34:45). In one of the unfavorable reviews, LaSalle comments on the main character's adventure, calling it "a nightmare story, one of Pinocchio in purgatory." Indeed, while the story of Pinocchio can afford to be magical, this sci-fi movie about forlorn androids can hardly seem so. Unlike David, the viewers know that his quest will not be successful because Pinocchio's Blue Fairy does not exist. No technology can turn a robot into a human being. Nevertheless, the viewers engage in the story because it is less about Pinocchio and more about David getting what he is owed by the humans that created him.

It is important to note that various reviewers heavily criticized the story's ending. For example, Scott, in his review for *The New York Times*, claims that "For the second time, the movie swerves away from where it seemed to be going, and Mr. Spielberg, with breathtaking poise and heroic conviction, risks absurdity in the pursuit of sublimity." It is easy to assume that it was Spielberg's idea to present us with a fairy-tale ending that does not seem to fit into the general narrative of a hopeless quest of the main character. Nevertheless, in one of the interviews, Spielberg himself explained that while it seems to be a general understanding that the ending was solely his idea, it actually was Kubrick's: "This is where I was obligated to take the picture. And it didn't feel like an obligation to fulfil Stanley's vision; it was my vision as well" (in User323232). Manninen and Manninen claim that "David spends most of the film as a moral subject whom no one recognises as such" (352). The authors insist that the movie's ending is necessary because, in that way, the viewers who recognize David's moral right to achieve his dreams see him finally getting what he is owed.

Despite his ability to love and have dreams and desires like humans, those around him treat David as a commodity. Monica is using David to fulfil her emotional needs and fill the void that she feels after slowly losing her only son. Henry sees David as a remedy for Monica's grief, a helpful distraction for her motherly instincts. Mr. Hobby, his creator, made David as a homage to his deceased son. Even the silicon robots that help David reunite with his mother at the end of the movie are planning to use him to further their knowledge of humanity. Being the last machine that was in touch with humanity, David proves to be a helpful resource for them, so he is treated as such.

Hill claims that while the short story by Brian Aldiss the movie is based on focuses on the political implications of the future society with its cryogenic cameras and licensed pregnancies, Spielberg focuses more on the universal themes of humanity and morality (123). Neither strictly Kubrick's sci-fi nor entirely Spielberg's fairy tale, this failed film

shows us nonetheless the plight of humanity and the triumph of one person, a child who is not real but who has real human aspirations, for he is always more boy than robot.

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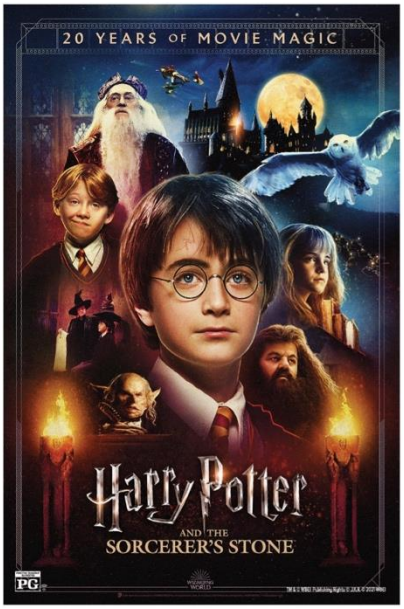
Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone: Magic Can Happen

YIFAN ZHOU

Release date: 4 November 2001
Director: Chris Columbus
Screenwriter: Steve Kloves
Based on the novel by J.K. Rowling
Producers: David Heyman
Cast: Daniel Radcliffe (Harry), Rupert Grint (Ron), Emma Watson (Hermione), Tom Felton (Draco Malfoy), Robbie Coltrane (Hagrid), Richard Harris (Albus Dumbledore), Alan Rickman (Snape), Fiona Shaw (Aunt Petunia), Maggie Smith (McGonagall)
Companies: Warner Bros. Pictures, Heyday Films, 1492 Pictures
Genre: fantasy
Nationality: UK, USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0241527/



Summary: The adventure of the illtreated orphan

Harry is an abused orphan who lives with his cruel relatives, the Dursleys. His life takes a dramatic turn on his 11th birthday when he discovers that he is a wizard. He receives a birthday cake from Hagrid, the groundskeeper of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, along with a letter of acceptance to the school. Harry learns that his parents were powerful wizards who sacrificed their lives battling the dark wizard Voldemort. The boy is the only survivor of their family and the chosen one who must defeat the villain. As Harry begins his journey at Hogwarts, he displays extraordinary talent in flying, soon joining the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Meanwhile, along with his new Gryffindor friends Ron and Hermione, Harry realizes that a dark force is growing within the school, and the key to unraveling the mystery lies in a room guarded by a vicious three-headed dog. Determined to solve the mystery, the trio embark on a thrilling adventure, facing the rising threat of Voldemort and the truth behind the Philosopher's Stone.

Analysis: Harry Potter's metamorphosis

Famous director Chris Columbus (b. Spangler, Pennsylvania, 1958), gained immediate recognition with the Christmas comedy series *Home Alone*. Urged by his eager young daughter, Columbus read J.K. Rowling's 1997 fantasy novel *Harry Potter*

and the Sorcerer's Stone (original title *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*) and convinced Warner Bros. that he should direct its adaptation. To film such an elaborate story, the casting process was intense, with young book fans contributing plenty. Many of the main children's roles are indeed played by book fans. For example, Evanna Lynch, who played Luna Lovegood, was a pen pal with J.K. Rowling, the author of the series. Rupert Grint got the role of Ron Weasley after revealing in the audition interview that Ron was his favorite character (see "Behind the Scenes"). Richard Harris, who plays Headmaster Dumbledore, was 'threatened' by his granddaughter, who vowed to never talk to him again unless he took the role.

Luckily, all the hard work shows. As Peter Bradshaw wrote in *The Guardian*, "I can't think of these characters played by any other actors: the thought of the stories being remade or re-adapted with a different cast is heresy," although it is to be seen whether the announced HBO Max adaptation will succeed in that sense. In order to ensure that the movie faithfully captured the Wizarding World, apart from having profound conversations with J.K. Rowling, Columbus also brought the dailies home to share with his daughter to guarantee that the magical world was presented through children's imaginative lens. Columbus and the cast's commitment ultimately resulted in a unique film experience that struck a chord with children worldwide.

Children are often neglected. However, as Erving Goffman states in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*: "whether treated as non-persons or not, children are in a position to disclose crucial secrets" (57) As a PG rated movie, and despite the fantastical wizarding setting, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* poignantly depicts harsh societal realities that children encounter, evoking deep thoughts about children and gender, particularly as regards sensitive boys like the abused Harry. Bullying behaviors remain visible at Hogwarts, intertwined with gender stereotypes. These have descriptive components, which are beliefs about what men and women typically do and contain strong prescriptive components, or beliefs about what men and women should do (see Fiske and Stevens; Cialdini and Trost). Not even the Wizarding World is free of heteronormativity and prejudice.

Harry is an ordinary boy who has no ambition, except being a trained wizard. He is not as smart as Hermoine, nor as quick-witted as Ron. The deepest desire in his heart is to reunite with his late parents Lily and James, as reflected in the magical Mirror of Erised. However, this not too special boy becomes the protagonist of the series and grows up to develop a better self as a teen. Neither a talented student nor a prodigious wizard, he manages to achieve great things thanks to his friends, with his main talent just being the youngest Quidditch player.

Harry is famous in the Wizarding World for destroying Voldemort, who loses his body when baby Harry deflects his Avada Kedavra curse protected by his mother, yet he himself is not aware of his fame before Hagrid tells him about it. Fearing magic, the Dursleys have concealed it from Harry, raising him in practice as a Muggle (a non-magical person). Yet, despite both growing up in the Muggle world, he and Hermione Granger (whose parents, unlike Harry's, lack magical powers) exhibit distinct characteristics. Hermione is smart and confident, sometimes even arrogant while Harry is shy and feels insecure, speaking hesitantly. His insecurity derives from his abusive childhood, as he was raised by his maternal aunt Petunia and her husband with total negligence.

Living in the cupboard under the stairs and often teased by his cousin Dudley, Harry always has to do chores for the whole family. Despite his obedience, he gets punished frequently. His wears oversized clothes left by Dudley and his glasses remain broken until Hermione fixes them with a magic spell. Harry is, in short, abused both mentally and physically. On the contrary, Hemione grows up in a loving, materially comfortable, educated middle-class family (both parents are dentists). The mistreatment Harry receives not only makes him shy and silent but may also affect his academic performance at Hogwarts. Research shows that maltreated children perform significantly below their peers in standardized tests and grades (see Eckenrode et al.). A-student Hermione knows how to use well all the resources, whereas Harry performs poorly and can only answer Professor Snape's questions with "I don't know, sir." Nevertheless, Harry manages to do well even though he is never as remarkable a student as Hemione. Because of this relative immaturity Harry, the ordinary boy, fascinates, inviting audiences to wonder how he will ultimately defeat Voldemort.

The first peer Harry encounters on the train is Ron Weasley, another seemingly ordinary boy who, surprisingly, has the courage to sacrifice himself when their adventure reaches a dangerous turning point (he is, of course, rescued later). Ron comes from a loving, though poor wizarding family dominated by his loving but authoritarian mother Molly. His warm interactions with his family are what our young Harry longs for. Even the snooty, naughty Draco Malfoy seeks shelter from his protective family when needed: "You wait till my father hears about this," he is constantly warning Harry. In fact, nearly all parents in Rowling's novels, regardless of their moral position, from Mrs. Weasley to Mrs. Dursley, deeply love their children, which contrasts starkly with the miserable childhood of orphaned Harry.

Nevertheless, Harry is neither timid nor cowardly, perhaps because he has learnt to be independent and resilient. In fact, he embodies the typical traits of a Gryffindor, the House to which he belongs. Harry disobeys rules bluntly, often for his friends. When Draco Malfoy throws away Neville Longbottom's magical Remembrall, he ignores the school rules, using a flying broom to retrieve it. To save Hermione from a giant troll, Harry rushes to the bathroom where the creature lodges, despite Professor McGonagall's strict instructions against going to that floor. It is this blunt courage that wins Harry many friends. They grow up and mature together at Hogwarts, so that Harry might be said to find a new warm family in his friends and their caring teachers.

Although Harry is the protagonist, other child characters also contribute much depth to this series. In the novel, Hermione is depicted as a plainer girl with bushy hair, buck teeth, and freckles, but the producers cast the attractive Emma Watson in this role. Even so, Hermione is bullied and isolated by her classmates because of her eagerness to answer questions and her intellectual passion. This dynamic, showing how intolerant children are towards any alleged "arrogance" in girls, mirrors the unfortunate backlash against smart girls often seen in the real world. What is presented in the movie corresponds to what Martin (727-751) found in a study that did address prescriptive stereotypes in children, by which girls should be gentle, neat/clean, sympathetic, eager to soothe hurt feelings, well-mannered, helpful around the house, soft-spoken and never noisy. Hermione's role, despite her formidable intelligence and bravery, perpetuates the stereotype by which accomplished females are relegated to supporting roles, prevented

from taking center stage themselves. Such as in competitive video-game scenarios, women often willingly or unwillingly find themselves side-lined into ancillary positions. This discrepancy in attitudes possibly stems from a gendered double standard by which bullying by boys is smartened up as mere 'naughtiness' while girls who defy traditional stereotypes are bullied. Thus, one may wonder whether, if Hermione had experienced Harry's ordeals, she would have been accepted as a protagonist like him. If Hermione faced the Dursleys' demands to do house chores, would audiences simply see this as the natural behavior expected of girls?

In contrast, Draco Malfoy's mischiefs, including bullying, are better tolerated by the audience, possibly because of actor Tom Felton's good looks. Draco's bullying repeatedly emphasizes his aristocratic "pureblood" heritage as inherently superior to Ron's impoverished upbringing and Hermione's 'mud-blood' roots. This depiction of discrimination rooted in perceived social hierarchies and bloodline supremacy is sadly reflective of real-world prejudices. By authentically portraying such multi-layered bullying involving privileges, bloodline discrimination, and gender-based double standards, the first *Harry Potter* film encourages a crucial reflection on the harsh societal biases that can take root from a young age and that unfold in the other seven films of the series.

In a way, through its nuanced representation of gender dynamics and authentic depictions of bullying's many discriminatory forms*, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* serves as a powerful lens for viewers of all ages. As Judith Butler states in her new book *Who's Afraid of Gender*:

> No one arrives in the world separate from the set of norms lying in wait for them. Conventions, modes of address, and institutional forms of power are already acting prior to any moment when we first feel their impress, prior to the emergence of an "I" who thinks of itself as deciding who or what we want to be. (32)

This applies as well to characters in fiction, including children. Within its imaginative Wizarding World, the novel by Rowling and the film by Columbus prompt a vital contemplation on how various societal prejudices often embedded in childhood can blossom into harmful realities, making this fantasy a catalyst for real-world reflection on justice, equality, and human consciousness. Most importantly, the portrayal of the protagonist Harry himself does not fall into the typical cliché of the boy hero. At pivotal moments, Hermione's intelligence and Ron's sacrifices ultimately lead to their triumph over the dark forces handled by Voldemort. Instead of portraying Harry as a character with an in-built protagonist aura, this film meticulously depicts how an abused child begins to grow resilient in a new environment, thus laying a strong foundation for the subsequent films and his eventual defeat of Voldemort, always with the help of his friends.

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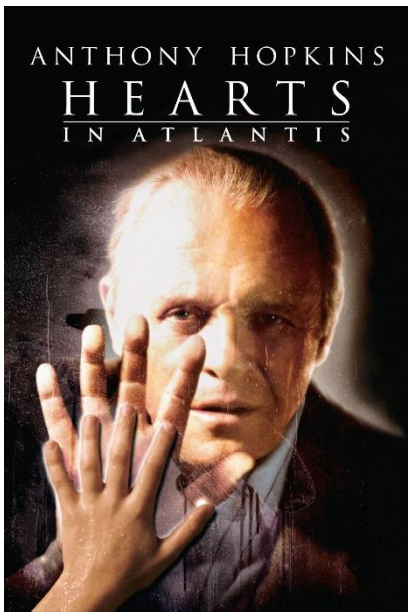
Bridging Hearts: Gender, Friendship, and Childhood in *Hearts in Atlantis*

YOMNA KHREIFICH

Release date: 28 September 2001
Director: Scott Hicks
Screenwriter: William Goldman
Based on the novel by Stephen King *Hearts in Atlantis*
Producer: Kerry Heysen
Cast: Anthony Hopkins (Ted), Anton Yelchin (Young Bobby), Hope Davis (Liz), Mika Boorem (Carol), David Morse (Old Bobby)
Company: Warner Bros. Pictures
Genre: drama, mystery
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0252501/



Summary: A journey into past memories

Middle-aged Robert 'Bobby' Garfield finds himself drawn back to his childhood roots when news of his best friend Sully's passing reaches him. Returning to his old hometown, Bobby's journey becomes a poignant reflection on his past as he revisits the abandoned remnants of his childhood home. Set against the backdrop of a 1960s summer, we are introduced to 11-year-old Bobby, who is living with his widowed mother, Liz Garfield. Alongside his two friends, Carol Gerber and Sully-John, they navigate the mysteries of youth, their lives forever changed by the arrival of a mysterious elderly boarder, Ted Brautigan, taken in by Liz. As she tends to her own affairs, Ted assumes the role of a mentor to Bobby, and they develop an intimate friendship. As their relationship unfolds, Ted warns Bobby to beware of the elusive 'Low Men' who are in pursuit of him because of his telekinetic abilities. Together, Ted and Bobby embark on a summer of adventures, forging a deep bond that transcends age.

Analysis: Bonds, betrayals, and benevolence

At first glance, Bobby Garfield can be seen as a character who defies toxic masculinity by expressing emotions typically associated with femininity, namely fear and sadness. Rebecca Martin offers an insight into such a shift in cinema, suggesting that "males are more involved in the plot of the story and hence, are more likely to be shown responding to events occurring" (513). In other words, this change is not driven by a

positive agenda but by a pragmatic approach to storytelling. Male characters are increasingly portrayed exhibiting a wider range of emotional responses including counter-stereotypical ones like fear, marking a departure from traditional gender roles. However, this progression is more pronounced for male characters than for female ones, highlighting ongoing gender discrimination (512). Yet, Bobby's character is still flawed because he embodies an almost 'too perfect' boyhood, adhering to societal standards as a straight cute mannered son.

The significance of his heterosexuality is, besides, underscored by the movie's 2001 release date, which reflects a societal norm by which being straight is not just common but perceived as favorable for acceptance. In this regard, Corrine M. Wickens asserts that "proper femininity and masculinity are equated with heterosexuality. To be considered a proper woman/man, one must also be heterosexual, and to transgress social norms around sexuality is also to have one's gender called into dispute" (150). Deviating from heteronormativity invites mockery, as seen in the portrayal of Harry, the only queer character in the movie. He is introduced as a queer boy who happens to be a bully. His initial harassment of Carol by trying to touch her breasts (00:53:42), and his taunting Bobby with the term "queer" position him as an antagonist, in stark contrast to Bobby, the story's beloved straight protagonist.

Today we are accustomed to seeing queer characters relegated to secondary roles, often included for the mere sake of a token representation. In this case, however, we encounter a dangerous *mis*representation. An intriguing scene worth mentioning presents mind-reading Ted reacting to Harry's bullying by instinctively resorting to pointing out his cross-dressing. Ted issues a rather threatening warning to the child:

> "I know your dark secret ... You like calling people 'queer' and 'fairy' and such words? Look in my eyes, Harry Doolin. Tell me what you see. Do you see someone in your mother's clothes when he thinks no one is looking? Tell the whole, wide world. Now say, 'I'm sorry, Carol'" (00:54:36).

This significant exchange between the elderly Ted and the child Harry, illustrates the film's attempt to problematize gender fluidity and cross-dressing. The absence of Bobby's father and Ted's stepping into that role imply that Bobby might internalize Ted's understanding of masculinity and, subsequently, of sexuality. Although Bobby does not directly hear the conversation between Ted and Harry, such an intolerant and potentially harmful mentality is often manifested through other actions, which Bobby, not yet aware of broader societal contexts, may inadvertently emulate. This further contributes to the movie's exploration of societal attitudes towards non-normative identities, both in terms of sexuality and gender expression. It prompts the audience to reflect on how LGBTIQ+ identities are positioned within societal discourses, what associations they evoke, for which purposes, and how child viewers might interpret such associations.

In the movie, Harry's sexuality is left undefined, yet the act of cross-dressing is prominently depicted. Victoria Flanagan discusses how contemporary Western culture often conflates cross-dressing with homosexuality, attributing this phenomenon partly to the rise of drag since the 1990s (139). The mere act of a man wearing feminine clothing carries significant cultural weight due to its association with homosexuality. As seen in the movie, cross-dressing appears to be an emasculating and shameful act for Harry, which reflects societal attitudes that stigmatize gender nonconformity, particularly among

individuals adhering to hegemonic masculinity norms. Ted's resort to threatening Harry by exposing his act of cross-dressing to "the whole wide world" aims at depriving him of his masculinity and self-worth (00:55:05). Diane Ehrensaft also disagrees with the association of children's cross-dressing with emasculation, viewing it as a playful and creative form of expression, "merely a manifestation of their cross-sex identifications and the ease with which they express the developing feminine aspect within them in their early years" (123). This suggests that the cultural stigma attached to cross-dressing is unwarranted and rooted in societal constructs rather than in the inherent characteristics of the act itself.

In examining gender roles in the movie, specific scenes highlight traditional stereotypes. In his domestic setting, for instance, Bobby is usually depicted lounging on the bed with his sneakers on or watching TV on the couch, whereas Carol is only shown engaging in household tasks, such as hanging clothes. Gender stereotypical beliefs are also revealed through the dynamic between them; Bobby, being male, is portrayed as protective, while Carol, as the female, is depicted as delicate, particularly the moment when Bobby carries her on his back after she is beaten up by Harry. This scene juxtaposes her weakness and need for protection with Bobby's strength and dominance. He immediately assumes a protective stance, and while helping her may be viewed in terms of care and genuine, almost 'feminine' affection, it can also be interpreted as asserting power dynamics. Bobby emerges as a hero, rescuing his frail, wounded princess, reinforcing traditional gender roles and power imbalances.

The presence of the male gaze is evident, particularly reinforced in the kissing scene, in which Carol asks Bobby to kiss her again because she is "dying here" (00:43:01). Interestingly, this scene is replicated almost exactly from the novel by Stephen King, suggesting a deliberate choice to retain it while it could have been easily omitted. A review in *Spirituality and Practice* poignantly describes the moment of the kiss as "a wonder to behold with its innocence and naturalness," which prompts consideration as to whether an explicit and essentially forced kiss between two children who barely know each other is necessary for the sake of representing child romance on screen. Notably, Anton Yelchin (Bobby) was merely 12 years old, while Carol (Mika Boorem) was 14. In many adaptations, filmmakers would opt for older actors and/or age up the characters, acknowledging the emotional maturity required for such scenes. At 12 and 14 years old, the actors do not possess the necessary depth of emotional understanding to comprehend the nuances involved in romantic or intimate scenes. While consent is paramount and child actors are accompanied by their parents or guardians, children still find it difficult to express discomfort. Filmmakers and creators can explore alternative storytelling approaches that convey emotions without requiring physical contact. This may involve creative cinematography, dialogue, or other means to suggest a romantic connection without the need for a kiss scene. Participating in intimate scenes, even if staged, can have an impact on the emotional well-being of child actors.

Atlantis, the mythical land that sank supposedly in the Atlantic Ocean, serves as a metaphor in the story, symbolizing the gradual dissolution of memories and childhood. The movie can be described as a nostalgic coming-of-age tale centered around young Bobby, skillfully capturing the enchantment of growing up while also depicting the inevitable loss of childhood innocence and the disillusionment that accompanies

adulthood. One of the most compelling aspects of the story is the relationship between Bobby and Ted. Bobby's deep love and admiration for the much older Ted are palpable, as Ted assumes the role of a surrogate father figure in his life. Ted introduces Bobby to a world he had not seen before, sparking a sense of hero worship in him. However, their relationship is not without its troubles.

Ted faces challenges not only from the 'Low Men' but also from Bobby's mother who harbors suspicions about their growing friendship. The inherent unease surrounding a single man befriending a child is a sad reality of the world we live in. Liz's apprehension towards Ted is portrayed with foreboding scenes and comments, stirring concern in the audience about potential dangers: "Bobby, this Ted of yours. Did he tell you where he came from? ... Bobby? Does he… Nothing. Just promise me you'll tell me if anything unusual happens, alright?" (00:31:11). In this regard, it is worth noting that Liz's character is portrayed in a negative light, despite her valid concerns about her child's safety. The movie's portrayal of Liz as overbearing and unreasonable overlooks the genuine risks associated with unsupervised interactions between children and strangers. While reading about their friendship in the book may not be so problematic, the portrayal of such relationships in visual media is increasingly restricted due to legal constraints and societal sensitivities. Cancel culture can be beneficial to right the wrongs but, "witnessing cancel culture backlash seems to send some people into panic mode" (Beauchamp 8). As a result, portrayals of such friendships are increasingly avoided in contemporary media landscapes.

The negative depiction of Liz evokes a profound sense of disillusionment, marking Bobby's introduction to the mundane and often cruel world of adults. She brings to mind the sinister stepmother archetype from fairy tales, being portrayed as cruel, wicked, and dismissive of her son's wishes: "I never get what I want," he laments (00:48:17). She goes to great lengths to poison Bobby's mind against his late father and men in general, emphasizing her perception as the story's villainess. This portrayal further strengthens the contrast between Liz's malevolence and Ted who emerges, thus, as the savior figure. Towards the movie's conclusion, Liz, herself a victim of her hostile environment, betrays Ted to the 'Low Men,' further solidifying her depiction as evil until the very end. Bobby's supposed liberation from her influence begins with Ted entering his life, underscoring the narrative's emphasis on male figures as agents of change. This representation raises questions about the value attributed to women in the narrative. Bobby's girlfriend, Carol, occupies a minor role, while Liz is portrayed as unequivocally evil, despite her arguably justified actions. As a widowed working mother struggling to make ends meet and facing sexism and abuse in her workplace, Liz is definitely a complicated character, albeit not necessarily a likable one.

Yet, amidst the darkness of Liz's character lies the beauty of friendship and the transformative power it holds, along with a sense of childhood nostalgia. What brings Bobby and Ted together is their identification as 'others.' As Cecilia Lindgren and Johanna Sjöberg suggest, "children and the elderly are set aside as 'others,' bound to act their age" (214). Bobby finds in Ted the attention and responsibility he does not get from his negligent mother. He is not viewed by Ted as a mere child in need of nurturing, but a competent companion and friend, capable of contributing meaningfully to their dynamic. In an interview with Anthony Hopkins, he was asked about the enduring bond

between the characters despite their disparate life stages, to which he replied: "Mutual respect. He didn't talk to the boy like he was a baby. He talked to him as a young adult. Just respect" (in ScreenSlam). In turn, for Bobby, Ted is not a confused elder who needs to be taken care of, but a wise mentor capable of guiding and educating the younger generation.

Their relationship, thus, challenges societal norms surrounding age and roles, daring to venture beyond the boundaries of childhood and old age. The companionship between Ted and Bobby is portrayed as fulfilling for both parties, but as unconventional and potentially risky, rather than idyllic and innocent. In essence, the relationships that Bobby cultivates are the real strength to the story-a unique bond with Ted, a budding romance with Carol, a special connection with his mother and an enduring friendship with Sully. The plot is not the story here; the relationships are.

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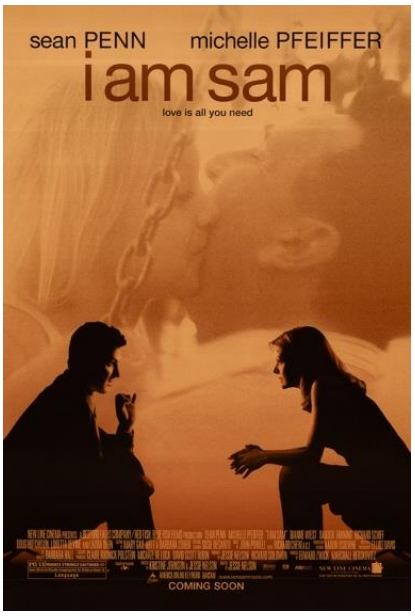
I Am Sam: Gendered Narratives of Disabled Fatherhood

YASAMAN PARASTOOK

Release date: 25 January 2002
Director: Jessie Nelson
Screenwriter: Kristine Johnson, Jessie Nelson
Producers: Jessie Nelson, Richard Solomon, Edward Zwick, Marshall Herskovitz
Cast: Sean Penn (Sam Dawson), Dakota Fanning (Lucy), Michelle Pfeiffer (Rita), Dianne Wiest (Annie), Loretta Devine (Margaret Calgrove), Richard Schiff (Turner), Laura Dern (Randy Carpenter)
Companies: New Line Cinema, Avery Pix, The Bedford Falls Company
Genre: drama
Nationality: USA
IMBD: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0277027/



Summary: Love's triumph over disability

Sam, who has the intellectual capacity of a seven-year-old, has made a homeless woman pregnant; she runs away from the hospital after giving birth to a baby girl. Sam subsequently faces problems securing the custody of his daughter Lucy when she turns eight and he is asked to prove that he can provide the required living standards for her. *I am Sam* portrays thus the struggles of an intellectually disabled father in the absence of his daughter's mother, a man far from the picture of the 'normal' paternal role who nonetheless fights for the love he has for his daughter. Even though he eventually comes to an agreement for the joint custody of his daughter with another couple, as foster parents, due to his disability, Sam asserts that he may not be a complete parent for Lucy, yet he is still capable of giving her all the love that she wants.

Analysis: The complexity of disabled fatherhood

Sam Dawson, played by Sean Penn, is depicted as a loving and devoted father to his daughter Lucy (Dakota Fanning). Jessie Nelson's film highlights the biases and stereotypes surrounding intellectual disability, particularly in the context of parenting. Sam's disability is often used as a justification for questioning his ability to provide adequate care for Lucy, thus reflecting societal misconceptions about disabled individuals' capabilities as parents. In addition to grappling with his disability, Sam also navigates societal expectations regarding gender roles in parenting. Traditional gender

norms dictate that fathers should be the primary breadwinners and be less involved in caregiving responsibilities compared to mothers. This is one of the notable problems Sam is constantly facing throughout the film. As a disabled individual, this seems a major concern. Parchomiuk asserts that "as the individuals with a disability have difficulty being an active part of society and need public aid during their lives, their parenting is also an obstacle that needs to be tackled by their community" (6). This stereotyped image of the father as the breadwinner is visible throughout the film as Sam is not only a disabled individual but he is a man. As such he is expected to be a strong masculine figure who should protect the family, much more so given that the mother has abandoned him and their daughter. Esping-Anderson states that "this is not only a societal norm but also a part of a discourse by which children are central points of the social investment strategy and therefore their lives must be facilitated by the presence of a perfect caregiver" (20). Something that, clearly, Sam cannot be.

However, Sam challenges these norms by prioritizing Lucy's well-being and demonstrating unwavering commitment to his role as her father. According to Lamb, the father's role and responsibility consists of allocating love, affection and a sense of security to children. (4). Despite his general learning disability and mental retardation that limits his adaptive behavior, decision-making, problem-solving, thinking and judging which had affected his daily learning and experience in life, Sam's love and dedication to Lucy serve as a powerful testament to the importance of nurturing and caregiving in fatherhood; it is evident that he can understand the meaning of protecting a child through fatherly love. Kilkey explains first-hand that fathers with physical disabilities have to struggle in their lives as they enjoy spending time with their family members, yet they feel insecure that they can't play the expected parental role: "I loved spending time with my son and staying at home, but I felt it wasn't the right thing. I just felt I should be the main breadwinner" (25); this argument also applies to fathers with intellectual disabilities similar to Sam's, beyond physical disability.

The portrayal of Sam as a disabled father raises important questions about the barriers that individuals with disabilities face in assuming parental roles. Disability often intersects with gender, exacerbating the challenges faced by disabled men who aspire to be actively involved in their children's lives. Societal attitudes towards disability can limit opportunities for disabled fathers to participate fully in parenting activities, perpetuating the stereotype that they are incapable or unfit parents. As Kilkey and Clarke explain, society has attended mostly to the children who have disabled fathers and marginalized the disabled parents' supportive needs in their lives (8). This is exactly the case in *I am Sam* as we can witness from the beginning to the end of the film that there is no specific organization to offer any support to Sam in order to nurture his daughter.

In addition, intersectionality serves as a critical framework to understand the multifaceted nature of Sam's identity as a disabled father. His experiences are not isolated but are intertwined with intersecting systems of oppression based on socioeconomic status, and access to resources. In the movie, these intersecting identities shape Sam's interactions with societal institutions (including family, social media, education system, government, religious institutions and his minimum-wage employer) and influence his ability to go through the complexities of parenthood. In one scene, Sam attends a meeting with Lucy's social worker and legal representatives to

discuss his suitability as a parent. Despite his genuine love and dedication to Lucy, Sam is met with skepticism from the professionals present, who question his ability to provide a stable home environment due to his intellectual disability and his job in a cafeteria chain. As we can see, as a working-class individual with limited education and resources, Sam faces important economic and social struggles. His inability to conform to traditional gender norms of paternal authority and financial stability exacerbates the skepticism of those tasked with evaluating his parental fitness. In other words, Sam's identities intersect with his access to resources, further complicating his journey as a disabled father.

Unlike affluent parents who can afford specialized care and assistance, Sam must rely on limited public services and community resources to meet Lucy's needs. He works as a barista at Starbucks and endeavors to find a new job as a dog walker to prove he can indeed take care of his daughter. This is his solution to overcome challenges that other employers have planted by undermining his abilities. Although Sam has mental disabilities, he tries to present his skills and abilities to improve his financial stability and prove his suitability as a father. This lack of access to resources is highlighted in the scene where he is asked about the future of Lucy's education. Sam mentions that he has found some free courses to show that he can play an active role in providing a proper education for Lucy despite his financial status. That scene shows Sam's ability to focus and understand the importance of Lucy's education and his efforts to provide her with appropriate educational conditions as a suitable father.

The way Sam is portrayed in *I Am Sam* as a father with a disability illuminates how impairment, gender standards, and social status all collide with the obstacles that come with being a parent. As he navigates societal biases and presumptions that cast doubts on his abilities as a good father, Sam reveals the prevalent ableism and gender-based standards that affect how others view parenting throughout the whole movie. Sam's unwavering love and dedication to Lucy in the face of these challenges is a strong example of the transformational power of nurturing and caregiving in fatherhood. Ladia et al. explain that Sam can give the care his daughter needs regardless of his mental status. He tries his best to make a living for Lucy, though necessarily at the end of the movie he must accept joint custody as he accepts his own shortcomings as a parent for Lucy's sake (5).

In conclusion, *I Am Sam* provides a thorough examination of how gender roles, social standards, and impairment intersect with fatherhood. The film highlights the systemic barriers disabled men experience in fulfilling parental roles by addressing common biases and stereotypes about them through the character of Sam Dawson. Sam's unwavering love and dedication to his daughter Lucy challenge traditional gender norms and emphasize the importance of nurturing and caregiving in fatherhood. Sam's representation as a disabled father emphasizes the need for a more fair and inclusive parenting approach that honors the variety of experiences and skills that caregivers, regardless of their capabilities or social identities, have to offer. In the end, *I Am Sam* shows how love and affection can redefine what it means to be a parent. It also advocates for a society that recognizes every individual's inherent worth and dignity, regardless of their social standing or disability.

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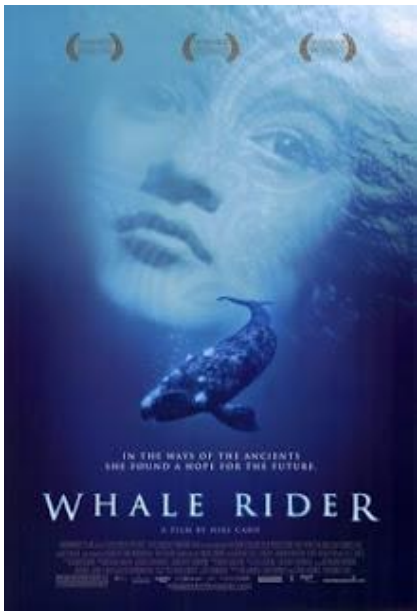
Whale Rider: Challenging the Tides of Tradition

YASAMAN PARASTOOK

Release date: 29 August 2003
Director: Niki Caro
Screenwriter: Niki Caro, Witi Ihimaera
Based on the novel by Witi Ihimaera
Producers: John Barnett, Frank Hubner, Tim Sanders
Cast: Keisha Castle Hughes (Paikea), Rawiri Paratene (Grandfather Koro), Vicky Haughton (Nanny Flowers), Cliff Curtis (Paikea's father), Grant Roa (Uncle), Mana Taumaunu (Hemi), Rachel House (Shilo)
Companies: South Pacific Pictures, Apollo Media Distribution, Pandora Film Produktion
Genre: drama, family
Nationality: New Zealand
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0298228/



Summary: A girl born in a patriarchal society

Among Māoris, for more than 1000 years a male heir born to the Chief has succeeded to the title. The Chief's eldest son, Porourangi (Cliff Curtis), fathers twins, a boy and a girl, but the boy and his mother die in childbirth. The surviving girl is named Pai (Keisha Castle Hughes). Her father leaves her to be raised by her grandparents and abandons the village. Koro (Rawiri Paratene), her grandfather and the Chief, refuses to acknowledge Pai as his heir. When Pai's father returns home after 12 years, Koro hopes that he will relent, but Porourangi has no intention of becoming Chief. After a bitter argument, he leaves again, suggesting to Pai that she comes with him. She starts the journey but quickly returns, claiming that her grandfather needs her. Still, Koro is blinded by prejudice and cannot accept that Pai is the natural heir. The old Chief calls for his people to bring their 12-year-old boys to him for training. He is certain that through a grueling process of teaching the ancient chants, tribal lore, and warrior techniques, the future leader of their tribe will be revealed to him. Meanwhile, Paikea learns all the rituals secretly and when a massive herd of whales become stranded on the beach, she is the one saves the animals to finally gain her grandfather's approval and become his heir.

Analysis: Girls becoming the leaders of the future

Whale Rider, based on the well-known novel by Witi Ihimaera, is a powerful exploration of gender roles and depicts the potential for change within a traditional Māori community. At its core is the story of a young girl who defies the patriarchal norms of her society to assert her leadership and connect with the spirit of the whale, a symbol of great significance for her people. The notable fact about the young girl protagonist is her age. As Message notes, the portrayal of girls before the age of adolescence is central in New Zealand's film industry and Pai is a representative of transformation as aged 11 she is the connection between childhood and adolescence. However, Message argues that the characterization of Paikea in this movie is paradoxical as she shows a mature behavior beyond her age, far more rational than that of all the other adult characters in the film.

One of the central gender issues in *Whale Rider*, as noted, is the rigid adherence to traditional gender roles within the Māori community. As Witi Ihimaera, the author of the original novel, narrates, every generation since the legendary 'whale rider' has seen a male inherit the title of Chief. This linear succession is disrupted when Paikea's brother is born dead, leaving her as the sole surviving heir to the leadership. Paikea's journey challenges the gender stereotypes ingrained in her community and demonstrates that leadership potential is not limited by gender. Concerning his creating this powerful female character, Ihimaera mentions that he intended to create female characters who are not only heroines at a national level but on a historical level as well so that they can reflect the truthful role of Māori women: "Having a girl ride the whale—which is also a symbol of patriarchy—was my sneaky literary way of socking it to the guy thing" (in Meklin and Meklin). In the same interview, Ihimaera explains that he decided to change the patriarchal picture that existed in Māori culture because her daughter complained about constantly reading about male heroes.

Pai's own father prefers to live and work as an artist ignoring the traditions, indicating in this way his mental fatigue, his inability to face failure, and his fear of not meeting his father's standards as a Chief. Although Pai herself is attracted to the traditions, understands the whales' feelings, and thinks that she can be the leader, her grandfather disagrees. The personality of the grandfather is that of a man who limits his decisions to what the traditions dictate without accepting any exceptions. The gender issues and his belief in the separated roles of men and women are the most important barriers for Pai in expressing her feelings and talent to lead. Her older brother also follows their father's steps and prefers to leave and form a new life away from traditions, while Pai is responsible, interested, and mature enough in her behavior to fight and prove she is qualified to eventually become Chief.

Paikea's leadership is validated when she successfully communicates with a stranded whale, a moment that holds great significance for her people. According to Gonick, *Whale Rider* presents a double narrative: one from the perspective of the child who observes the world, and one from the Māori tradition that emphasizes the importance of the elders' wisdom. By bridging these two perspectives, Paikea can lead her community in a way that respects their traditions while also challenging the limitations placed on her as a young woman, still a child. The film's portrayal of Paikea's emotional growth and developing sense of self-worth is crucial to understanding its themes of

gender and leadership. Majeed and Lashari explain that "*Whale Rider* challenges the view of children as passive recipients of knowledge, instead presenting a young girl who actively shapes her own destiny." Accordingly, Paikea's journey is one of self-discovery and empowerment, as she learns to embrace her unique qualities and challenge the expectations placed upon her by her society, embodied by her grandfather Koro. A central aspect of *Whale Rider* is that Pai understands her grandfather's disappointment at her brother's death. She seeks love from her grandfather by proving her abilities, with the full support of her grandmother, who countenances her efforts. In other words, Pai is depicted as a young girl who knows that all obstacles can be overcome and that fulfilling her destiny as a leader is a process of growth. Thus, although she must prove her abilities and learn new things, her efforts finally validate her. Yet, the movie is not only about this girl's character, but a call for all children to fight for their dreams, leaning on the force of reason and beyond the possibility of failure.

In interviews about the movie, director, and scriptwriter Niki Caro discusses the challenges of telling a story set in a patriarchal Māori society. She highlights the importance of Keisha Castle-Hughes' performance in bringing Paikea to life and the film's focus on female empowerment. Caro also emphasizes the significance of working with child actors and the unique challenges that come with it. Keisha, Caro comments "is a very urban girl. Very girly. And I really needed this kid to 'be' from this place, feel like she came from that ground. I like the economy of language that you need to have when working with kids. You have to be very clear with them" (in Mottershead). In the same interview, Caro asserts that she has tried to portray accurately the Māori gender dynamics and cultural specificity, though it must be noted that she is not herself Māori.

From another viewpoint, *Whale Rider* also explores the theme of the survival of indigenous cultures and the importance of preserving traditional knowledge. The film's emphasis on the significance of the whale and Paikea's connection to it reflects the Māori people's deep reverence for the natural world. Beyond the family circle, the film portrays the traditions and cultures of a small, unknown village. Despite being rooted in a small area, their traditions are shown with respect, highlighting the connection between humans and nature. Caro's film is thus also a lesson for the children in the audience about other cultures and societies, which may motivate them in their individual growth and their thoughts and improve their creativity. Prentice explores the way the cultural values of the Māori have been represented in the movie and argues that by depicting the picture of Paikea, the film is challenging the notion that indigenous cultures are static or unchanging, instead portraying a community in flux, grappling with the challenges of modernization while also seeking to maintain their cultural heritage. In the movie, the picture of the future is depicted as a female image, but this is a future that is firmly connected to the past and this shift is happening through a connection to the history. Smith explores this notion and states that

> The remembering of a people relates not so much to an idealized remembering of a golden past but more specifically to the remembering of a painful past and, importantly, people's responses to that pain. While collectively indigenous communities can talk through the history of painful events, there are frequent silences and intervals in the stories about what happened after the event (...) This form of remembering is painful because it involves remembering not just what colonization was about but what being dehumanized meant for own cultural

> practices. Both healing and transformation become crucial strategies in any approach that asks a community to remember what they may have decided unconsciously or consciously to forget. (in McDonough)

In conclusion, *Whale Rider* stands as a poignant cinematic exploration of gender roles, leadership, and cultural preservation within the Māori community. The film challenges traditional gender norms, showcasing how ancient cultures are supposed to go through change and accept new societal ideals. Although it is vital to preserve traditional cultures, society needs to grow and make advancements generation by generation. Paikea's journey symbolizes a powerful transformation, bridging the gap between the older members of society and the future potential leaders of the community while she challenges the patriarchal structures deeply ingrained in her community. By depicting her struggles to navigate modernization while holding onto cultural traditions, the movie showcases the resilience and adaptability of indigenous communities in the face of change. In essence, *Whale Rider* is a compelling tale of empowerment, self-discovery, and the enduring spirit of a young generation who challenges the status quo to pave the way for a more inclusive and progressive future. It serves as a reminder of the importance of embracing one's uniqueness, challenging societal expectations, and honoring the wisdom of tradition while forging new paths toward a more equitable society in which a girl can eventually become the Chief.

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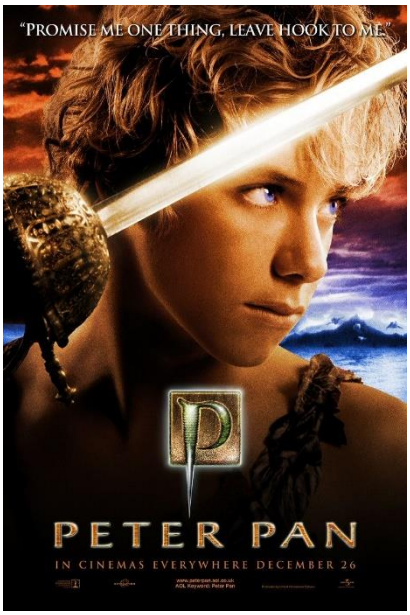
Peter Pan: Marriage as Commerce and the Seeds of Colonial Violence

ANDRÉS SANTIAGO BERRÓN

Release date: 18 December 2003
Director: P.J. Hogan
Based on the children's play and the novel by J.M. Barrie
Screenwriters: P.J. Hogan, Michael Goldenberg
Producers: Lucy Fisher, Douglas Wick, Patrick McCormick
Cast: Jason Isaacs (Captain Hook/Mr. Darling), Jeremy Sumpter (Peter Pan), Richard Briers (Mr. Smee), Rachel Hurd Wood (Wendy), Olivia Williams (Mrs. Darling), Lynn Redgrave (Aunt Millicent), Ludivine Sagnier (Tinker Bell)
Companies: Universal Pictures, Columbia Pictures, Revolution Studios, Red Wagon Entertainment, Allied Stars Ltd
Genre: fantasy, action-adventure
Nationality: UK, USA, Australia
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0316396



Summary: Stumbling upon Neverland

The Darling family appears to be a happy and prosperous family. Nevertheless, when Nana, the family nurse, who happens to be a dog, shames Mr. Darling and ruins his prospects of furthering his career, the father appoints the strict Aunt Millicent as the new nurse, seeking to discipline his children. Wendy, who has started seeing their strange visitor Peter Pan, helps him sew his shadow back on, and then he offers to take her to Neverland, where he comes from. She accepts, on condition that her brothers accompany them. There, they encounter the pirate band led by Captain Hook, who seeks his revenge on Pan for the loss of his hand. Aided by the Native Americans who live on the island, the 'lost boys' fight back and manage to help Peter defeat his rival.

Analysis: Edwardian children and the weight of cultural mores

The 2003 adaptation by P.J. Hogan (b. Brisbane 1962) of James Matthew Barrie's 1911 novel *Peter and Wendy*—based on his own 1904 play *Peter Pan; or, the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*—incorporates some aspects of its source materials that other versions ignore, while also innovating in its casting choices, thus allowing for neglected

readings of the story to surface. By allowing the characters to be embodied by actors of the same age, the director allows Wendy and Peter's romance to question Aunt Millicent and Mr. Darling's Edwardian view of marriage as a legal endeavor or economic transaction. Similarly, Wendy's brothers Michael and John represent an embryonic version of colonialist masculinity, which is both questioned and affirmed throughout the episodes that comprise their stay in Neverland. Linking these two issues together is a cinematographic examination of the nature of traditional Protestant gender relations as expressed in the imaginations of three English children living in the early 20th century.

Let us firstly analyze the portrayal of Wendy Darling, interpreted by Rachel Hurd-Wood, who was 13 when the film was released. Wendy, a storyteller, fascinates her brothers with her ability to captivatingly narrate stories. Because of this, she earnestly desires to become a novelist, an aspiration that her aunt decidedly objects to, perceiving that profession to be intrinsically dishonorable, perhaps since it was perceived as indicative of female possession of imaginative powers able to potentially subvert the patriarchal hierarchies of gender. It is interesting to note that Wendy's first encounter with Pan causes the children's confrontation with their father, foreshadowing the discovery of the fearsome fatherly figure—as embodied by Captain Hook—in Neverland; the first sighting of Pan seems indeed to become vividly imprinted in her, enthralling her fancy. In this occasion the externalization of her imaginative faculty is visual instead of aural, resulting in a rudimentary depiction of the scene in a drawing. The fact that the teacher, upon discovering this inoffensive drawing, feels compelled to compose a prudish complaint—according to the narrator, the adult Wendy—suggests that adults are prone to perceiving sexual undertones in otherwise innocent expressions of infantile creativity. This scene inaugurates the conflict between Freudian and Victorian understandings of childhood that permeates the film's romance plot. According to Duschinsky, the combination of "desire" and "childhood innocence" results in a "disjunctive synthesis" (135), explaining the dissimilarity between the audience's—and Wendy's—perception of the incident related to her drawing, and that of the indignant teacher, whose behavior, as shall be explained later, seems coherent with that of Aunt Millicent.

Nevertheless, Wendy suspects that her father will sympathize with her teacher's condemnation of her artistic inclinations, instead of perceiving it as a harmless entertainment, or even a talent, which is what Wendy believes it to be. Mr. Darling's willingness to listen to Aunt Millicent's advice had possibly made her suspicious of her father's sympathy for her pursuits. Furthermore, the prospect of marriage, presented to Mr. Darling by the aunt as another element in the list of methods to achieve social and financial advancement, must have caused a profound impact in Wendy's mind, since, in many of the stories she tells, the ending is signaled by marriage and the end of adventuring. Wendy's understanding of the implications of her father's decision to enforce a strict discipline in his household in order to make his children "grow up" is negotiated by her intense interaction with fairy tales and folk stories, which serve as a hermeneutical tool to apply to her own life—much of with is spent in playful projections of her person onto the characters of the stories she tells, as exemplified by her desire to perform the role of a pirate. Besides this, since her aunt had declared that novelists are not easy to marry, becoming, as it were, extravagant commercial goods that few would

be likely to purchase, it is likely that Wendy would have begun questioning her attachment to those stories others deem to be childish, hence clarifying her need to mediate between her love of fantasy and the need to mature by going to Neverland.

The child actors needed to express fascination through their facial reactions, since "the film was shot entirely inside sound stages" (*The Age*), thus not making any use of the director's native Australia. One of the producers, Lucy Fisher, dissipates any belief in the possibility that Hogan might have chosen to go back to his homeland to relive his childhood, stating that "[they] saved a lot of money by shooting in Australia" (in *The Age*) but Hogan's colorful computer-generated world appears to be completely independent from any memories from his youth. The fact that Rachel Hurd-Wood's seeming fascination at the sights of Pan's island is actually derived from her staring at bluescreens hints at the reason why she was chosen to play Wendy. One of the posters, which features the character she plays, seems to highlight her eyes: the child's eyes and their reflection of wonder become fundamental in the film. The spectator must vicariously experience fascination by sympathizing with Hurd-Wood's feigned reactions, which were somewhat aided by the semi-digital film sets. An actual sense of wonderment, somewhat dependent on evocations of colonial exoticism, seems to have been present during the shooting of the film, since the actress mentions that the "Neverland set" was "like being in a jungle" (in Head).

Because of this, her presence in Pan's environment necessitates the simultaneous adoption of two identities which are irreconcilable in the traditional Protestant world she belongs to, in which, due to the non-existence of the communal celibate alternative offered by Catholicism, all women must spend their youth "preparing for the role of virginal bride" (Gryctko 144). Wendy must both fulfil her dreams of adventuring, also coming close to becoming a pirate—that is, of performing roles which are utterly beyond the norms of Edwardian respectability, transforming those associated with them into outcast—and prepare for her marriage and motherhood by responding to the Lost Boys demands for maternal care, thus being referred to as their "mother" by them. Interestingly, her brothers, who have at this point join the Lost Boys, also call her their mother.

Because of this, it would be a mistake to consider Neverland a land of escapism, enabling the portrayal of subversive actions which would never be accepted in the protagonist's Edwardian United Kingdom. While it is true that Wendy can glimpse the possibilities of non-patriarchal occupations for women, these are hastily shown to be untenable even in Neverland: she is offered a position in Captain Hook's crew, but the sinister undertones of seduction projected by Hook—perhaps inverting the Freudian idea of the Electra complex, transforming the daughter into the desired object—make it clear that such a profession is not only profoundly immoral but dangerous for a woman. The fact that Hook and Wendy's father are played by the same actor, Jason Isaacs, despite the clear difference in appearance, with Hook evoking "the attire associated with the name of Charles II" (Barrie 81), and Mr. Darling bearing the expected look of a respectable middle-class banker, hints at the fact that any other fatherly figure is not merely unstable but steeped in abhorrent sexual practices. The fact that Hook inhabits a predominantly infantile space is in itself strange, and profoundly menacing. Rachel convincingly portrays Wendy's intense emotional discomfort, which most viewers will

also feel when they realize that her father and Hook are embodied by the same man. Confirming this idea, Jason Isaacs asserts in an interview that Hook is "strangely attractive but repulsive as well" and that "he looks like the only man she knows—which is her father" (in Simons). The film exploits this theatrical casting tradition to reinforce the Freudian undertones that characterize some readings of the source material—of course, it must be taken into account that Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* was published only five years before Barrie's original play.

Similarly, the fact that Wendy's kiss was portrayed by the filmmakers as a reversed image of their first meeting—with her seemingly hovering over Peter—is indicative of the momentary expression of the possibility of alternative forms of desire, with the female taking the active role. The conscious decision to present the scenes as mirror images confirms Neverland's function as an elusive receptacle for alternate gender roles, drawing on an English tradition of fairyland as a place in which non-normative gender roles are presented only for Protestant doctrinal understandings to triumph over them—a clear precedent is Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1596). Yet it must be remembered that Peter and Wendy can never bring their romance to fulfilment; theirs must be a fleeting infatuation which is meant to aid Wendy's coming of age and assume the demands of her Protestant environment. Since the only representation of a nonmarital romantic relationship she will ever have access to is the one she herself experiences with Pan, that possibility is one she will always instinctively regard as an untenable one.

In relation to this, we ought to question what the representation of child characters falling in love—as well as the culmination of the romance plot by means of a kiss—implies for the actors who played Pan and Wendy. Interestingly, Jeremy Sumpter stated in an interview that "Rachel and I fell in love on set" (in Trumata), yet Hurd-Wood's perspective seems different, since she speaks about "the actual characters" instead of "their personal lives off-set" (in Trumata). The strangeness arising from this information is twofold: firstly, it makes us question whether children playing characters in complex emotional situations can fully tell apart the experience of acting out feelings from the actual emergence of those feelings themselves. Secondly, and because of this, the fact that the romantic agency of children is examined not only by the film, but also by the consequences of its shooting on the child stars, testifies to the prescience of J.M. Barrie's story. P.J. Hogan stated in an interview that the "chemistry" between the child actors "had nothing to do with us [the filmmakers]" (in Otto), thus providing a view that seems to coincide with Sumpter's. Hogan also mentions the important change in terms of casting that he was responsible for, stating that "Peter Pan's never been played by a real boy before" (in Otto). The film's representation of Wendy and Peter as children of the same age allows for the question of child romance to come to the forefront, even uncomfortably and somewhat uncannily seeping out of the movie, and leaking into the experience of the performers themselves, surrounded by adults who strangely "[record] what was happening between the two of them" (in Otto).

We now ought to turn to Wendy's brothers and the way Freddie Popplewell (age 9) and Harry Newell (age 12) give a humorous tone to their aspirations, mocking to some extent the education Edwardian boys were supposed to have been given. John's relationship with Wendy is established in the first scene, in which her storytelling is

interrupted by his attempts to project himself into the story and transform it into a creative excuse to engage in fictionalized representations of violent encounters. He calls his sister a "girlie"—this epithet, meant to discourage Wendy, is repeated on two other occasions by Hook and an anonymous pirate respectively—and joins her in a pretend duel. Furthermore, Michael and John's characters partake in a mock-patriotic performance when in Pan's island, asserting their Englishness, which they associate with stoicism, discipline, and bravery. Of course, the fact that John's assertion of these values is contrasted with Michael's pleas for mercy amidst a flood of tears—an action John subsequently mimics—seems to depict the assertion of Englishness as a humorous excess of childish patriotism. Nevertheless, Wendy is afforded no space for infantile flights of fancy: she must always be prepared to be a mother, a juvenile governess. By contrast, Michael and John can fail in their patriotic duties and be dispensed of any punishment due to their immaturity. This difference may reside in the disparity with regards to the acceptable ages for marriage for men and women in the period the story is set; men could generally hold off marriage until their thirties, while women had to marry sooner or else be perceived as unmarriageable spinsters.

In addition to this, John's demand that Captain Hook "get [his] hands off the savage," referring to native islander Tiger Lily, complicates the children's relationship to the English history of colonial expansion, perhaps alluding to their awareness of books belonging to the lost world genre. Once more, John's puerile knowledge is used as a comedic ploy, since, lacking another term to make use of, he calls Hook a "savage" too. Yet the young Darling's equivocation reveals much more about his education and the beliefs he has been indoctrinated in than about his premature worldview. That an Edwardian boy could have perceived Native Americans as Others appears more evident than the fact that he would have seen Hook in a similar way as well. But this fact is made easier to understand when considering Barrie's description of Hook's appearance, in which the narrator affirms that "he somewhat aped the attire associated with (...) Charles II," and that "he bore a strange resemblance to the ill-fated Stuarts" (81). The Stuart's alleged crypto-Catholicism, as well as their sympathy for continental fashion and their defense of the divine right of monarchs made them an unpopular example of absolutism and decadence in the eyes of post-Glorious Revolution English Protestants. Hook, thus, is not only related to Mr. Darling, since he is embodied by the same person, but to a historic precedent of abusive male power, which haunted the memory of Englishmen, with the Jacobite Risings used to teach children about the dangers of its reappearance.

Despite Tiger Lily and Hook's shared otherness, it is noteworthy that the actresses who performed as Tiger Lily and Wendy, despite their lack of interaction in the film itself, "became really close friends" (in Head) during the shooting, a fact that, according to Hurd-Wood, was due to her "[lack]" of "female company" (in Head). The filmmakers did not seem to perceive Wendy's lack of female friends, hence their choice to omit any scenes where Tiger Lily and Wendy could bond. The romance occupies so much of Wendy's screen time that the only way for Tiger Lily to have some measure of importance was to hastily bestow her a romantic interest in John Darling.

In conclusion, P.J. Hogan's version of Barrie's *Peter Pan* successfully portrays the tensions regarding gender expectations that had remained unexplored in previous adaptations due to the adherence to traditional casting choices. Wendy and Pan are

embodied by suitably aged children, thus allowing for the question of childhood romance and its contrast with the institution of marriage to be manifested, while exploiting the Freudian undertones of Hook's attempts to make the young heroine join his crew. Besides this, the expanded role given to John and Michael results in an attempted performance of Edwardian masculinity, in which the young boys' dedication to the colonial and imperialist endeavor coincides with their sister's first encounter with the duties of motherhood.

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Charlie and the Chocolate Factory: The Bittersweet Reality of Willy Wonka

MARÍA NAVARRO GARCÍA

Release date: 10 July 2005
Director: Tim Burton
Screenwriter: John August
Based on the children's novel by Roald Dahl
Producers: Brad Grey, Richard D. Zanuch
Cast: Johnny Depp (Willy Wonka), Freddie Highmore (Charlie Bucket), David Kelly (Grandpa Joe), Helena Bonham Carter (Mrs. Bucket), Cristopher Lee (Dr. Wonka), AnnaSophia Robb (Violet)
Companies: Village Roadshow Pictures, The Zanuck Company, Plan B Entertainment, Theobald Film Productions.
Genre: fantasy
Nationality: UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0367594/

Summary: A bittersweet adventure

Charlie Bucket is an 11-year-old boy who lives with his family in a small town next to the most famous chocolate factory in the world, the Wonka factory. The Bucket family—formed by Charlie's parents and grandparents—struggles economically, living in a small, crooked house. Fifteen years after closing it, Willy Wonka is reopening again his factory for the five children who find the Golden tickets placed in the Wonka bars all over the world. The lucky children will get a tour of the factory by Willy Wonka himself, will also be rewarded with a lifetime chocolate supply, and will receive one final special price. Charlie finds the last Golden Ticket and is accompanied by Grandpa Joe to the factory. During their tour, the children falling into temptation and misbehaving are punished and excluded, while the Oompa Loompas sing a morality song about them. The last one to stand is Charlie. The secret final prize is living and working at the factory with Wonka, on condition that Charlie must leave his family behind, which he refuses to do, as for him family is the most important thing. Willy does not understand Charlie's view of family, as his father abandoned him in his traumatic childhood, but after he reconciles with him, he allows Charlie and his family to live in the factory with him.

Analysis: Unwrapping gender roles

Tim Burton's cinematic world portrays the macabre and the grotesque centering on freakish characters (mis)labelled as monsters, and as such seen to be a menace to society, to reject their marginalization. The 'Burtonesque' is inspired by German Expressionism, which revolves around the "fascination with the macabre, obscure and the disturbing psychological depths of the characters" (Schäfer 3). Traditionally, the characters within Burton's cinematic world would have been understood as villains since they are outcasts of society who are forever condemned to be loners. Nevertheless, by representing 'strange' stories and characters understood as the 'Other' Burton aims to subvert their exclusion, to arise empathy in the audience and show that the different or the strange as a virtue.

In this new adaptation of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1963), unlike Mel Stuart's *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971), Tim Burton gives Wonka a backstory, as Thomas notes in his review of the film, to enhance a moral message about the importance of family, and of working hard above entitlement. Burton's reworking of Dahl's classic demonstrates the 'freezing' of old-fashioned family values (Schober 69) through the emphasis on patriarchy, marginalizing the female figures. The film firmly enhances gender roles and the dichotomy between the private and the public sphere, particularly with the Bucket family. Mr. Bucket is the family provider, whilst Mrs. Bucket is a 'stay-at-home' mother who has the role of a caretaker and housewife, attending to Charlie's four grandparents and the housework activities. Therefore, despite having been reviewed as Burton's "first proper family movie" as Thomas argues, *Charlie* centers on a patriarchal and heteronormative idea of family, contributing to the dominant discourse.

Furthermore, according to Parson, the film centers on patriarchal capitalism through the figure of Willy Wonka, as the 'great patriarch'. That is, Wonka's success in creating the world's largest and most famous chocolate factory emphasizes how the message of the film centers on men's success and rejects women's (101). Hence, the film marginalizes women, who are either sidelined—such as Mrs. Bucket, trapped in the domestic sphere—or are completely excluded from the narrative—such as Willy Wonka's mother. Moreover, the film rejects the idea of sorority or sisterhood through the rivalry between the girls Violet and Veruca, who despite vowing to 'be friends', are rivals for the secret prize. In fact, Burton develops a stereotypical portrayal of women as 'fake', competitive and spoiled. Thus, the film depicts a male-dominated environment, where "patriarchy is celebrated especially in Burton inventing a father figure for Wonka and not devising an equivalent mother figure because the message of the film is about empowering men" (Parsons 101).

Although the movie emphasizes masculinity and patriarchy through its gender roles, Charlie Bucket subverts them. Charlie is the protagonist of the film and is presented in the book as the hero; nevertheless, he maintains a passive attitude through the story. Therefore, some scholars such as Mulders argue how this contributes for his character to be understood as feminine rather than masculine. Although passivity is a negative condition which has constantly been assigned to women, what Burton's film depicts is the rejection of toxic masculine attitudes. In other words, although Charlie represents the

"angel-child" (Mulders 23), echoing the Victorian era 'angel of the house', being obedient and compliant to his family, as well as passive, his characterization is used to subvert the established notions associated with masculinity such as violence, anger, etc. Contrary to traditional male protagonists exhibiting selfishness as well as aggressive behaviors, Charlie is characterized by his compassion. Hence, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* promotes a vision of masculinity that is based on empathy and cooperation rather than often harmful, masculine stereotypes.

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory also discusses gender through the notion of the absent parents and father figures. Typically, in Burton's films, the main character suffers the absence of their father figure as seen in *Edward Scissorhands*, *Big Fish*, and *Miss Peregrine's House for Peculiar Children*. In *Charlie*, Burton contrasts evil and positive fatherhood. Through the strong and paternalistic father figure of Dr. Wonka, Burton demonstrates how "bad parenting, is the instrument of the child's early exposure to trauma, betrayal, loss." (Raducanu 159). That is, Dr. Wonka's abandonment causes his son's isolation, and his inability to connect with people, represented by his use of gloves to avoid human contact (Salsbury 237). Therefore, although the ending of the film shows the reconciliation between father (played by Christopher Lee) and son (Johnny Depp), it does not provide a fairytale-like prototypical ending. As Burton argues:

> I remember the studio saying, 'Shouldn't you have the father there at the end?' I thought, 'No, it's not that cute, it's not that simplistic.' Both John and I felt, 'No, we're not going to have Christopher Lee sitting at the table. "Pass the turkey" …' But it is some resolution, with the sense that nothing is ever really resolved but that you have layers of resolving things. That's why it was important to do it. It felt natural, it felt right. (in Salsbury 246)

That is, Burton is not forcing a redemptive story of reconciliation, as the situation is not that simple, but rather the possibility of Wonka having more inner peace. In contrast, Mr. Bucket presents the notion of positive fatherhood, as he teaches Charlie values which help him to reject toxic masculinity and enhance his pure and sensitive spirit, demonstrating how "a loving relationship with one's family is more valuable than any material comfort" (Pulliam 106). As Charlie tells Wonka: "I wouldn't give up my family for anything. Not for all the chocolate in the world" (1:35:08). In fact, Charlie even becomes the main contributor to Wonka's reconciliation with his father.

Nonetheless, Willy Wonka is presented as a subversive figure who challenges gender norms. Wonka's peculiar appearance and behavior represent gender trouble as he confuses the audience. As Schober claims, Wonka challenges the boundaries of masculinity and femininity, being understood as an "anti-heteronormative" figure who contests gender and sexuality. He is portrayed as an androgynous figure with the high-pitched changing voice of a boy about to enter puberty (Macmahan 190). His character challenges what is considered to be 'normal' sexuality, he is played by Depp in a "comic and camp manner quite asexual" (Rudd 382), as shown by his rejection of Mrs. Beaugrade's flirty inclinations.

Furthermore, Wonka's eccentric and uncanny social skills are used as a subversive undertone. According to Pulliam, "behind his façade is a sad little boy who was never allowed to have a normal childhood" (109). Therefore, as Burton argues, Wonka is not a psychotic character but rather an emotionally repressed figure putting on

a mask (in Morales 2005a), through his constant positive smile, to avoid remembering his traumatic childhood. Depp claims that he took inspiration from show hosts like Captain Kangaroo, who would go on stage and put on a mask (in Head). However, there is something which has worried the critics and that is the resemblance and correlation between Willy Wonka and iconic singer Michael Jackson. According to Rudd, both characters present this synthetic look (384), being a man-child figure with the habit of inviting children to visit his home. As Eber asks "Can anyone look at Willy Wonka and not think of Michael Jackson? Consider the reclusive lifestyle, the fetishes of wardrobe and accessories, the elaborate playground built by an adult for the child inside." Nevertheless, both Burton and Depp have completely disregarded any resemblance, stating that "everybody is entitled to think what they want even while being violently wrong" (Burton in Head). As Burton further argues, Willy Wonka cannot stand children, thus rejecting any context in which Wonka is related to Michael Jackson.

On another note, Burton's lack of ethnical diversity demonstrates the still present race issues, especially with the Oompa-Loompas. All the Golden Ticket winners, as well as Wonka, are white individuals except for the Oompa-Loompas. The disturbing small child-like size of these creatures evokes besides the idea of child labor, idealizing the idea of factory work which presents Wonka as the white English colonizer with a globetrotting style (Parsons 96) who "imported [the Oompa-Loompas], direct from Loompaland" (00:43:11). As Rider notes, the Oompa-Loompas are "close to indentured servants," an echo of slavery brought from an 'uncivilized land', for a better life, forever grateful to the figure of Wonka, interpreted as a white savior who has rescued them from the danger their original land. The latest reworking of Dahl's story, *Wonka* (2023) continues to illustrate the novel and its film adaptations' racist past, through the figure of Noodle, a poor black girl, who presents once again Willy Wonka as the white savior. Consequently, the problematic portrayal of the Oompa-Loompas continues to reflect on slavery and how Wonka enhances the idea of capitalism by employing slaves to work eternally in his factory.

Finally, the film also demonstrates the issue of child abuse through the punishment of children. Burton's film presents a religious undertone, as many critics have argued that the five winners of the Golden Ticket stand for capital sins. Thus, Burton depicts how "innocent natures are corrupted by adult excesses" (Schober 61). Augustus Gloop represents gluttony, as a boy with never-ending hunger. Violet Beauregard represents pride, she is an arrogant girl who wants to be the best at everything, constantly proving herself. Veruca Salt represents greed, as a rich and spoiled young girl who does not take no for an answer. Mike Teavee represents sloth with his obsession with TV and video games. Due to their naughtiness and misbehavior these children are harshly punished. As Janecek notes, "Beside the physical pain the children have to endure, there is also the psychological harm they suffer when humiliated in front of their parents and peers, as a consequence of their loss of control and the display of their sudden weakness and physical deformation" (35).

In conclusion, Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* continues to reflect on Dahl's narrative as a cautionary tale against children's temptations and vices, with special emphasis on love and family. Still, the macabre reality behind *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* perfectly reflects Burton's prototypical *modus operandi* centering on the gothic,

the obscure and psychological depth of characters. Despite being a modern reworking of Dahl's classic, it still portrays gender issues through clearly established gender roles, diminishing the female characters, and through the racist interpretation of the Oompa-Loompas as slaves.

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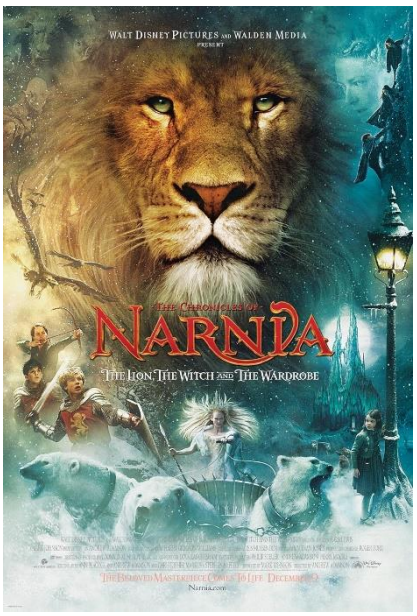
The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe: The Theology of Childhood

ANDRÉS SANTIAGO BERRÓN

Release date: 7 December 2005
Director: Andrew Adamson
Screenwriters: Ann Peacock, Andrew Adamson, Christopher Markus, Stephen McFeely
Based on the novel by C.S. Lewis
Producers: Andrew Adamson, Douglas Gresham, K.C. Hodenfield, Mark Johnson, David Minkowski, Perry Moore, Philip Steuer, Matthew Stillman, Brigham Taylor
Cast: Georgie Henley (Lucy Pevensie), Skandar Keyes (Edmund Pevensie), William Moseley (Peter Pevensie), Anna Popplewell (Susan Pevensie), Tilda Swinton (White Witch), James McAvoy (Mr. Tumnus), Liam Neeson (Aslan)
Companies: Walt Disney Pictures, Walden Media, Mark Johnson Productions
Genre: fantasy, action-adventure
Nationality: UK, USA
IMDB: https://m.imdb.com/title/tt0363771



Summary: Into the wardrobe

After an air raid during World War II, the Pevensie children are sent away to the countryside by their mother to stay at a professor's house. There, while playing hide and seek, Lucy stumbles upon a wardrobe that leads to Narnia, where she meets Mr. Tumnus, a faun. Later, Edmund enters Narnia too, finding the White Witch, and telling her about his family. Eventually, the four siblings, also including teens Peter and Lucy, enter Narnia through the wardrobe. They search for Mr. Tumnus, who has been captured. Confused, Ed flees in search of the Queen's palace, and is abducted by her. The remaining three Pevensie children are told to go to the lion Aslan's camp to ask for help to rescue Edmund from the Witch. Ed's blood, as a traitor, belongs to her, so Aslan offers to be sacrificed on his behalf. Lucy and Susan accompany him and witness his death and subsequent resurrection. Aslan defeats then the White Witch and the children are made Kings and Queens of Narnia. Many Narnian years later, they stumble upon the wardrobe portal once more, and return to the professor's house.

Analysis: Allegorizing childhood

Andrew Adamson's 2005 adaptation of C.S. Lewis' 1950 children's novel *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is the first theatrical film version of the story. Taking advantage of technological advances that the 1988 BBC live action version could not make use of, Adamson's first Narnia film manages to evoke the wonderment the book attempted to produce in its readers, and, by surprising its actors during the production, is able to convincingly portray an actual sense of fascination. Furthermore, the director and the script engage with the Christian subtext present in Lewis' novel, oscillating between subverting it by offering alternate readings at times, and strengthening it by adding further biblical quotes, all the while constructing child characters that go beyond the mere embodiment of allegorical tropes.

To examine the filmmakers' attempt to modernize the story's depiction of children, we ought to begin by considering the way Lucy is portrayed; she is played by Georgie Henley, who was nine years old during the film's production. Although the film begins by focusing on Edmund, one of her three siblings, once the Pevensies arrive at the professor's house, Lucy becomes the focal point for the narrative. Her sadness at being taken away from her mother and sent to a completely unknown place contrasts with her willingness, once she stumbles upon the wardrobe, to return to the world it hides within. Interestingly, Georgie Henley has declared in an interview that, having to leave for New Zealand to shoot the film, "saying goodbye to my dad, it was so hard" (in Narniaweb) The parallels between the child actor's experience and the embodied character's emotions, as we shall see later, were also made use of by the director in a different occasion.

In a sense the discovery of Narnia serves as both a substitute for and an ideal reading of the English countryside around Lucy. A depiction of the gloomy interior of the house and the incessant rain outside appears to place the children in an unwelcoming and unpleasant space, in which neither playtime in the garden nor entertainments pursued indoors are of much satisfaction. Narnia seems completely different to Lucy: when she encounters it, the land appears peaceful, full of interesting and friendly creatures, whose homeliness—consider Tumnus' cozy house and his offering of tea—dissipates any potential sense of uneasiness provoked by their merging of human and animal features, both physical and intellectual. It is unlike the England she is experiencing, disturbed by terrible weather and unpredictable air raids. Yet at the same time, Tumnus' tea-drinking, his mannerisms, and his accent are unmistakably English. Narnia is at once distinct from Lucy's England and similar; of course, Narnia is in many ways dependent on notions of the idealized English countryside—the so-called Merrie England—, having much in common in that sense with Tolkien's hobbit-inhabited Shire.

As for the actress' experience of meeting Tumnus, it ought to be noted that, according to the film's *Cast Commentary DVD*, Henley had not seen McAvoy characterized as Tumnus prior to filming the scene where Lucy meets her. Adamson seems to have attempted to surprise the children to record their actual reactions, instead of having them pretend—that is, to act in the traditional sense—to be amazed at what they are seeing. As it was also the case in P.J. Hogan's *Peter Pan*, the child's facial expressions are key to the credibility of the fantastic element of the film, and the

subsequent emphasis on their faces, as exemplified by the close-ups on Lucy right after she enters Narnia, is meant to awaken the spectator's empathy—perhaps specifically to provoke a similar sensation of wonderment in the child spectator. Nevertheless, the actress' experience in the set seems not to have been exclusively one of constant fascination. In an interview published a month before the release of the movie, Henley affirmed "that she was shocked by the 'ripe' language of the grownups on set and organised a 'potty mouth bucket'." Ironically, "McAvoy was the worst offender and had to put four New Zealand dollars in the bucket" (in Tirian 2005a). Of course, the perceived 'ripeness' of the professional actors' speech and some other elements of the cinematic industry might not be the most appropriate for a child to experience, yet it seems that in Henley's case the enjoyment of the discovery of New Zealand, which, according to her, "felt like this massive leap" (in Narniaweb), had more prominence than her clashes with the less child-friendly behavior of some of those involved in the production, which are, despite this, mentioned by her humorously.

We also ought to remember that New Zealand, having been used by Peter Jackson for his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, had acquired an association with fantasy landscapes. Yet *The Lord of the Rings* features no child actors, nor is it intended primarily for children. Thus, Adamson's Narnia, as has been noted above, relies heavily on the cinematic display of the child's amazed gaze. Because of this, the child actors were surprised with another fundamental element. The *Complete Production Experience DVD* features the explanation that Skandar Keynes and Georgie Henley had not seen the set before commencing shooting. The film relies on the "use of panoramic landscape shots and child figures" (McCallum 64) to appeal to the child spectator's sense of sublimity, addressed by the contrast between Lucy, Edmund, and their siblings' smallness when compared with the vastness of the sprawling New Zealand scenery. Lucy, consequently, needs to embody the cuteness that represents the quintessence of the innocent child, while allowing a stark contrast between her vulnerability, exemplified by her sadness when in the professor's house, and her overwhelming sense of joy and amazement when in Narnia.

The contrast between Narnia and war-torn England is also complemented by the moral rectification which takes place in the former. Lucy endures Ed's mockery and lies, since he does not want to risk being taken for an excessively imaginative child by Peter and Susan, but when the four of them collectively stumble into Narnia Peter—who had been named guardian of the family by their mother—orders Edmund to ask for Lucy's forgiveness. In England, Edmund's repentance—a foretaste of his later atonement, made possible by Aslan's intervention—would have seemed impossible, and incredibly out of place. The landscape's destruction by the air raids is complemented, at least in Lucy's perspective (dominant since the children's arrival to the countryside), by an erosion of the mores of Merrie England. The professor's housekeeper, enforcing strict rules for the children, seems to embody a negative fairy-tale role—that of the evil stepmother, or the monstrous projection of the hate of the mother—despite decidedly inhabiting the real world. The war has seemingly caused an overspill of negative fantasy elements onto reality; by contrast, in Narnia, the images of real-life evil are transformed into heroic actions performed by the forces of good: for instance, the initial air raid is replicated by the "gryphons [dropping] rocks on the White Witch's army" (McCallum 63). This visual

inversion of scenes is used to offer a reading that challenges the monopoly of the Christian subtext, presenting a psychological alternative in which Narnia is not merely a fairy-tale equivalent of the Christian soteriological narrative, but to a certain extent a projection of the child's war-infused trauma, as well as their fears and hopes for the future.

In addition to this, the screenwriters' decision to alter the roles played by the female characters, as well as some significant lines of dialogue, serves to create another tension with the supposed authorial intention of the source material. Fulfilling their Biblically derived role, Susan and Lucy accompany Aslan to the Stone Table, and contemplate his sacrifice. They mourn his death, in a scene in which Lucy's sadness, again, is made the center of attention whereby the spectator's emotions are mediated. Her tears evoke previous scenes at the professor's house; her embrace of the dead Aslan echoes the Pietà but also the initial air raid, during which she is paralyzed in her bed due to the extreme terror she is experiencing. Susan and Lucy may be the Narnian version of the Gospels' women at the tomb of Jesus, yet the film's Lucy is not a mere blank slate for the biblical character to inhabit: her experience of Aslan's death is presented as synonymous with her war trauma. Or, due to the Lion's resurrection, as a way to mediate with it and overcome it via a soteriological hope in the victory of a perceived ontological good—Aslan, the Allies—over its evil counterpart—the White Witch, the Nazis.

With Aslan's return, and the dialogue whereby he describes the Narnian equivalent of the Protestant *Law and Gospel* distinction—effectively catechizing Susan and Lucy—, the two sisters are taken to the battle in which their brothers are participating. Their implication in the action scenes is by no means as active as that of Ed and Peter, whose self-sacrificing bravery is displayed in a manner reminiscent of mediaeval romance, with the obvious problem that children are participating in a violent conflict, becoming essentially child soldiers, a function whose inadequateness is somewhat lessened by the fantasy elements, but which is nevertheless troubling. Susan makes use of her bow, but Lucy, the youngest of the Pevensie children, does not draw her dagger, instead taking Santa Claus's healing potion with her after the battle has ended to heal those who have been wounded. Lucy enthusiastically performs the role of wartime nurse, a figure that was, and still is, incredibly significant with regards to cultural history of the World Wars; her sister, in contrast, uses Santa's gift in no more than a couple of scenes.

Although their presence in the frontlines makes them slightly more visible during the battle against the Queen's forces than they were in Lewis' work, the screenwriters try to highlight this change by modifying one of the lines spoken by Santa Claus to Lucy. In an interview, Adamson stated that "[he] would not include C.S. Lewis's line from the book where Father Christmas says, 'It's ugly when girls fight' [...] so the line was changed to, 'Battles are ugly affairs'" (in Monroe). However, there are two reasons why this alteration could be seen as practically insignificant. Firstly, Father Christmas still addresses his words to Lucy, and the other children, particularly Ed and Peter, who are the representatives of medievalesque chivalry, receive no similar injunctions. Therefore, since only Lucy is told that battles are ugly when given the dagger, her subsequent reticence to participate in them—a reticence that would be particular to her, and not shared by her siblings, since the warning was issued to her specifically—would still

remain in effect despite the line change. Secondly, the alteration of the dialogue has no correspondence in the battle scenes: the two brothers participate in them, and the soundtrack and camera angles, as well as their bright armor and intensely red tabard, serve to portray them as unmistakably heroic, despite their youth and Santa's previously stated opinion on the nature of violent conflict. The alleged defiance of Lewis' traditional view on gender roles thus falls flat. According to Mochel-Caballero, this is due to "Adamson [being] torn between his desire to pay homage to the book and his urge to challenge some of its contents." (169) Regarding this issue, Douglas Gresham, the stepson of C.S. Lewis, has affirmed that "[he knows] that Jack would want to protect the integrity of each of the books, and preserve very carefully the messages that each is intended to convey" (in Tirian 2005b). In addition to this, it could be asserted that the inconsistencies produced by Father Christmas' new dialogue are quite confusing: whereas, in the novel, the statement concerning female participation in wars is followed by their absence in the final battle, the movie's assertion about the nature of violence results in an extended, epic battle action scene, which was altogether missing from the source material.

To make sense of Edmund's redemption, which parallels Aslan's catechizing of Lucy and Susan, mentioned above, we ought to examine the question of the moral agency of children. Although Edmund's initial misbehavior, exemplified by his uncaring mistreatment of Lucy, is framed as arising fundamentally from the painful absence of their father—which is not felt with the same intensity by his siblings as Peter's reaction when recklessly retrieving the father's photograph shows—, his betrayal of his family in Narnia is not given any psychological explanation. Instead, Edmund must embody fallen humanity, while Susan and Lucy conform to the Romantic ideal of feminine childhood, and Peter transforms into a traditional heroic male figure, able to successfully watch over the family, as his mother had asked him to do. Despite Tilda Swinton's assertion that the White Witch, whom she plays, is meant to "look like a Nazi" and be "the ultimate white supremacist" (in Narniaweb), the solution offered by Aslan to her claim over Edmund has no relation at all to the war context, instead presenting a fantasy version of the Christian ransom theory of atonement, which understands Christ's death on the cross as a ransom paid to Satan in exchange for human freedom. Edmund, who, according to Keynes "you're [not] supposed to like [...] at first" (in Narniafans), is thus given a role that hardly seems fitting for a child. In traditional Christian language, Christ pays the price for Adam's sin—signifying all of humanity's failures—, but Adam is undoubtedly an adult, thus much more clearly responsible, in a judicial sense, of his wrongdoings. Yet the fact that Edmund's misguided treason, brought about by the Witch's manipulation of his weaknesses and his trauma, is not attenuated at all due to his age (he's only around 12), is certainly troubling.

In conclusion, Adamson's adaptation of C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* features child characters who manifest contradictory conceptions of childhood. The novel's Romantically-inflected Christian ideas are presented beside a psychologically oriented, 'modernized' reading of the story, which is constantly undermined by the theological allusions and the presence of essentialist visions of gender, projected onto childhood as unfulfilled potentialities that can begin to be actualized in Narnia, and then fully mature in the real world. Hence, Lucy and Susan are

at once the women at the tomb, barred from action scenes and depicted as inviolably innocent, and complex, traumatized children trying to make sense of the war that has driven their father, as well as themselves, far from home. By contrast, Edmund's lack of innocence, contrasting starkly with Lucy's ideal feminine moral purity, is meant to have a cosmic scale, having consequences that he is unable to foresee, and incapable to resolve by himself.

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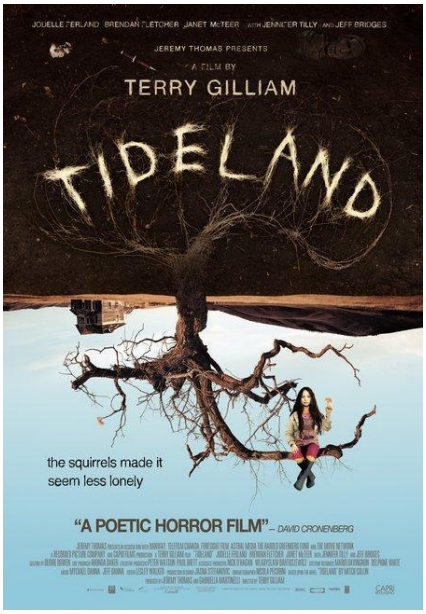
‘Those Wise Eyes of Yours’: *Tideland*, Between the Gaze of the Child and the Gaze of the Adult

YOMNA KHREIFICH

Release date: 9 September 2005
Director: Terry Gilliam
Screenwriters: Tony Grisoni, Terry Gilliam
Based on the novel by Mitch Cullin
Producers: Gabriella Martinelli and Jeremy Thomas
Cast: Jodelle Ferland (Jeliza-Rose), Jennifer Tilly (Queen Gunhilda), Jeff Bridges (Noah), Janet McTeer (Dell), Brendan Fletcher (Dickens)
Companies: Recorded Picture Company, Telefilm Canada, The Movie Network, Astral Media, Hanway Films
Genre: drama, fantasy, horror
Country: UK, Canada
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0410764/



Summary: A journey down the rabbit hole

Eleven-year-old Jeliza-Rose is the daughter of two heroin addicts. After the lethal overdose of her mother, Queen Gunhilda, her father Noah brings her to his mother’s abandoned Texas farmhouse. Shortly after they settled down, Noah overdoses as well. Now orphaned and secluded, Jeliza-Rose seeks to cope by creating a fantasy world in which she lives with her ‘friends’, four heads of decapitated Barbie dolls that speak to her and accompany her in her explorations. During her adventures around the farmhouse, she befriends Dickens, a 20-year-old young man who suffers from epilepsy and has the mind of a ten-year-old, and his older sister, Dell. The woman soon becomes a mother figure to Jeliza-Rose, though in grim and eccentric ways; an amateur taxidermist, Dell decides to preserve Noah’s body, just as she had done with her own mother’s. It is then revealed that Dell and Noah were once romantically involved, as Jeliza-Rose discovers pictures of the two in Dell’s room. Throughout the movie, Jeliza-Rose and Dickens develop a sort of romance, and in one scene they kiss more than once. Dickens keeps a stash of dynamite in his bedroom, which he seemingly eventually uses, causing the explosion of the night passenger train that runs by the farmhouse. Amid the wreckage, a woman survivor finds Jeliza-Rose wandering around and assumes the little girl is also a victim of the train wreck. The film concludes with the woman embracing Jeliza-Rose, who stares in stunned confusion at the devastation around her.

Analysis: Innocence and madness, two sides of the same coin

Converting a story from page to screen can present significant challenges. Although *Tideland* the novel won great acclaim upon its release, the film adaptation faced substantial obstacles in reaching audiences, and was not released in the US until 2006: "*Tideland* sounds better on paper than it is to watch," Berardinelli observes in his review. Despite Director Terry Gilliam's insistence on viewing his movie from the child's point of view, it is still possible, if not necessary, to keep an adult's critical perspective; in most instances, it is difficult to ignore that the movie centers around an abused and abandoned child.

When Mitch Cullin's novel was first published in 2000 in the USA, it was described as a modern-day *Alice in Wonderland*. It is no accident, therefore, that from the costumes to the set design, Gilliam's movie adaptation is clearly inspired by Lewis Carroll's masterpiece. The fairytale-esque world of *Tideland* the movie is in no small part the product of the imagination of 11-year-old Jeliza-Rose (Jodelle Ferland), a fierce, feminine child who loves playing with makeup and the severed heads of Barbie dolls. Neglected by both her parents and ultimately orphaned, the lonely girl survives by "playing her way through trauma" (Fruoco 199).

Always having to "defend his cinematic vision" (Fruoco 189), and perhaps foreseeing the controversy his movie might evoke, Gilliam offers a warning to his audience on the commentary track of the *Tideland* DVD:

> Many of you are not going to like this film (...) If it's shocking, it's because it is innocent. I suggest that you forget everything you learned as an adult (...) Try to rediscover what it was like to be a child, the sense of wonder and innocence, and don't forget to laugh. (in Laity 120)

Beginning with the poster of the movie, the viewers are invited to enter the disorienting world that is *Tideland* (translated in Spanish as *Tierra de Pesadillas*, or 'Nightmare Land'), playing with the way they choose to look at things, and from whose perspective. Gilliam, on his side, wants his story to be seen through a child's innocent eyes. The movie certainly emphasizes Jeliza-Rose's eyes the moment her father Noah (Jeff Bridges) is introduced as a rockstar, singing a song about her: "Those wise eyes of yours / Those big skies of yours." Serving as Gilliam's camera lenses, they allow the viewer access to Jeliza-Rose's world, which is not necessarily that of a child. For Gilliam, he simply admits his protagonist into real life. In his view, "A child makes sense of what would depress an adult. Children are not victims, this is nonsense, they are designed to last, adults are more vulnerable, they die. She survives" (in Fruoco 199). Berardinelli disagrees and notes that,

> One of the problems is the presence of the adults. It's easy to imagine how a better movie could have been made centered around Jeliza-Rose on her own, exploring magical fantasy-worlds of her imagination (...) some of the experiences Jeliza-Rose goes through while in the company of her deranged neighbors are difficult to watch.

Most of the controversy around the movie arises indeed from the domestic horror it exhibits, and the exposure of an innocent little girl to the world of adults, where mental

illness, sex, drugs, death, and bodily decomposition are represented. The main issue, I contend, is the film's belief in the child's inherent resilience and ability to endure harsh situations without being victimized.

Apart from stepping into that forbidden intersection between childhood and adulthood, Jeliza-Rose also contributes to the movie's ambivalence in her depiction as a monster, making it challenging at times to perceive her innocence and sympathize with her. In presenting a child cooking heroin and helping her parents inject it, as well as showing indifference to their resultant deaths and to the decomposition and taxidermy of her father's corpse, *Tideland* defies the audience's expectations that only adults can be monstrous. The little girl's monstrosity is evident in her odd exchange with Noah following Queen Gunhilda's (Jennifer Tilly) overdose:

> Noah: It was the methadone that killed her (...) Now she's dead and I don't have a car.
> Jeliza-Rose: Please don't be sad. Now we can eat all her choc bars. Look!

Jeliza-Rose's reaction, or rather lack of reaction, particularly to her father's death, can be justified, since he is not any less present in her life now that he is dead. Nonetheless, Gilliam reports that her style of coping with death has proven particularly odd to many reviewers. The origin of their confusion, the director believes, is that "she just doesn't respond the way children in movies respond," but as a real child would (in Laity 124). In this regard, Laity seems to share Gilliam's valorizing and optimistic view of children, explaining that "We tend to want children to be helpless victims, partly because it means that we must protect them" (128). In other words, what shocks the audience is the fact that Jeliza-Rose can survive outside the need for adults' protection. While there is some truth to that observation, the film vividly portrays how Jeliza-Rose's descent into chaos *stems* from the absence of the protective environment children deserve. Queen Gunhilda only appears briefly at the beginning of the movie, yet her presence looms large in the horror depicted later. The abusive environment the child has endured from infancy can be summed up in the few lines uttered by her mother when they are alone:

> It's your daddy's fault you were the way you were, not mine. 'Cause I loved you (…) Your daddy blew smoke in your face to keep you quiet (…) I think it what damaged you, well don't blame me, cuz. I breast fed you forever (…) I'm sorry baby, I'm gonna do something real nice for you real soon someday, I promise (…) How many times do I have to tell you to stay away from my chocolate, you little bitch? Oh honey, I don't want you to leave me, Jeliza Rose. I can't get by without you.

The mother's professed love is juxtaposed against both her volatile outbursts and refusal to take responsibility for her daughter's troubled upbringing. Her shifts from affection to aggression explain the instability of Jeliza-Rose's emotions. Queen Gunhilda's claims to have breastfed her daughter "forever" and her expressions of love ring hollow after her fatal overdose, underscoring the profound betrayal experienced by her daughter.

As a young child, Jeliza-Rose cannot distinguish between what is morally right or wrong, between what is socially acceptable or not, which makes her to a certain extent an unrealistic, exaggerated character. Her transgression of conventional norms of behavior can be seen in her gender nonconformity. A clear example of that is her portrayal as a very feminine girl who plays with costumes, wigs and makeup, and acts

out roles in front of the mirror. Although she is a resilient character, surviving trauma, wandering in remote fields, and befriending strangers, she is not masculinized, which challenges conventional literary and audiovisual depictions of strong female characters. Interestingly, she is non-stereotypical in her relationship with gender in general, not just her own. She is seen in many scenes, for instance, putting makeup and wigs on Dickens (Brendan Fletcher) and even on Noah's decomposing body.

Jeliza-Rose's excessive innocence is what makes her story even more disturbing; despite her constant abandonment, if not *because* of it, she looks for affection and nurturing wherever she can, which puts her in dangerous situations she cannot perceive. Eventually placed within an alternative yet profoundly dysfunctional family, the little girl's neglect is reinforced rather than alleviated. The abnormality of this new family dynamic becomes especially evident during their first shared meal, with Noah's stuffed corpse at the end of the table, Dell, having cooked the food, says graces and tells Jeliza-Rose, "This is where you belong (...) You're part of the family now, you hear me? We cannot have any strangers here."

Yet, the relationship that blossoms between Jeliza-Rose and Dickens is perhaps the most intriguing part of the movie. Going on adventures with her "brave sea captain" and getting closer to him exposes Jeliza-Rose, and by extension the viewer, to her sexuality. The tension between both characters can be seen in two distinct instances, the first capturing the child playfully putting a blond wig and makeup on her "future husband" to make him "pretty." As if to heighten the pedophilic undertone of the scene, Jeliza-Rose and Dickens share their first kiss while the latter recounts his grandmother's habit of French-kissing him when he was a child. Their second sexual encounter occurs when she ventures into Dickens's bedroom to "see his secret," which is alluded to throughout the movie through suggestive cues and is ultimately revealed to be his stack of dynamite. As Dickens moves above Jeliza-Rose, her lipstick, coupled with the change of lighting to red and blue, adds weight to the scene, further reinforcing the impression that behind the alleged curiosity of a child and the innocence of a mentally impaired young man there is the uneasy reality of an adult flirting with a child in a derelict house set in the middle of nowhere.

Gilliam explains that discomfort with Jeliza-Rose's behavior often comes from adults "judging those moments as an adult, void of her innocence and curiosity" (in Fruoco). Fruoco, in accord with that declaration, notes that Gilliam's portrayal of disturbing elements is honest and non-moralizing; for Jeliza-Rose, Dickens is her "hero," and her desire to kiss him is innocent, untainted by adult prejudices (194). I must agree, however, with Gauger's identification of Jeliza-Rose as the "seductress": "In Dickens, Jeliza finally finds an aspect of her life she can influence and possess. She takes advantage of the feebleminded young man in a familiar game of seduction, assertion and befuddlement that is instinctually exercised by pre-pubescent girls." Describing Jeliza-Rose as seductive is certainly not at all far-fetched. From her Texan drawl to the way she dresses in older women's garments, scarves, wigs, and makeup, she exudes a provocative and sexually charged allure, intensified by her attraction to Dickens, as in her fantasy world, he is her "husband."

The film's madness, emerging as Jeliza-Rose retreats into her fantasy world to escape her traumatic life, is unsettling and challenges the limits of the audience. Despite its beautiful and captivating cinematography, *Tideland*, Newman reasons, "merrily dances on the line between the merely unpleasant and the completely unwatchable." Acting in a film that tackles such a delicate subject—with a lack of the necessary

seriousness and integrity, I might add—must be an extremely uncomfortable experience for 11-year-old Ferland. Although she mentions no issues or mistreatment on set, Gilliam is known for taking advantage of child actors, particularly actresses. The most notable example is Sarah Polley, who provides a heartfelt account of her experience with Gilliam when filming *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen:*

> I remember being afraid a lot of the time. I felt incredibly unsafe. I remember a couple of trips to the hospital after being in freezing water for long periods of time, losing quite a bit of my hearing for days at a time due to explosives, having my heart monitored when one went off relatively close to me, etc. I remember running through this long sort of corridor where explosives went off every few feet, things were on fire, etc. i cried hysterically in my dad's lap and begged him to make sure i wouldn't have to do it again, but I did. I think i did it quite a few more times.

Such a testimony makes it difficult not to question Gilliam's intention behind making *Tideland*. The idea of a 64-year-old man writing about an abandoned little girl exploring her sexual urges with a man, and directing a child to act it out, especially in overtly sexual scenes, is deeply disturbing. The film undeniably portrays child abuse and neglect in a manner that is not only present but overwhelmingly visible, which makes Gilliam's warning, "don't forget to laugh," even more absurd. After a fast-paced plot packed with madness and nightmarish occurrences condensed within a few days, the film appropriately ends in a train wreck. Although Jeliza-Rose is not on the train when it explodes, her consistent survival through the chaos can only reinforce the idea that imagination and curiosity can shield a child from harsh realities. Schager asserts that the movie's "excessiveness" ultimately "[conveys] not the resilience of youthful imaginations but, rather, the limits of unchecked auteurism." We can only agree.

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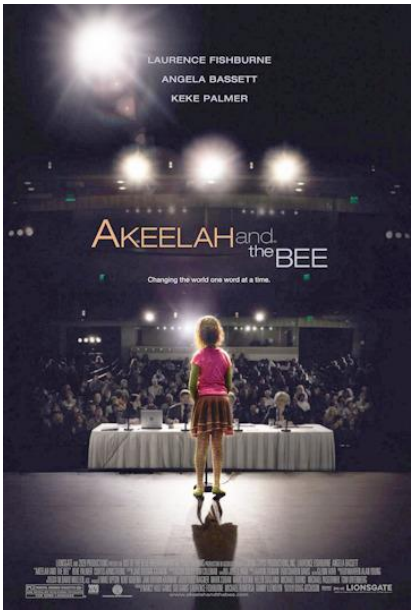
Akeelah and the Bee: The Struggle for Words

ANASTASIIA LYTVYN

Release date: 16 March 2006
Director: Doug Atchison
Screenwriter: Doug Atchison
Producers: Laurence Fishburne, Sid Ganis, Nancy Hult Ganis, Danny Llewelyn, Michael Romersa
Cast: Keke Palmer (Akeelah), Laurence Fishburne (Dr. Larabee), Angela Bassett (Tanya), Curtis Armstrong (Mr Welch), J.R. Villarreal (Javier)
Companies: Lionsgate, 2929 Entertainment, Starbucks Entertainment, Out of the Blue Entertainment, Reactor Films, Cinema Gypsy Productions
Genre: drama, family
Nationality: USA
IMDb: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0437800



Summary: The African-American dream?

Akeelah is an 11-year-old girl living in a poor Los Angeles neighborhood with her single mother and three siblings. Her father has died, but he left a legacy of love for words to Akeelah. That is why, despite failing most of her subjects in school, she is extraordinary at spelling. Seeing her talent, the principal of the school asks Akeelah to compete at the national spelling bee, which could attract more funding for their school. She is coached by a former champion, Dr. Larabee, but the road to success is not so easy for Akeelah. She must navigate new friendships, economic difficulties and her family, which is far from perfect. Ultimately, the entire neighborhood unites to support Akeelah in her journey, enabling her to triumph and embrace those around her. In this moment, she discovers the perfect word to encapsulate her emotions towards her community that she struggled to find: Love.

Analysis: If Rocky was a black teenage girl

Akeelah and the Bee (2006) stands out as a significant addition to the limited pool of 21st-century films featuring black girl protagonists. Alongside *Our Song* (2000), *Precious* (2009), *The Fits* (2015), and *Night Comes On* (2018), or *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), it brings a unique perspective to the screen. This inspirational tale follows the journey of a black girl from a poor neighborhood, showcasing her exceptional spelling talent and determination to pursue her dream despite the numerous challenges she faces.

Akeelah and the Bee was Dough Atchison's directorial debut. He got an idea for the script after seeing a Spelling Bee competition during a commercial break on an ESPN channel that usually broadcasts sporting events. This is why Akeelah, the main character of the movie, finds out about the Spelling Bee similarly and starts her complicated path to success. Later, this scene would become a point of racial criticism of the film. For example, Pimentel and Sawyer claim that the fact that ESPN is the primary channel of Akeelah's household is part of the racist rhetoric of the film, which implies that black people can achieve success only through sports (102). As we will see further, even though almost all the film's cast is black, the movie was criticized for reinforcing the racial stereotypes inherent in US society.

From the film's very first scenes, the viewer can see that Akeelah is surrounded by poverty. She lives in a primarily black neighborhood of Los Angeles with graffiti on the walls and people day-drinking out of bottles in brown bags. Her sister is a young single mother, while her absent brother appears to be spending time with people who deal drugs. Since the movie is family-friendly, these issues are not elaborated on or developed upon; they are shown matter-of-factly to present a stark contrast to Akeelah's intellectual aspirations. At the very beginning of the movie, Akeelah claims that she does not belong to her neighborhood, searching for an appropriate word to describe what she is feeling towards it: "alienation, estrangement, incompatibility" (00:01:05-00:01:08). In various scenes of the movie Akeelah is shown to be visibly and verbally annoyed with the poor state of her neighborhood and the local school. After the Principal of the school asks her to participate in the Scripps Spelling Bee contest to attract some publicity and funding for their school, Akeelah sharply replies: "Why would anyone want to represent a school that can't even put doors on the toilet stalls?" (00:08:10-00:08:15). It is because of the melodramatic nature of the movie, Linder contends, that the viewers are encouraged to be supportive of Akeelah and of her efforts to break free of her oppressive socio-economic environment, to which she does not belong due to her extraordinary intellectual skills. She claims that "standards of melodrama both advance issues of race while also encouraging the film's diverse audiences to ignore them to be 'good sports'." (21).

While there is a certain amount of doubt as to whether the movie fully achieves the empowerment goal that the director had set for it due to relying heavily on racial stereotypes, some of the racial critique voiced by academics tends to attribute racial significance where it may not be warranted. For example, Pimentel and Sawyer claim that the issue of bullying in the school that Akeelah has to face implies that African-American girls are perceived as lazy, so they resort to bullying to pressure Akeelah to help them with their homework. Nevertheless, Fu and Waasdorp claim that bullying is a widespread public health concern among American youth (1839). Hence, in this specific case, peer bullying does not necessarily have to be attributed to race but is a rather universal problem. Another issue within the movie pointed out by academics was the fact that Akeelah's Spelling Bee coach, Dr Larabee, told Akeelah not to use "ghetto talk," considering it an unintelligent way to communicate. Actually, the African American Language is an officially recognized dialect (Linder 26). Ryan Henyar, in his podcast devoted to movies with black protagonists, defended the film against this critique, claiming that showing Dr Larabee's language ideologies that still persist in the older

African-American society is not the same as endorsing it (15:03). In his interview, Laurence Fishburne (who plays Larabee) addressed this scene noting that he regards the choice of language a matter of manners and presentation (in Lee).

Because the story is centered on a black female pre-teenage character—Akeelah is featured in every movie scene but one—the companies were quite apprehensive about supporting the innovative film. To overcome obstacles, Atchison pitched it as a sports drama: "You've seen Rocky, you've seen Hoosiers, you've seen the Karate Kid, you've seen this before" (in Lee). That helped to get Lionsgate on board, as well as Starbucks Entertainment, which helped with the marketing of the movie through its chain of coffee shops. Despite featuring a black female lead in the story, which is unusual for sports dramas, the film does not subvert gender expectations but rather plays along with them. The main character is a heteronormative girl whose father died in a shooting, so now she is only supported by her mother, Tanya, who works as a nurse. Tanya wants Akeelah to focus more on her school subjects than on the Spelling Bee, which inevitably leads to conflict between the two. Akeelah's sister is also a single mother, which reveals the lack of male figures in the narrative. The only positive male figure Akeelah encounters is Dr. Larabee, who trains her for the upcoming competition. Her brother is not as lucky because his father figure is local gang leader Derrick-T, which leads to further tension within the family.

Since this movie is centered around intellect, school plays a significant role in Akeelah's life. Andrew et al. argue that "for many Black girls, schools are toxic, traumatizing places where they receive mixed messages about who and what is valued" (2532). This is also Akeelah's situation—she does not thrive in the school environment and fails various subjects despite her exceptional intellectual abilities. The Principal claims that due to the economic problems, schools will not have enough money for books, and we see students sleeping at their desks in the classrooms. The atmosphere is not academically motivating, and despite Akeelah's intellect, she is not praised for it. Instead, her Principal sees her as a tool to attain the needed financial support from the state. He also cancels the summer school that Akeelah must take to get her to study more for the upcoming Spelling Bee, neglecting her need and right to an education. This does not sit right with her mother, who protests the decision.

Still, as viewers who are on Akeelah's side, we are coaxed into ignoring the obvious problem and not siding with the mother. Tanya is the only person opposing Akeelah pursuit of the Spelling Bee and is thus presented as an antagonist of the movie. This is a problematic message, especially because many females who belong to minority groups do not get fair access to education. At the beginning of the movie, Akeelah does not want to participate in the Spelling Bee. Still, as the film moves on, she does it to honor his father's love for words, though it is unclear whether the father would have supported her neglecting her school education. In her interview, Keke Palmer, who plays Akeelah, says she is quite different from her character: "I'm not afraid, you know, to do good in school because I fit in even though I was smart" (in Shadow and Act Staff). Including this important message would have enriched the film's narrative.

Despite gender and racial issues, *Akeelah and the Bee* remains a story worth telling. It shows a strong black girl who pursues her intellectual dreams and achieves them with the help of her family and community. The movie also focuses solely on

children and their stories, with adults mainly staying in the background, so as viewers, we can see the child's perspective and sympathize with it. In the words of Laurence Fishburne: "as long as there's kids, there should be movies that focus on them" (in Lee), especially so the children from minority groups, and within them the little girls.

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Little Miss Sunshine: The Undertones of Beauty Pageants

MARÍA NAVARRO GARCÍA

Release date: 18 August 2006
Director: Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris
Screenwriter: Michael Arndt
Producers: Marc Turtletaub, Peter Saraf
Cast: Toni Collette (Sheryl Hoover), Greg Kinnear (Richard Hoover), Alan Arkin (Grandpa Edwin) Paul Dano (Dwayne Hoover), Steve Carell (Uncle Frank), Abigail Breslin (Olive Hoover)
Companies: Big Beach Films
Genre: drama, comedy
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0449059/

Summary: A (dysfunctional) family road trip

Frank Ginsberg has tried to kill himself and due to insurance problems, he cannot stay at the hospital so her sister, Sheryl Hoover, takes him home with her family. That same evening, the Hoover family receives a call announcing that Olive, the youngest daughter, can participate in the Little Miss Sunshine Beauty Pageant because of the last participant's disqualification. The Hoovers cannot leave Frank alone, but their financial problems prevent them from travelling by plane. Therefore, they embark on a family road trip to sunny California from dusty Albuquerque. During the journey, they face several misfortunes such as Grandpa's death, Richard finding out that his project is bankrupt and his son Dwayne's discovery that he cannot become a jet pilot as he is colorblind. Regardless, these does not stop the Hoover family from making it to the beauty pageant. During Olive's performance, the family realizes the perverted and creepy atmosphere surrounding the little girls dressed as sexy dolls. Olive's subversive and erotic performance, coached by her late Grandfather, is not well received and when they try to bring her off the stage, the family joins her in a comedic and tender finale.

Analysis: The horror of beauty pageants

Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris are a duo of American directors who debuted as filmmakers with *Little Miss Sunshine*. They started their career directing music videos for R.E.M and Red Hot Chili Peppers. After their cinematic debut, they have directed two

other films, *Ruby Sparks* (2012) and *The Battle of the Sexes* (2017), as well as the Netflix's comedy series *Living with Yourself* (2019). Dayton and Faris's story adapted Michael Arndt's first original screenplay; he was later known for movies such as *Toy Story 3* (2010) or *The Greatest Showman* (2017). The story Arndt narrates was inspired by Arnold Schwarzenegger, as he wanted to prove the Austrian star wrong in his negative views regarding 'losers' (see Hardwick). During his period as California Governor, Schwarzenegger gave a speech to high-school students in which he stated that "If there's one thing in this world I hate, it's losers. I despise them." In 2007, Arndt gave a bookstore interview where he condemned that attitude, since "there's something so demeaning and insulting about referring to any other person as a loser" (in Hardwick). Therefore, he wrote the movie rejecting this idea, celebrating a family of 'losers' whose journey towards winning a beauty pageant is more meaningful than winning itself.

Little Miss Sunshine presents the audience with a portrayal of the failed American Dream. As defined by the Oxford dictionary, this consists of "the ideal by which equality of opportunity is available to any American, allowing the highest aspirations and goals to be achieved." In other words, the ideal fantasy that with perseverance and hard work 'dreams come true', dividing society between winners and losers. The Hoover family represents a double view of the American Dream. On the one hand, each member's failure in life rejects this notion. Richard Hoover's unsuccessful nine-step 'Refuse to Lose' program depicts him as a broke man who only promotes a get-rich scheme. Dwayne Hoover also fails to achieve his dream (to become a jet pilot) as he is colorblind. Likewise, Olive does not win the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant, so she also fails to complete her dreams. Therefore, as Morin and Ehrhardt discuss, the act itself of winning is abandoned, with the movie presenting instead a family who "comes together and experience genuine happiness" abandoning any notions of the American Dream. On the other hand, the Hoover family reflects the implied moral of most Hollywood films: family is everything. This enhances the ideals portrayed by the American Dream, presenting Americans as "family-oriented people supporting and caring for each other" (Morin and Ehrhardt). Thus, the movie portrays the model heteronormative family with clearly established gender roles. Richard's main goal is to become a successful best-selling author with his program, finding a place in the public sphere. In contrast, Sheryl, despite being a strong and incredibly grounded woman—as Collette states in "Who are the Hoovers?"—belongs in the private sphere, being the caretaker of the family. Unlike Richard, Sheryl "gave up her own aspirations to take care of their kids."

The film also discusses the influence of male figures during early childhood and how they enhance a patriarchal view of the world. Both of Olive's most important masculine role models—her father and her grandfather—impose their physical and sexual preferences on her (Happel 47) depicting the objectification and idealization of women. Ergo, women are constantly seeking for male validation to please the male gaze. Richard uses "his gaze to teach Olive about the tyranny of slimness" (47) as seen with his fat-shaming discourse to educate Olive with a narrative on how not to be a loser and 'remain skinny'. As Greg Kinnear states, Richard "brings his own misguided philosophy and puts that onto her [Olive] and given the fact that she is seven possess some problems" ("Who are the Hoovers" 00:02:25 - 00:02:35). He reflects on everybody else's faults but overlooks his own failure (Bhatnagar). In contrast, Grandpa Edwin uses his gaze

to explain how he prefers "a woman with meat on her bones" (*Little Miss Sunshine* 00:27:35). Although grandpa's statement aims at subverting the beauty standards about being thin, the film portrays the constant ideals women must live up to and for which they are constantly judged. In fact, grandpa himself is imposing on Olive a sexualized view of women, as he coaches her seven-year-old granddaughter on sexually explicit dance moves. Consequently, the male figures in the film stress how women are never going to 'get it right', as the male gaze will always judge them either for being too skinny or for not being skinny enough.

Through the culture of beauty pageants, *Little Miss Sunshine* is condemning the beauty standards and the ideals of femininity it portrays. As Martin stated, beauty pageants represent "American glamour and perfection—the beautiful ideal woman" (6). The first Miss America Pageant took place in 1921 and its continuity demonstrates the "disciplinary practices of femininity" (Gaus). In other words, as Oppliger argued "little girls are taught that they can and should be judged on their looks, and that their natural beauty is not good enough and must be enhanced by a variety of beauty products" (in Happel 42). This notion reflects on beauty pageants as well as on the Hollywood industry. As Abigail Breslin, who plays Olive, commented in the *Vulnerable* Podcast, she struggled with body image throughout the film, as she had to wear a 'fat suit' to make her look chubbier in comparison to the skinny real-life participants (in Carlson). Hence, the film illustrates the superficial and objectifying tones which beauty pageants promote. For instance, the reason why Olive can participate in the pageant is that "the girl who had won had to forfeit her crown (…) something involving diet pills" (*Little Miss Sunshine* 00:16:40). Pageants are presented as the place where little girls were introduced to gender roles and expectations. Nevertheless, this is challenged not only through Olive, but also through Sheryl Hoover. As Toni Collette commented in an interview with *Glamour*, Sheryl's sense of style is not glamorous but rather very simple and cheap. She subverts the idea of being the ideal woman and mother, as she is not really thinking about fashion but more about getting food on the table and being there emotionally for the kids (00:01:28-00:01:36).

Little Miss Sunshine certainly emphasizes the sexualization of children within this pageant culture. According to Errigo in *Empire's* review of the film, these parades for pedophiles are a "blood-curdling showcase for teensy, grinning poppets shattered in cosmetics and posturing like freakishly overgrown Barbie dolls." In fact, as the directors stated in the *Epoch Times* interview, the little actresses in their film were "real pageant girls, done up by their mothers. They brought all their own equipment. They brought every aspect of that (…) We knew we couldn't fake this, because these are girls who have been working at this all their lives" (in Balfour). Both the directors as well as Toni Collette argue nonetheless that this is not a film about beauty pageants but rather about "being out of place, about not knowing where you're going to end up" (in Balfour). While this is true, the film depicts these pageants as overly sexualized and enmired in an exploitative atmosphere in which young girls perform for the validation. Thus, the film also explores the role of the parents as protectors, how they should not encourage but condemn this exploitation, as Dwayne argues: "I don't want these people judging Olive (...) you're the mom and you're supposed to protect her" (*Little Miss Sunshine* 1:27:39).

Consequently, what Dayton and Faris aimed to was to depict these beauty pageants as honestly as they could and then let the audience make their judgement (in Balfour).

With this context, Olive's performance is seen as transgressive. Olive's strip-tease like dance routine enhances sexually suggestive and erotic moves, demonstrating the hypocrisy and irony of beauty pageants, whose "goal is to sexualize your child without explicitly saying that is what you are doing" (Olvera and Heath). Pageants do sexualize little children, as seen with the young girl's presentation and performance, but when Olive performs her overly sexual routine dancing to Rick James' "Superfreak," she is criticized.

Olive is a "healthy little girl who suddenly becomes laughable when set beside the other pageant contestants" (Martin 6). This is illustrated in a deleted scene in which two young girls ask Olive is she is on a diet and proceed to laugh at her: "Didn't think so." This shows how young girls have internalized this notion of begin skinny form a very young age. Hence, through Olive's character the film is presenting an ideological gap, the contrast between individual choices and societal expectations (Martin 3). In this sense, Olive is presented as the underdog, as she chooses happiness over conventional beauty, as seen with the ice cream scene as well as with her performance. Olive has no desire to be perceived as sexy, as it is seen in her childish outfit, unlike the rest of the participants. In fact, as Abigail Breslin discussed in an Moviefone's interview, what she enjoyed most the most about playing Olive was that she got to dance a lot (00:00:40-00:00:47). Olive, likewise, is presented as a naïve and innocent girl who is more invested in having fun than subverting to beauty standards.

The *Little Miss Sunshine* pageant exposes the sexual undertones of these events, while Olive's performance offers an ironic commentary on the sexualization of girls, through the juxtaposition between 'good' and 'bad' girls (Happel 51). The other participants represent this ideal mix of puritanism and overt sexuality mocked by Olive's masculine attire and hypersexualized dance. Like the Hoover family, Olive's performance has a double function. She conforms to the beauty standards and expectation by removing her glasses, as they diminish her femininity (Gaus), to become a proper object of the male gaze. However, her attire (a top hat, suit and vest) transgresses the beauty standards, as these are clothing elements associated with masculinity, to expose the absurdity of these standards imposed on girls from a young age. As a result, unlike the 'terrifying' pageant children, Abigail Breslin is "not 'cute' in the visual Hollywood sense. She's cute the way real kids are: unpredictable, vulnerable, resilient, and tender" (Stevens).

In conclusion, *Little Miss Sunshine*'s main premise is the notion of being one self, and rejecting societal expectations. The film portrays the ugly undertones of beauty pageants, the sexualization of children. Hence, it exposes gender standards and roles imposed on women from a young age, specially dealing with their physical appearance to satisfy the male gaze. However, Olive's performance and attitude undermines and condemn this notion, to promote the subversion of societal and gender conventions because "life is one fucking beauty contest after another" (*Little Miss Sunshine* 01:24:07), and this cannot be condoned.

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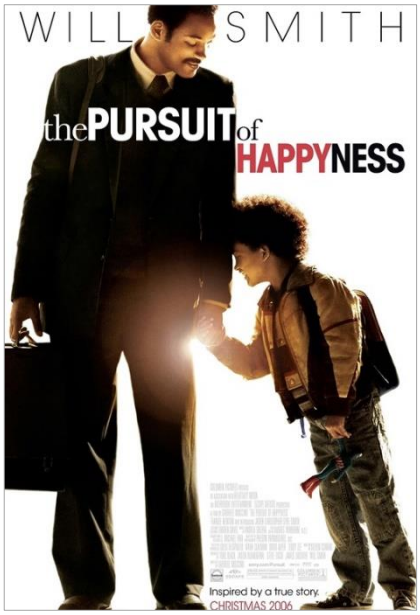
The Pursuit of Happyness: The Monster of Success and Its Consequences on Parenthood

MARÍA SÁNCHEZ SOUTO

Release date: 15 December 2006
Director: Gabriele Muccino
Screenwriter: Steve Conrad
Producers: Will Smith, Todd Black, Jason Blumental, James Lassiter, Steve Tish, Devon Franklin.
Cast: Will Smith (Chris Gardner), Jaden Smith (Christopher), Thandiwe Newton (Linda), Brian Howe (Jay Twistle), Kurt Fuller (Walter Ribbon)
Companies: Columbia Pictures, Relativity Media, Overbrook Entertainment, Escape Artists.
Genre: drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB:
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0454921/?ref_=tt_urv



Summary: Overcoming poverty

The story starts in 1981, San Francisco. Chris Gardner and his family struggle financially to pay their rent, their son's school and their daily supplies. Chris' job consists of selling bone density scanner to hospitals, but this is not a profitable business. The lack of sales results in a precarious situation in which Linda is forced to work double shifts in the laundry to provide her family with food. Since the situation is unmanageable, Linda leaves Chris and Christopher Jr. on their own, while the former decides to switch careers, applying for a stockbroker internship. Although he is accepted, the first six months are not paid and only one person is hired once the internship is over. In these circumstances, Chris must sell the remaining scanners, otherwise, he and his son will not be able to survive. Through much effort, Chris manages to sell two of them, securing a temporary place to live in. However, when their savings are over, they start living in miserable conditions. At the end, Chris takes his final exam and is called by the bosses of the firm who announce that he has earned the chance to work with them.

Analysis: Egotism against parenting

Gabriel Muccino (b. Rome, 1967) is an Italian director who firstly started his career in his country's television industry. Nonetheless, today he is recognized as a successful international director known for the titles such as *The Last Kiss* (2001), *The Pursuit of*

Happyness (2006), *Seven Pounds* (2008), and *Fathers and Daughters* (2015), among others. The latter movie also explores the relationship between a motherless girl and her father. Although this story differs from *The Pursuit of Happyness* due to the sudden death of the mother, it revolves around the bond between father and child forged in the absence of the maternal figure.

The Pursuit of Happyness has been acclaimed worldwide. Will Smith's portrayal of Chris Gardner earned him nominations for Best Actor at event such as the Oscars and the Golden Globes. The film also received nominations at the Black Reel Awards, with both Will and his son Jaden Smith recognized for their performances. Jaden's breakthrough performance was further acknowledged with a win at the MTV Movie Awards. Additionally, the Smiths clinched victories at the Teen Choice Awards. Despite the film's success, director Gabriele Muccino received barely any acclaim in comparison. Although honored as the movie of the year at the Capri Awards, nominations predominantly centered around the performances of Jaden and Will Smith.

The Pursuit of Happyness is inspired by the real-life story of the successful stockbroker Chris Gardner. In fact, the movie was shot while Gardner himself was writing his memoirs. His presence on set and the constant communication between Muccino and Gardner allowed the movie to represent an accurate version of Chris' life-story. Gardner explains that he "was on the set every day for 17 weeks of shooting." In fact, as Will Smith states in an interview, "He [Chris Gardner] just thanked me for the service to his family and he's forever indebted for bringing his story [to the big screen]" (in Murray). Nonetheless, a host of scenes differ from the real story of the protagonist. For example, Chris' son was two years old during their period of homelessness, which slightly changes the story since the relationship between father and son was different. That is, the toddler was not aware of the dramatic situation from which they were suffering. Also, at one point of the internship, Jackie Medina—Chris Gardner's wife—assumed sole responsibility for their son for four months whereas Dean Wither's internship did not only hire one person: most of the interns got a stipend of one thousand dollar per month and were hired after their training. Therefore, the movie's portrayal of the latter aspects differs substantially from the actual events. It seems then that the film dramatizes Gardner's challenges to underscore the bond between father and son, enhancing the appropriate atmosphere of *pathos*.

In the movie, Chris Gardner epitomizes the American Dream, defending the pursuit of individual happiness, regardless of its impact on those around him. The Americanness of the film also relies on the insistence that each citizen should find their own fulfilment, as stated in *The Declaration of Indepen*dence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (US 1776). Thus, Gardner's dream is the result of this path towards happiness—a right promoted by the idiosyncrasy of the United States. Likewise, according to Sarah Ahmed, "The history of happiness can be thought of as a history of associations" (2) and the happiness promoted in the movie and in *The Declaration of Independence* appears to be associated with personal and economic success.

For instance, in one of the most remarkable scenes of the movie, Chris Gardner tells his son that if "You got a dream... You gotta protect it. People can't do somethin'

themselves, they wanna tell you you can't do it. If you want somethin', go get it. Period." Despite the optimism of the message, the only character who is allowed to dream big is Chris Gardner himself and he prioritizes his ambitions over his son's needs. As Dargis states in her *The New York Times* review, "He [Gardner] doesn't want just a better, more secure life for himself and his child; (…) he seems to yearn for a life of luxury, stadium box seats and the kind of sports car he stops to admire in one scene." Again, happiness is not financial security, but absolute success regardless of the consequences that his pursuit may cause, which are, of course, damaging his son. To achieve his ambitions, father and son endure significant hardships, including nights spent sleeping on public transportation and even in the bathroom of the subway. There is no comment on how this is good for the boy. According to Dargis, "How you respond to this man's moving story may depend on whether you find Mr. Smith's and his son's performances so overwhelmingly winning that you buy the idea that poverty is a function of bad luck and bad choices, and success the result of heroic toil and dreams." Gardner's situation can be read differently according to one's individual perception of happiness and success. However, it is undeniable that the movie defends binary oppositions, as it revolves around the notions of wealth, happiness and effort against those of poverty, despair and laziness. These dichotomies underscore a psychological framework whereby the main message asserts that success is within reach for anyone who dares to pursue it.

The Pursuit of Happyness clearly defends an optimistic psychology;[7] as Will Smith states, "The film represents the greatest dream and the greatest hope that a man has for his ability to be and his ability to accomplish" (in Williams). In this manner, according to Sarah Ahmed, "Happiness becomes, then, a way of maximizing your potential of getting what you want, as well as being what you want to get. Unsurprisingly, positive psychology often uses economic language to describe happiness as a good" (10). The movie perfectly depicts Ahmed's conception of positive psychology, as Gardner lives through manifold experiences in which he must do sacrifices and take advantage of the opportunity that he is being given at the firm to achieve his dream. Likewise, it is not surprising that happiness in the movie is not only expressed in economic terms but that happiness itself is economic success. Consequently, Gardner's individualism breaks his family, as Linda and Chris do not have an egalitarian relationship in terms of providing money and supplies to their family.

Concerning Linda, she could be labelled as a 'Runaway Wife', according to Todres Rubin's analysis about the figure of the abandoning mother. In fact, Linda's situation echoes Avilés' idea of the mother who leaves her family: "En relación a sus maridos, se descubrió que [las madres] habían tomado la decisión por la existencia de un largo historial de desacuerdos y disputas en el seno de la unión conyugal" [In relation to their husbands, it was found that they had made the decision because of a long history of disagreements and disputes within the marital union] (137). This can be perceived at the very beginning of *The Pursuit of Happyness*, as Linda and Christopher do not share any loving moment and are constantly reproaching their lack of capital to each other.

[7] The optimist psychology is also defended by Will Smith in terms of racism when he was asked about it in interviews: "Well, sure, there may have been racism but the belief that if you acknowledge it, you give it power over you" (in Murray). Nonetheless, it has been proven that racial ostracism is not overcome by ignoring it.

Nevertheless, Linda's disappearance from the screen is sudden and abrupt since she leaves for New York with minimal effort to claim for the custody of her son. Furthermore, the reasoning behind the parents' assumption that little Christopher should remain with his father is left unexplained, adding to the ambiguity surrounding Linda's departure.

It appears that Gabriel Muccino's intention was to focus on the story and the evolving relationship between father and son, which—as explained before—did not happen exactly in the manner that it is portrayed in the movie. As Will Smith states, "There aren't a lot of movies that depict that relationship because men, we have to pretend that we're not that emotional about it" (in Morales). Traditionally, the father figure has been portrayed as authoritarian, but Smith's portrayal suggests a departure from this archetype. However, it seems that the only manner to immerse himself in his son's life is by the abrupt removal of the maternal figure. The idea that is trying to be sold both in the movie and in Gardner's book *The Pursuit of Happyness* is that Chris was a model father. As stated in Chris Gardner's webpage, "More than a memoir of Gardner's financial success, this is the story of a man who breaks his own family's cycle of men abandoning their children." Indeed, he does not abandon little Christopher, but the latter is forced to accompany his father through a precarious journey where providing a safe roof is unaffordable. Regarding Gardner's path towards success, Smith argues that "Chris Gardner laid down in a bathroom with his only child, seemingly the ultimate parental failure. The next morning, he woke up, he bathed his son in the sink, and he went to work. You can't do that if there's a possibility this might not work out" (in Gilchrist). Whether he succeeds or not, it must be highlighted that Gardner drags his son to a journey towards what seems to be an unattainable utopian dream, about which the boy is too young to voice his opinion.

It has been argued that Gardner is a positive example of an Afro-American parental figure, as black fathers are often depicted as absent or abusive characters. Likewise, Chris Gardner apparently "denies the stereotype of Afro-American fathers as uninvolved fathers through Gardner's involvement and interest in his childhood development and the environment around his son" (Heryanti and Ngestirosa 83). It is forgotten, however, that he is an Afro-American man who aspires to what has traditionally been associated with the successful white man, whose goal is the accumulation of capital. From the moment he sees a stockbroker getting out of his Ferrari and asks him the secret behind this luxury, his goal is to become like that man regardless of the difficulties, which inherently affect his son. Therefore, it is questionable that "the Afro-American father in the movie supports what his son needs" (Heryanti and Ngestirosa 84), because a child's needs are to be with his mother as well and to have a home. It can be stated then that little Christopher is the main victim of Gardner's pursuit of happiness, as not only is he deprived from both elements, but he is also enduring the miseries that are the result of his father's decision.

Regarding Christopher, he can be even associated with the abject, because a single father would traditionally reject being left alone with a child. Little children are thought to be a burden in cases in which the male parent must assume the full responsibility of parenthood. This also echoes Karen Lury's words when stating that in current cinema "the child is othered, since as a child they must always be to one side, or on the outside, awaiting this unknown and anticipated future, so that they are therefore

'other' to the society they presently inhabit" (5). This is exactly what happens with Christopher's future, as he depends on his father's luck, as only he is the active subject in the movie. Chris Jr. can be perceived as the Other and the abject since he appears to be left in the hands of his father as an object and not a subject. A tantalizing question in that sense is to what extent Christopher Jr. and Jaden Smith are exploited for their cuteness. Gardner uses his son to make new clients and it seems that Will Smith introduced Jaden, then aged eight, in the film industry to show his family off and to start his son's future acting career (so far failed). Children in *The Pursuit of Happyness* are thus twice reified, as their presence aids the adult men, whether Gardner or Smith, to accomplish their dreams, which are read in terms of financial success in business or the film industry, respectively. What the boys may gain or lose is not commented on.

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Bridge to Terabithia: Childhood Grief and Creativity

MERITXELL LANCIS TRIBÓ

Release date: 16 February 2007
Director: Gabor Csupo
Screenwriter: Jeff Stockwell, David Paterson
Based on the children's novel by Katherine Paterson
Producers: Lauren Levine, Hal Leiberman, David Paterson
Cast: Josh Hutcherson (Jess), AnnaSophia Robb (Leslie), Zoey Deschanel (Ms. Edmunds), Robert Patrick (Jack), Bailee Madison (May Belle)
Companies: Walden Media, Hal Lieberman Company, Lauren Levine Productions Inc, Buena Vista Pictures (distribution)
Genre: fantasy, drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0398808

Summary: Escape from reality

Jess is a 12-year-old boy with a secret passion for drawing who gets bullied at school and struggles to connect with his father at home. However, when the unconventional Leslie Burke, a girl his age, moves to the house next door, the two establish a friendship. After school, they both play in the forest, where they create the fantasy kingdom of Terabithia. In 'Terabithia', the problems of their real-life become monsters they can fight, allowing them to stand up and gain courage for school. Jess shows his art to his teacher, Ms. Edmunds, and she offers to take him one Saturday to a museum of art. Jess hesitates but ultimately accepts the invitation, without telling Leslie about it. When he returns, he discovers Leslie has had an accident in the forest and died. He feels guilty for not inviting her to the museum and returns to the forest, where he finds his father and opens up to him. Ultimately, he continues the legacy of Terabithia, building a bridge for his little sister May Belle.

Analysis: The freedom of friendship and imagination

Bridge to Terabithia came to public attention in 2007, advertised as a new fantasy movie from Walden Media, the production company behind the successful adaptation of C.S. Lewis's classic in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (2005; see the essay by Andrés Santiago in this volume). Another adaptation of a beloved children's book, in this case by US author Katherine Paterson (1971), *Terabithia*'s core themes revolve around bullying and grief. This change of register differentiates the film from other productions of the studio as "the

real-life story often becomes more absorbing than the fantasy that grows out of it" (Wilmington). Director Gabor Csupo, best known for animated shows like *Rugrats* or *The Simpsons*, precisely chose this particular story as his debut in directing live-action movies because, as he explained in an interview, "It really moved me, I loved the story. I thought it was challenging material because there are issues in it, not many people daring it to put it on the big screen" (in IGN). The divergence from the topics and the general story portrayed in the movie made the film's trailers initially "give the impression of a second-rate *Narnia* or *Lord of the Rings*" (Miller). However, once we put the fantasy scenes in a second place, *Bridge to Terabithia* becomes a story about "guilt, how you can misjudge people, grief and children's cruel and funny ways" (Moore). Thanks to its powerful message, the film stands alone among the director's previous and further creations, as both animator and director, avoiding the comedy of his previous animated series nor dwelling exclusively in fantasy, as he later did in *The Secret of Moonacre* (2008).

Despite the presence of fantastic elements, the core themes depicted in *Bridge to Terabithia* are deeply rooted in reality. The film is set in a fictional rural community, presenting two central characters on opposing sides of the class struggle, even though, as Claudia Puig notes in her review, the portrayal of the "hardscrabble home life of Jess seems derivative and simplistic" in contrast to Leslie's situation, in which the artistic endeavors characterize her family instead of their income. In any case, Josh Hutcherson's portrayal of Jess succeeds in capturing "the obsessive, walled-away introspection of a young artist" (Wilmington); as he is aware of the limitations of his family, he decompresses all the tension projecting it into his drawings.

At the movie's beginning, we are introduced to Jess trying to adhere to social norms and escape the bullying from his classmates. This action is rendered impossible once they discover that he is wearing his sister's shoes (and concealing their pink stripes), which makes him a prime target for further bullying. The shoes show how he does not conform to economic expectations, or the strict gender binary imposed on his hometown. In this school setting, we see the general rules of this rural society, with its clear division between what is deemed masculine and feminine, rules which cannot be crossed.

Leslie, the newcomer in town, disrupts notions of what girls can and cannot do, such as competing in a race despite being told that "it is not for girls." Robb succeeds in portraying Leslie's attitude towards these rules without sounding preachy, offering instead "a blend of buoyant optimism and mischievous eccentricity" (Ennis). Leslie's attitude directly opposes Jess, who is presented at school as shy and reclusive, with a performance from Hutcherson that "perfectly captures Jess' quiet prepubescent confusion, his isolation from classmates he doesn't relate to" (Ennis). In their footsteps is May Belle, one of Jess's sisters, who at first seems to fall into the feminine stereotype of her other sisters until she differentiates herself by playing 'extreme Barbies', a game implying she prefers a more adventurous play style than her sisters, who are only shown staying in the house and gossiping. As many studies indicate, this kind of rough play has a "value in general, in children's development and learning" (Storli 2).

As Jess and Leslie are bullied throughout the movie, they become friends and learn to express themselves without restrictions, so the story "exposes nature as a

significant place to escape from all gender stereotypes and the demands of life under capitalist pressure" (Ardini 4). Jess's restrictive world begins to falter once Leslie, expressing her imaginative nature, proposes that they explore the woods and create Terabithia, a fictional place where they can process reality. This results in a friendship "in which each person introduces the other to facets of life, spirituality, and selfhood that had been out of his or her grasp" (Diffrient 449). Despite many critics showing aversion towards the CGI world of Terabithia, *New York Times* critic Jeannette Catsoulis remarks that the film does a competent job of "Beautifully capturing a time when a bully in school can loom as large as a troll in a nightmare (…). *Bridge to Terabithia* keeps the fantasy in the background to find magic in every day."

This connection is evident in the design of the fantastic characters, which also aids in merging both worlds, as they share traits with the bullies at school. Moreover, Leslie's open-minded perspective spills onto the conception of Terabithia and how she and Jess express themselves. Leslie constructs the exterior while Jess decorates, subverting the social rules presented at the beginning of the story, by which "the public sphere was a space of masculine agency and authority, with the private sphere in contrast serving as a feminine domain" (Diffrient 448). In the film, Leslie is the main target of change; her urban background and highly educated powers of creation are positioned as elements that allow her to be open-minded and, in turn, open up Jess's mind. Through their dialogue she challenges Jess's views on what is acceptable for each gender and her presence allows him to gain confidence and accept his real passion. Despite being disruptive, Leslie still ascribes to some gendered behavior in the 'private sphere'; for instance, she sympathizes with Janice, the bully, as they share a moment of connection in the girl's locker rooms.

Another conflict that permeates the fantasy in Terabithia is the connection between father and son, exemplified in the movie's first frames, when Jess observes his father through the window as he drives away. Jess's longing stare is followed by relentless training for a school race; later, he informs his father about it, an action framed as a point of connection with him. As it is often the case, Jess's family shows how "male children often train to fulfil masculinity characteristics in society, such as being tough, strong, and brave" (Ardini 5). Throughout the film, Jess's gaze always lingers towards his father as he starves for attention and goes to great lengths to please him. When he loses his father's keys, the mere thought of disappointing him worries Jesse, and when he hides his artistic skills, he constantly fears not "meeting the standard of masculinity created by his father" (Ardini 6). The father, in turn, presents an indifferent attitude towards Jess, in opposition to how he treats May Belle, which proves to be one of the reasons for Jess's disconnection as "parent-child emotional talk influences children's emotional expression" (Aznar and Tenenbaum 148). Rober Patrick depicts a father longing to connect with his boy but unable to do so, as he does not appear to understand his child's creativity. Jack, the father, is shown at some points of the film looking over his son's sketches and drawings, but he never acknowledges Jess's artistic talents, as he appears not to share them. Despite that, throughout the film, Jack's character mimics his son's longing stares as he watches him sleeping, trying to understand his artistic inclinations. As Alex Chun notes, Robert Patrick's performance "provides a feeling of sternness and warmth to an otherwise two-dimensional character, and just as important,

a big shoulder to cry on." The film juxtaposes this disconnection between father and son with montages of Jess enjoying artistic time with Leslie's artist parents and their art teacher.

When Leslie suffers an accident trying to cross the river alone, Jess loses both his best friend and his safe place for artistic endeavor; the plot focuses then on the real threat of things returning to normal. Jess regresses to performances of traditional masculinity by acting violently and in his habitual reclusive way. At first sight, this seems to be another depiction of masculine grief by which young men are depicted as "the ideal prototyped male" who is "strong, stoic, and adventurous" (Moran 98). The film's end liberates Jess from hiding his feelings by returning to the forest, a safe place for expression, where he comes across his father. As his father comforts him, he finally opens up, creating a moment of bonding without the constraints of toxic masculinity, thus subverting the belief that "men should not express emotions (...) for these may be interpreted as a sign of weakness" (Brand and Klimes-Dougan 89).

This fantasy film for children avoids big epic battles with monsters; instead, the primary encounter with the 'dark one' leads to Jess clinging to his father as he lets himself be vulnerable and cry over the death of his best friend; this emotional climax, also allows his father to reconnect with his son and give him full support. With its discussion of grief, the film takes on a more reflective meaning, connecting with both children and adults and, in a way, rooting for Jess to escape the quiet, stoic, and masculine style of bereavement. Jess is aided by different people from his community as they explain their grief to him, and he starts understanding that grief is an emotion present in many people's lives; the film thus represents "the anguish and confusion of young characters experiencing loss for the first time" (Armitage and Baker). The movie's final sequence shows Jess's change as he returns to the creative realm of Terabithia, this time introducing it to his sister. He builds a new bridge to cross to Terabithia and makes it more accessible. By preventing another accident like Leslie's and by welcoming his sister in Terabithia, Jesse keeps Leslie's memory alive, passing it to a younger age group together with the pleasures of hospitable nature.

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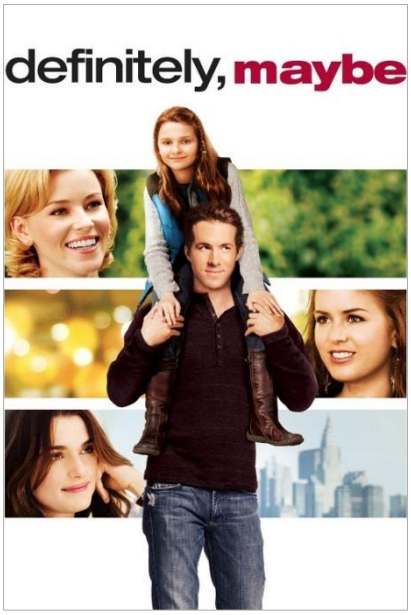
Definitely, Maybe: Framing Gender in Childhood

JUDITH CALLEJA ALTÉS

Release date: 8 February 2008
Director: Adam Brooks
Screenwriter: Adam Brooks
Producers: Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Adam Brooks
Cast: Ryan Reynolds (Will Hayes), Abigail Breslin (Maya Hayes), Isla Fisher (April Hoffman), Elizabeth Banks (Emily Jones), Rachel Weisz (Summer Hartley), Kevin Kline (Hampton Roth).
Companies: Universal Pictures, StudioCanal, Working Title Films
Genre: romantic comedy, drama
Nationality: USA
IMBD: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0832266/



Summary: A second chance to love

After receiving a sex education course at school, 10-year-old Maya starts asking her father, William Hayes, to tell her the story of how he met her mother. Will takes this chance to change the names of three women he dated when he was younger and makes it a game for Maya to guess who her mother is. *Definitely, Maybe* explores and frames gender dynamics through Will Hayes' love story with these three women and Maya's reactions and comments to his narration. By the end of the movie, Maya and Will have bonded over his honest storytelling, his past romantic relationships, and the different models of femininity that each woman in the story embodies, and from which Maya learns. On the other hand, Maya teaches her father that it is never too late for a second chance to love.

Analysis: Three models of feminine identity

Adam Brooks (b. Toronto 1956) is a Canadian filmmaker, director, screenwriter, and actor. Brooks began his cinematic career as a director with *Almost You* (1985) and *Red Riding Hood* (1988). He began screenwriting in 1995 with the film *French Kiss*, which starred Meg Ryan and Kevin Kline and helped establish his reputation in Hollywood. In 2008, Adam Brooks wrote and directed one of his best-known films, the romantic comedy *Definitely, Maybe*. As Brooks explains in an interview, his decision to both write and direct this film springs from the fact that it's "a personal story that [he] wanted to tell, so it felt very natural to do this next step" (in Cinema.com). At the time of the interview, Adam

Brooks had two children, which might also explain his interest and involvement in the plot.

The first scene of the film shows the families' outrage after their children have been taught sex education in school, and in the same interview with Cinema.com, Brooks acknowledges that the sex handbook the children read in the film was the same book his daughter was given in school: "The way it's shown in the movie is real. I remember when my daughter came home from school with 'the book'. The same book that we used in the movie" (in Cinema.com). This scene poses the question of what age is the appropriate one to address sex education to children. For young Maya, this sparks her curiosity about how her father Will and her mother met. Following the school's lessons, Will's daughter believes that sex is associated to a reproductive objective and questions him on how one of her classmates can be an accident: "If they didn't want a baby, then how come they had sex?," she worries.

Regardless of her age, Maya has a mature view of what love and romance are and acknowledges that love is not a fairytale but a much more complex feeling. When she asks Will about how he met her mother, she observes: "And the real story, not the, 'Oh, we met, we fell in love and we decided to take all that love and make a family and that's how we made you'." In *The Independent Critic*, Richard Propes notes that "The beauty of *Definitely, Maybe* is that it recognizes that love is more complicated than such simple choices and yet definitely, maybe, it really all can still work out in the end." In fact, he remarks how honest and authentic the film is "with sprinkles of hopefulness spread throughout its proceedings." In Maya's view, adults make love much more complicated than it needs to be and so Will learns from her daughter that it is never too late to move on from a broken heart and reignite an old flame.

Definitely, Maybe explores three different models of womanhood with Will's love interests Emily, Summer, and April. Film critic A.O. Scott observes the visual distinction between them and how their temperament relates to their physical appearance. In the case of Emily (Elizabeth Banks), her hair color frames her as an "obliging, blond college sweetheart" (Scott). Film critic Richard Propes describes her as "a young woman who clings to that simple world as long as she can before growing into her own person." Her model of femininity is portrayed as more traditional and caring. She is shown in her house for the most of the film and in fact, she is revealed to be Maya's mother at the end of the film. Her kind caresses make Maya discover that Emily is her real mother in Will's mysterious love story, since in his narration Emily also strokes lovingly his hair. Although Maya tries to spark love again between her almost divorced parents with a visit to the aquarium and by explaining that penguins love each other eternally, in the end, Emily still wants to divorce Will and keep shared custody. This is one of the remarkable points of the film, as it shows that love is much more complicated and transient.

Summer, interpreted by Rachel Weisz, is Emily's college friend. She is described by Scott as the "intriguing, slightly dangerous dark-haired intellectual." Apart from her intellectual endeavors, she is in a relationship with Hampton Roth, a professor and political writer, who represents a toxic model of masculinity in which fighting and drinking are key to 'real' manhood. Before Will moves to New York to pursue his dream of becoming a speech writer for politicians, Emily asks him (by then her boyfriend) to give a present to Summer, an old college friend of hers. Will meets Hampton while searching

for Summer to give her the present and Hampton's initial action is to offer him an alcoholic beverage: "Drink, be a man." Summer is an intriguing character because she contrasts with Emily's sweet and motherly model of femininity with her "ruthless nature" and "slight touches of humanity and vulnerability that add up to a layered complexity beneath her surface ambitions" (Propes). Summer is comfortable with her sexuality and when Will narrates his story with her, 10 year-old Maya confesses that she hopes she is not her mother, as Summer is often shamed for being considered promiscuous. Maya's perspective on the issue is assimilated from her surroundings and the societal expectations on women to be modest. It is telling how corrective comments contrast what is considered as acceptable or not acceptable female behavior.

April, played by Isla Fisher, is a redhead woman who works with Will at the New York campaign headquarters for candidate Bill Clinton. Scott highlights her "impetuous" nature as a distinctive trait that distinguishes her from Emily and Summer. Propes describes her as "free-spirited, wounded and more emotionally available than any man can seemingly fully appreciate." After taking Maya's advice from her innocent perspective, Will realizes that April is the woman he is in love with and, encouraged by his daughter, visits her to confess his love in hopes of initiating a relationship. In this sense, Will teaches Maya about love, sex and gender and Maya teaches Will about romance. April has been collecting *Jane Eyre* copies for years in the hopes of finding an edition which was originally hers with a dedicatory note from her father. Will finds that copy and uses it as an excuse to see her again and ask for another chance at love, bringing along little Maya, who has advised her father to pursue his love. The film ends with Will signing his divorce papers and being thus able to move on from his past relationship with Emily into a second chance with April.

Maya Hayes, interpreted by Abigail Breslin, is a curious and loving 10-year-old girl. In the film, she is sweet, caring and understanding of Will's past. Although Maya is close to both her mother and her father, she also understands that love is complex and deals with her parents' divorce scrupulously and maturely. Besides, she offers her dad insight into love and forgiveness and advises him to give April a second opportunity. Moreover, Maya expresses her gender through traditionally feminine clothes but also challenges the sexist language which shames women for promiscuity but rewards men for having multiple partners. Besides, in the film's ending, Maya shows interest in getting to know April and is supportive of her father's relationship with her.

As a whole, Adam Brooks created complete and believable characters who are imperfect but true to themselves. This is also noted by film critic Scott in his review of *Definitely, Maybe*. As he argues, "Emily, Summer, and April are all decidedly imperfect, but Mr. Brooks succeeds in showing how their shortcomings are, especially at first, part of their allure." While Will narrates his life to little Maya, he offers an honest portrayal of women with different qualities, aspirations and dreams. In this unique bedtime story, Maya learns about gender power dynamics in the relationship between Summer and Hampton Roth but she also learns about societies' expectations on motherhood and about the disdain of promiscuity. The concept of promiscuity is also tackled by Maya when she asks her father "What's the boy word for 'slut?," bringing into attention the lack of an equivalent to shame men's promiscuity. Summer is often described for her sexual attractive by other characters, even before she is introduced in the film itself, with Emily

representing her in a sexualized way: "She was on my exchange program at Cambridge, and all the guys wanted to sleep with her, and you probably will, too." Yet, according to reviewer Sam Toy, there is "an imbalance of the attention given to the three women in Will's life." The focus remains on Will Hayes as the narrator of the; however, the film acknowledges Maya as the girl of foremost importance to Will as a dad.

The parental relationship of Maya with her mother Emily and her father Will is shown as fulfilling and nurturing. Although they are a divorced couple by the end of the movie, they remain on good terms for the wellbeing of Maya, even if that means not being in a romantic relationship. In some cases, divorce is an agent which changes the relationship between the former united nuclear family to a divided and fragmented one, but that is far from the case for the Hayes family. The film depicts the experience of a single father, which was an emerging phenomenon in 2000s Hollywood, as scholar Hannah Hamad illustrates: "The summer of 2002 marked a watershed moment for what subsequently became the pronounced and widespread paternalization of Hollywood's cinematic output, when it saw the release of a small but significant cluster of films, all of which conspicuously pushed issues of fatherhood to the discursive fore" (99). Moreover, Hamad attributes this phenomenon to its marketability in the early 2000s as it "accentuated the paternal angles of these films, foregrounding fatherhood as a theme and prominent selling point, and anchoring their marketing, as postfeminist fatherhood has risen to discursive prominence for leading man masculinities in popular film culture to a near totalizing extent" (100).

Definitely, Maybe not only deals with the struggles of a divorced couple in their effort to co-parent with shared custody, but also frames the female gender through the experiences of young Will Hayes. It presents diverse models of feminine identities as valid alternatives and questions misogynistic comments related to promiscuity. Emily as a protective mother, Summer as a driven and ambitious woman and April as a vivacious and free-spirited nature show through Will's story the opportunities for identity development and the importance of being true to oneself. In this sense, Will not only narrates a compelling and nostalgic story from his past, but also teaches his young daughter Maya about honesty, respect and the unexpectedness of love.

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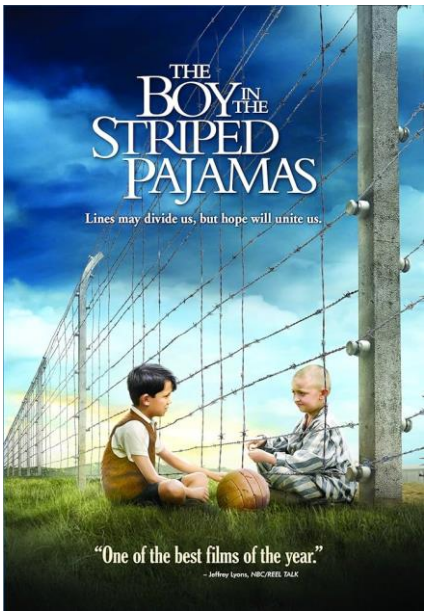
The Boy in the Striped Pajamas: Hatred and Empathy in Politicized Childhoods

ANDRÉS SANTIAGO BERRÓN

Release date: 28 August 2008
Director: Mark Herman
Screenwriter: Mark Herman
Based on the novel by John Boyne
Producer: David Heyman
Cast: Asa Butterfield (Bruno), Jack Scanlon (Shmuel), Amber Beattie (Gretel), Vera Farmiga (Elsa), David Thewlis (Ralf), Rupert Friend (Kurt Kotler)
Companies: Miramax Films, BBC Films, Heyday Films
Genre: historical drama
Nationality: UK, USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0914798/



Summary: "Not really people at all"

Nine-year-old Bruno, an SS officer's son, is told that his father has obtained a promotion, and that the family must relocate to Auschwitz. In their new rural home, Bruno feels lonely, and, noticing a 'farm', he asks for permission to go there to play with the children, mentioning their strange attires. Bruno's curious questions are only answered obliquely. A tutor arrives then to teach the siblings Nazi ideology. Bruno's 12-year-old sister Gretel accepts it enthusiastically, but Bruno is confused. The lonely child escapes, and meets Shmuel, behind the fence of the 'farm'. The boys become friends and meet sporadically. When, Bruno's mother Elsa figures out what the smoke drifting from the chimneys of the 'farm' is, she confronts her husband Ralf. At Elsa's insistence, Ralf decides to send the children away to Heidelberg. Going to meet Shmuel for a last time before leaving, Bruno is informed that Shmuel's father has gone missing. Noticing that he can dig under the fence, Bruno decides to enter the camp disguised in Shmuel's striped pajamas, in order to help his friend find his dad. The two boys are soon taken to a gas chamber and murdered, next to many other prisoners.

Analysis: Whose tragedy?

Mark Herman's 2008 film *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* adapts Thomas Boyne's 2006 eponymous novel, allowing for child actors to embody the characters created by Boyne as part of his historically problematic morality tale. The director and screenwriter

made use of the actors' limited knowledge of the Holocaust in order to enhance the view of childhood that the film advances, based on Romantic beliefs about pre-adolescence as an age in which the lack of reason allows for empathy to remain unconstrained by adult cold-heartedness. The unmediated encounter between the two children helps the protagonist readjust his views of his father's role in the war, thus charging Bruno with a symbolic-national role that far outweighs the possibilities of child agency.

In order to understand the message the filmmakers attempt to convey, we ought to take into account the quotation that precedes the first scene, which is proposed as a sort of suggested reading of the story about to be presented to the audience. This quote by John Betjeman, a 20th Century English Poet Laureate, contrasts the adult "dark hour of reason" with childhood, which is "measured out by sounds and smells and sights." This view of children as somehow more directly connected to the phenomenological world is not far removed from George MacDonald's conception of pre-adolescents as being "'at one' with Nature" (McCallum 56). The intended effects of the quote are evident: we are meant to project that idea onto the depiction of World War II (German) childhood that we are about to watch. The film itself does not seem to attempt to contradict this view, yet it appears to depend to a large extent on the contrast between Bruno's—and, to a lesser extent, Shmuel's—ignorance, and the informed adult's knowledge of the issue that the plot slyly focuses on.

However, we ought to take into account the fact that the main roles are played by two children, aged 11 (Asa Butterfield as Bruno) and 10 (Jack Scanlon as Shmuel), who were chosen by Herman because they "had about equal grasp of the facts, very faint and occasionally distorted" (in Andrews). The film is beset by an epistemological problem: the story was presented by the novelist as a fable, yet only informed adults can tell the difference between the historical elements in the plot and those which were included for dramatic effect by the novelist or the director. Those who rely on the novel and film as accurate representations of the Holocaust may reach very wrong conclusions about the nature of concentration camps or the Third Reich more generally.

Particularly troubling in this sense is the reliance on "ignorance [as the] key to Boyne's presentation of childhood 'innocence'" (Pinfold 258), which also, as noted above, was the criterion for the casting of the two protagonists. Even more confusing is the fact that the children's lack of knowledge was not rectified during the production. Herman stated in the cited interview that "discussions on set about the Holocaust were hard to avoid" (in Andrews), but were in fact avoided, with both Jack and Asa seemingly being given oblique answers when they enquired what was happening. The director asserted that the decision to keep them as uninformed as possible was meant to "make their acting of innocence as easy as possible for them." (in Andrews).

This is a recurring characteristic of films focused on children's experience of 'discovery', as exemplified by *Peter Pan* (2003) or the first *Narnia* (2005) adaptation (see the two essays about them in this volume); yet here the experimentation with the child actors' lack of foreknowledge is not anecdotal, as was the case in those cases, but in some ways morally doubtful. Furthermore, in *The Boy…* as in both of these fantasy movies, the child's facial expressions, and, particularly, his eyes, become the focus of the camera, intending to engage with the audience's sympathy and vicariously make them 'discover' what the child is discovering. It is unsurprising, then, that the director, in an

interview, remarked that Asa Butterfield had "pretty piercing eyes" (*Behind the Scenes* DVD). Besides the problematic nature of the film's 'experiential' approach to child acting, it could be argued that the children remained as misinformed about the *Shoah* as they were before the production, due to the aforementioned discrepancies with the experiences of those who suffered the genocide.

Nevertheless, what the children did know about the Holocaust made the filming traumatic. Asa Butterfield even told his mother that "[he] didn't want to be an actor any more" (in BangShowBiz). The main reason for this was the "awful" experience of filming the gas chamber scene "in a room full of men, some of whom were completely naked, and it was dark, and they shut the door on us" (in BangShowBiz). Furthermore, "[he] knew what it was, and [he] knew what they were demonstrating," and, despite the fact that "it was only acting" (in BangShowBiz), this was a traumatic experience for Asa. The question of the child actors in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* has a double problem: that of misinformation combined with a lack of historical education given during, or before, the production; and that of the terror at having to experience recreations of the most gruesome parts of the Holocaust, which the young actors understood and knew about beforehand.

It is also worth examining Bruno's development: in the Berlin scenes, he pretends to be a military airplane and a soldier, playing with his group of male friends. His grandmother taunts Bruno's father Ralf by alluding to his childhood activities; like Bruno, he imitated an idealized version of the military experience, even dressing up as a soldier with uniforms she made for him. Bruno's positive view of soldiers is undoubtedly provoked by a sense of pride in his father's occupation, which must have been instilled in him both at school and at home; this pride is maintained by a lack of contact with the actual activities performed by his father, and it is eroded both by a growing distrust of the parental figure itself, and by the father's subordinate Lieutenant Kotler's violence towards their servant Pavel (actually a Jewish prisoner).

Pavel's willingness to help Bruno when he gets hurt (he is a doctor) contrasts with Kotler's intimidating behavior towards him, subverting the child's expectations of both Jews and Nazi soldiers, and effectively causing an inversion in his views of them. Bruno does not actively question what their Nazi tutor Herr Liszt tells him—in fact, he is initially terrified when he discovers that Shmuel is a Jew—but he allows his experience to contradict what he has been told to believe by figures of authority: in other words, he allows the sensorial experiences that, for Betjeman, constitute the child's main experience, to deconstruct what he is being told to perceive as 'reasonable'. Thus, the film continuously relies on this contrast between adult 'dark reason' and childhood empiricism.

At the same time, Bruno embodies the young post-World War II generation of Germans, and his rejection of his father's actions is not merely meant to be understood as a family dispute, but as an allegorical dispute between the Nazi Germans and their sons and daughters, who had to dismantle the ideological education that they had been given. His role as the protagonist of Boyne's 'fable' necessary hints at allegory. The lack of any mention of Bruno's surname helps to universalize him, as if he could be any German child or the son of any Nazi soldier; notably, the same happens in Shmuel's case. Unsurprisingly, scholars such as Ruth Gilbert have considered that "erroneous historical

representation [is] inextricably linked [with] the fable device that frames the text" (361). Bruno and Shmuel's identities are partly effaced due to their roles as the universal German and universal Jew respectively, or perhaps even universal child, transforming them into transparent repositories for ideas about childhood to be explored.

As for Shmuel, the utilitarian nature of his character does not provide much ground for detailed analysis. He is used as the all-encompassing *Other*, who, by means of an unmediated encounter with the pre-reason *Self* (Bruno), can expand the latter's range of sympathy, thus avoiding the growth of adult prejudice and hatred in the German boy's psyche. If Bruno's role is given a social-national dimension, Shmuel's is archetypical, and quite superficial; his role, like Pavel's, is to be the "good Jew" who Herr Liszt deems impossible to find. In addition to this, since his perception of the events around him is obscured by Bruno's inability to comprehend the horrible things that Shmuel hints at, the question of the incapability of language to communicate traumatic experiences also plays a part in the filmmakers' construction of childhood against the "dark hour of reason." The realm of linguistic communication is that of adults, and Shmuel's childhood innocence is seen to have been partially shattered by his trauma, forcing him to make only partial use of it. Bruno and Shmuel do not become friends due to the conversations they engage in, but thanks to Bruno's gifts of food, the distraction provided by games, and the non-verbal joy expressed by laughter. It is in this sense that the film's childhood is 'measured out' by purely sensorial experiences; these scenes also parallel the initial ones in which Bruno and his friends pretend to be soldiers: they only engage in non-verbal communication, noisily imitating the engines of airplanes or the sounds emitted by machine guns.

Having examined Bruno and Shmuel, we ought to consider Gretel's role. She is the only non-adult female character, and her attitude towards Nazi ideology is opposed to those of both her grandmother and her mother—at least until Elsa discovers what is being done to the prisoners at the camp. Aged 12, Gretel was played by the then 15 year-old actress Amber Beattie, who describes her character as "feeling a lot more mature (...) because she's swept away by (...) Hitler Youth" (in GettyImages). Her rejection of her mother's cautious relationship with Nazism and of her grandmother's criticism of it serves as a catalyst for a sort of incomplete *bildungsroman*. She attaches herself to a worldview that she either believes is right, or that she conceives of as a useful opinion to hold in order to advance socially, to become what she perceives an adult woman must be. Perhaps this is the reason for Gretel's "crush" (as Beattie referred to it in the previously quoted interview) on Lieutenant Kotler, which is cut short by Bruno when she reveals to him that she is "only 12," a piece of information at which the soldier recoils, while she smarts. Gretel's perception of herself as much more mature than her age due to her fanatic adhesion to Nazism would explain why she is interested in starting a relationship with a soldier, in spite of the problematic age gap.

In conclusion, Herman's 2008 *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* generates some difficulties related to the embodiment of characters from Boyne's fable by child actors. The question of the relationship between the film's plot and the knowledge of the Holocaust by children is complicated by the fact that the children experienced during the filming both terror and confusion. Within the film, Bruno and Shmuel are to some extent forced to become allegorical blank slates for the moral tale of the story to function, while

Gretel and the questions posed by her character about female education and the coming of age experience remain submerged in the narrative, emerging only occasionally to function as a backdrop to Bruno's own experience of the empathic and ultimately tragic discovery of the *Other*.

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The Rights to My Body: *My Sister's Keeper* and the Moral Question of Agency in Children

JUDITH CALLEJA ALTÉS

Release date: 15 January 2010
Director: Nick Cassavetes
Screenwriter: Jeremy Leven, Nick Cassavetes
Based on the novel by Jodi Picoult
Producers: Mark Johnson, Chuck Pacheco, Mendel Tropper, Scott L. Goldman
Cast: Cameron Diaz (Sara Fitzgerald), Abigail Breslin (Anna Fitzgerald), Alec Baldwin (Campbell Alexander), Jason Patric (Brian Fitzgerald), Sofia Vassilieva (Kate Fitzgerald), Evan Ellingson (Jesse Fitzgerald)
Companies: New Line Cinema, Curmudgeon Films, Mark Johnson Productions
Genre: drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1078588/

Summary: Learning to let go

The cheerful and lively Fitzgerald family consists of Sara, Brian, Jesse and Kate. Sara is a loving mother who works as a lawyer and Brian is an understanding father and a brave firefighter. This young couple have two children, Jesse and Kate, and enjoy their quality family time to the fullest. However, their lives are suddenly upturned when Kate is diagnosed with leukemia at a young age. In such a hard moment, the doctor who is treating Kate advises the parents to conceive another child, Anna, in an effort to save Kate. As soon as Anna is born, she undergoes multiple painful procedures to extract bone marrow, blood, and part of her liver. When her parents ask her to donate a kidney to her sister Kate, 11-year-old Anna Fitzgerald sues them to try to achieve medical emancipation. Sara Fitzgerald cannot fathom giving up on Kate and letting her die, even if it is at the cost of her other daughter's health. In a turn of events, when her mother confronts Anna in court to question the reason for her petition, their brother Jesse reveals it was Kate's wish to die.

Analysis: Bodily autonomy in children

Nick Cassavetes (b. New York 1959), the son of the actor and director John Cassavetes and actress Gena Rowlands, grew up surrounded by the film industry. His

family greatly influenced his interest in pursuing a career in filmmaking. His debut in cinema was with *Unhook the Stars* (1996), a movie in which his mother Gena Rowlands starred. Just a year later he released *She's so lovely* (1997) and then, the renowned film *The Notebook* (2004), based on Nicholas Sparks's novel, with Rachel McAdams and Ryan Gosling as the protagonists. Five years later, Cassavetes directed *My Sister's Keeper* (2009), based on Jodi Picoult's best-selling novel, published in 2004. Picoult's novel was inspired by the real-life case of Molly and Adam Nash. In autumn of 2000, the American couple formed by Lisa and Jack Nash had a genetically modified a baby to try to save Molly, their little girl who had been diagnosed with Fanconi Aneia and, subsequently, suffered bone marrow failure and developed leukemia. This story was publicized in January of 2002 by the CBS and caused a moral debate on whether designer babies were legitimate ways of trying to save another child's life.

Anna Fitzgerald, played by Abigail Breslin, is a brave and bright 11-year-old girl. Despite the hard circumstances of Kate's illness, the younger sister remains her confidant, lightening up her spirits while she undergoes chemotherapy. Anna is also courageous and resolute, since out of her love for Kate, she is willing to take on the pressure of demanding medical emancipation through a lawsuit against her own parents. She is sweet and funny, and is often seen playing with her family in the flashbacks at the beginning of the movie. When the responsibility to save her sister arises, Anna finds herself in a tight spot, having to decide between two opposing views: her mother's relentlessness in keeping Kate alive and Kate's own desire to die.

Noted film critic Roger Ebert argued that in *My Sister's Keeper,* Anna is "young but she's bright and determined." In the film, Anna shows a deep understanding of death and grief according to Judge de Salvo, who interviews her to ensure that she is fully conscious of what her decision will imply. Despite her young age, Anna Fitzgerald proves before the judge her emotional intelligence and her awareness of the fact that not donating a kidney to Kate will mean an immediate death sentence for her, caused by associated liver failure. This raises ethical and legal issues as Scott comments in his review: "Do Anna's rights to govern her own body trump her obligations to the sister she claims to love? Is she prepared to let Kate die?" On the one hand, it is true that Anna and Kate's relationship is extremely close, however, it is the purest form of love to let someone go if they lack strength to keep going. Since Kate was diagnosed with leukemia when she was a little girl, she has undergone ten years of on and off chemotherapy and seen her boyfriend Taylor, who also had cancer, tragically die. Understandably, this means an unbearable physical and mental strain for the young teenager and for her immediate family. On the other hand, Anna is determined to respect Kate's choice and is prepared to let her die, although she acknowledges to the judge that it will cause her much pain. Displaying an outstanding level of maturity, Anna accepts Kate's choice yet Sara, their mother, is scared to let her go.

Despite the hardships they undergo, the heteronormative Fitzgerald family is loving and close. Anna's preoccupation with the well-being of Kate and of the family as a whole is part of a set of values shared by all the members. As Honeycutt observes, the audience feels inclined to support them and this empathy comes "from your understanding of these people and how this particular family operates in an atmosphere of love and mutual concern." Their conflicting but good-hearted positions also show an

ambiguous reality where there is no clear villain, but rather, different perspectives on the matter: "The tragedy that forces its way into their midst is fought with tenacity, and the conflicts within the family are portrayed in such a manner that no one is a bad guy" (Honeycutt). Honeycutt adds that, even though the film takes place in the courtroom for a considerable amount of time, it is not a movie "about a court battle." It is not about Kate's illness or Anna's decision only either, it is mainly about "how decisions were made and how this illness impacts everyone" (Honeycutt).

Cancer is a debilitating illness for the patients as well as for the families. The Fitzgeralds almost divorce due to disagreements about whether the right choice for Kate is going to the beach and enjoying a breeze of fresh air or staying in the hospital. To Sara, Kate's mother, the beach is too dangerous for her daughter's health and she adamantly refuses to let the family go. Hours later, however, she shows up to support Kate and her family in their beach trip. Even Jesse, the eldest sibling is hurt by the situation, as he "feels overlooked" (Honeycutt) and his dyslexia goes unnoticed by his parents. The resilience of the family and the eventual acceptance of Kate's death is indeed remarkable.

The question of bodily autonomy in *My Sister's Keeper* has also been studied by law scholar Stephanie O'Loughlin, who describes the film as presenting

> a compelling narrative of a minor who is desperate to have agency over her body and the medical treatment that her body undergoes. Minors who are terminally ill may feel trapped in their bodies and feel forced to prolong what is ultimately their physical suffering. Based on the constitutional right to bodily integrity, a minor should have the right to invoke the mature minor doctrine in order to refuse lifesaving medical treatment. (204)

O'Loughlin contemplates the position of minors who are terminally ill and feel restricted inside their own bodies, postponing the pain they experience themselves and the pain their loved ones go through. She establishes that it is a constitutional right to have bodily integrity and that terminally ill minors should be entitled the choice of accepting or refusing medical treatment. Nevertheless, in the case of Kate she is also pressured into continuing her life, as her mother is quite stubborn and refuses to hear any pessimistic thoughts about death. This way, she is creating a sense of guilt in the patient and making the decision of dying much harder, which is why Kate defers the task to the sweet and witty Anna, her confidant and closest friend.

The solution to this moral dilemma is different in the original novel written by Jodi Picoult. Rather than addressing the ethical issue, Montello argues that Picoult "takes the easy way out." In the film version, Kate dies due to liver failure and Anna wins her lawsuit. However, in the novel, after Anna wins her lawsuit demanding medical emancipation from her parents, she is in a violent car accident which leaves her brain dead, a candidate to donate her kidney to Kate. Montello claims that this narrative choice undermines the intriguing medical dilemmas since "The author abandons the difficult moral questions that drive the entire book, as well as the reader, in an ending that is dumbfounding and infuriating." As Montello argues, Picoult dismisses the question of agency in making decisions about one's body as a child by removing Anna from the picture: "Picoult's contribution to medical ethics is her success with creating children who seem like children, not reifications of their disabilities." Montello, however, acknowledges Jodi

Picoult's exploration of "disability, motherhood, family, social responsibility, and tragedy" and her ability to establish the "intricate connections among them."

Although *My Sister's Keeper* focuses on a girl with leukemia and her sister's decision to medically emancipate herself rather than continue giving away pieces of her organs, her bone marrow and blood, this moral debate can be extrapolated to bodily autonomy in children who are not ill. Nowadays, there are different opinions regarding transgender children and whether they should be allowed to get gender reassignment therapy and even surgery when they are still minors. Similarly to Anna's case, they have to defend their viewpoint, which needs to be validated by a certified psychologist through an analysis to ensure the child is able to transition. Bodily autonomy is usually denied to the minor and remains in the parents' hands, but until what age? That question still remains controversial, as some parents might be unsupportive of a transgender child yet the mental scar from body dysphoria could become unbearable.

My Sister's Keeper is a touching movie, depicting the hard choice of a terminally ill teenager, how her family navigates and supports her through the illness and how the decision to keep Kate alive or not falls on an 11-year-old little girl. This film not only shows the importance of family through hard times, but also poses moral questions about the bodily autonomy of children, leaving the audience contemplating what the right age for medical emancipation should be. The dilemma is so imposing in its nature that the novel version of *My Sister's Keeper* presents an ending that avoids the decision between Anna's rights and Kate's life. The film version, however, makes a decision which is respectful of Kate's wishes as well as of Anna's bodily integrity.

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Esther's Secret: Unveiling Adoption Anxiety in *Orphan*

JUDITH CALLEJA ALTÉS

Release date: 24 July 2009
Director: Jaume Collet-Serra
Screenwriters: David Leslie Johnson McGoldrick and Alex Mace
Producers: Leonardo DiCaprio, Susan Downey, Joel Silver, Jennifer Davisson Killoran, Erik Olsen
Cast: Vera Farmiga (Kate Coleman), Peter Sarsgaard (John Coleman), Isabelle Fuhrman (Esther), CCH Pounder (Sister Abigail), Jimmy Bennett (Daniel Coleman), Aryana Engineer (Maxine Coleman) Margo Martindale (Dr. Browning)
Companies: Dark Castle Entertainment, Appian Way Productions, Studio Babelsberg
Genre: horror, mystery, thriller
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1148204/

Summary: A troubled orphan?

After the traumatic loss of her unborn baby, married couple Kate and John Coleman decide to adopt an orphaned child. In the religious orphanage, Kate and John are instantly drawn to the brilliant and creative Esther, a Russian nine-year-old girl with great musical and artistic skills. Esther's uniqueness makes her stand out at home and at school. Kate, however, soon starts noticing unusual behaviors and unexplained events. Trying to find out more about Esther's suspicious past, Kate attempts to contact Sister Abigail, from the orphanage. However, Esther coldly kills the nun and threatens to kill her new siblings Maxine and Daniel Coleman if they tell their parents. Kate keeps digging and eventually discovers that Esther is actually a 33-year-old Estonian woman called Leena Klammer who has hypopituitarism, a disorder preventing normal growth. Leena, a dangerous, violent patient escaped from a mental hospital, has been pretending to be a little girl for years to seduce the husbands of each family that welcomes her as an adopted daughter.

Analysis: Uncanny children and adoption anxiety

Jaume Collet-Serra (b. Sant Iscle de Vallalta 1974) is a Spanish-American film director and producer known for his outstanding horror and thriller films. His directorial debut was with *House of Wax* (2005), which was followed by his best-known film, *Orphan*,

premiered in 2009. Later, he directed *Unknown* (2011), *Non-Stop* (2014), *The Shallows* (2016) and *The Commuter* (2018). Jaume Collet-Serra's skyrocketing popularity can be attributed precisely to the success of *Orphan* (2009), a horror film dealing with a violent foreign woman pretending to be a minor who is adopted by a grieving middle-class American family. Jaume Collet-Serra's decision to center his horror story on a false little girl is remarkable but not unique. There has been an ongoing tradition of using the adopted uncanny child, who blurs the threshold of what is human, as a model to project 20th and 21st century anxieties surrounding transnational adoptions. According to Balanzategui, "the uncanny child emerges from culturally specific contexts as an embodiment and agent of trauma at the turn of the 21st century, aestheticizing a breach in linear narratives of personal and national identity" (219). The concept of the uncanny child, therefore, sutures different national identities and in the context of *Orphan* enhances Esther's displacement, as she is Estonian but pretends to be Russian to become an American.

Astonishingly, there was a similar real-life case in which an adopted girl was accused of being an adult passing herself off as a minor to try to harm her adoptive family. Ukrainian orphan Natalia Grace was adopted by the Barnetts as a six-year-old in 2010, just a year after the release of *Orphan*. The family later claimed that Natalia was an adult woman born with dwarfism and that she was determined to hurt them, which is why they rejected her. As Lynsey Eidell reports, "Over the two years that she spent with the Barnetts, the couple alleged that [Natalia] had tried to poison Kristine's coffee, [and] attempted to drag her towards an electric fence," among other murder attempts. However, a blood test conducted by TruDiagnostic in August of 2023, confirmed that Natalia never lied about her age. There are singular similarities between the Barnetts' claims and the plot of *Orphan*; the film indeed might have inspired the Barnetts' unfounded, monstrous accusations, also fueled by the anxiety of transnational adoptions.

Esther, or Leena, is displaced and alienated both from her original life in Estonia, where her medical condition does not allow her to live a normal life as an adult and finds herself trapped in a permanent state of apparent childhood, and also in her life as Esther, a nine-year-old girl who is gifted and accomplished in piano and art. Leena's first displacement takes place as a patient of a mental hospital. Although the script does not address the origin of her violent and murderous instincts, the lack of agency over her own body (due to her hypopituitarism and the physical limitation of the straitjacket frequently used in the mental institution) and over her mental state seem to be decisive factors. It is undeniable that this loss of control over herself mirrores the lack of agency children have within their families. Balanzategui addresses this concern by claiming that: "The supernatural disturbances of the uncanny children in all of these films emerge from displacement and alienation. The films pivot on an anxious expression of deterritorialization, as a sense of home and belonging gives way to the unhomely disquiet of the 'non-place', isolated or detached from society beyond its bounds" (226).

Orphan explores the differences between adults and children by depicting an adult woman pretending to be a little girl, an information concealed from the public and only made available when Kate Coleman, her adoptive mother, discovers Esther's true identity. This decision to hide the information not only maintains the tension and mystery surrounding Esther and her past, but also allows for the audience to realize that her

attitude is not only odd but not at all childlike. As film critic Roger Ebert puts it: "There is something eerie about her. Something too wise, too knowing, too penetrating." While Esther's brilliant academic attributes could be due to her being gifted, there are incongruences in her behavior. For instance, in a scene when she is at the supermarket with Maxine and her mother, Kate receives a call from Sister Abigail, the nun from Esther's orphanage. This homely scene of a family shopping groceries takes an ominous turn when Esther establishes some boundaries to Kate, refusing to talk to the nun. Her firm decision not to change her outfit for school or her refusal to speak to Abigail, show Esther's determination but also raises suspicion among viewers since it is unusual for a little girl to mark boundaries which not even her mother can trespass.

Kate and John's precipitous decision to adopt without the proper healing from the miscarriage she suffers sends a negative warning about the role of adoptees as a second option (or chance) in the context of mourning. In her review, Manohla Dargis notes that "The new child is meant to take the place of the stillborn fetus who haunts Kate, though alas only metaphorically, a conceit that implies that adoptees are like replacement puppies." However, Esther's alleged Russian origin is also key to the plot and the representation of transnational adoption anxiety, as Balanzategui emphasizes: "In these transnational horror films, the uncanny child is deterritorialized from clear origins and is inscribed with a cultural hybridity" (226). Esther's adoption process is quite quick and this poses the question of what requirements are needed in order to adopt, considering her new family's troubled past with an alcoholic mother and a negligent father. Zilbauer highlights the troubled past of Kate Coleman, who had previously endangered and almost killed little Maxine after being intoxicated with alcohol. In view of Kate's "recent history of alcoholism and child endangerment coupled with her lingering emotional instability," she argues that the Coleman family might not be the most adequate environment for an adopted child.

Moreover, as critic Richard Propes mentions, not only does the movie raise the moral issue of whether adopting to cope with the traumatic event of a miscarriage is right, but also another problematic question, whether it is ethical to have a child play the 'adult' Esther in a movie in which she has to show extreme violence: "The dilemma is, of course, that Esther is so relentlessly brutal in her wrath that it could easily be labeled as morally reprehensible to represent a child in such a light and, as well, to have an actual child actor, 11-year-old Fuhrman, portray such a child." Isabelle Fuhrman had to perform in sensitive scenes such as diverse murders or even a scene in which Esther dresses up in a provocative and sexualized way to seduce John. Intradiagetically, by then the viewer knows of Esther's true identity as an adult with a rare disease, but, extradiegetically, the fact is the young actress is dressed in a strapless dress, wears heavy makeup with crimson lipstick, and has been asked to mimic seducing an adult man. Although most critics praise Fuhrman's brilliant performance, Propes also acknowledges the possible mental strain such roles might have in a young actress: "Quite simply, it's brilliant acting (…) even if the actress seems destined for psychotherapy after tackling this role."

Concerning gender, the three children from the Coleman family are divided according to their gendered hobbies. Esther's interests include music and art, with an intense focus on her obsession for her adoptive father to the point of painting in UV paint quite sexual and graphic representations of her and him. In this way, Esther uses art as

an outlet to show her romantic and sexual desires for John Coleman. Similarly, Maxine, the deaf youngest sister of the family, uses art to confess to her brother Daniel what Esther has made her do and the traumatic events she has witnessed. Art for Maxine is a catalyst through which she can express her fears and traumatic experiences, as her deafness constitutes a language barrier between her and her brother. In contrast to the sisters' interest in art, Daniel enjoys spending time in his tree house with friends, skimming through adult magazines and playing *Guitar Hero* in the console. Thus, *Orphan*'s representation of femininity and masculinity is quite normative and does not challenge any gender expectations.

Orphan, nevertheless, challenges the notion of the child as inherently pure and good. As noted, the uncanny child questions whether children can be evil. The case of Esther as a character is a bit different, as she is not really a child but she is socially perceived as one due to her childlike appearance, the product of her rare condition. However, as her sociopathic tendencies are shown when she is still thought to be a little girl, the viewer faces the question of innocence and purity in children with characters as Max or Daniel being stripped off their innocence by Esther's wrongdoings but also the real child actors (Isabelle Fuhrman as Esther, Jimmy Bennett as Daniel Coleman and Aryana Engineer as Maxine Coleman) having to record explicit bloody scenes.

Orphan, to sum up, offers an interesting take on the uncanny child in the genre of horror cinema. When the initially innocent Esther unveils her true identity, this poses questions about what constitutes a child and an adult, about sexualization and violent scenes including child actors and the topics of grief, loss and mental health issues. This film sheds light on displacement as a key agent in alienating adoptees and the subsequent effects of not receiving proper mental health care through their hardships. In this way, Kate and Leena both show the importance of mental institutions in the rehabilitation process from different maladaptive behaviors. Similarly, the movie shows a variety of child perspectives on violence, alcoholic parents, emotionally absent father figures and the power of art as an expressive outlet for children to convey their emotions, specially n horrific circumstances.

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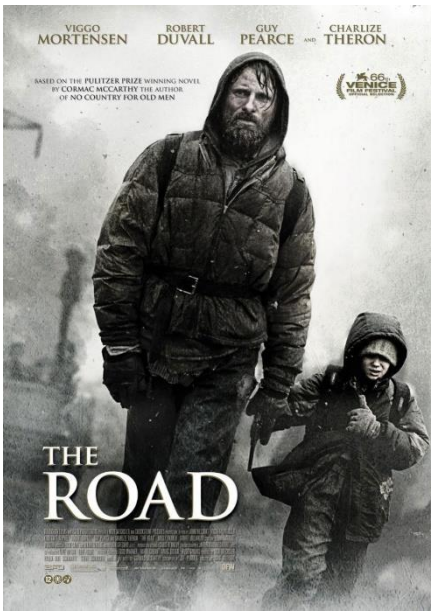
The Road: Walking with the Last God

YIFAN ZHOU

Release date: September 3, 2009 (VIFF)
Director: John Hillcoat
Screenwriter: Joe Penhall
Based on the novel by Cormac McCarthy
Producers: Nick Wechsler, Steve Schwartz, Paula Mae Schwartz
Cast: Viggo Mortensen (Man), Kodi Smi-McPhee (Boy), Charlize Theron (Woman), Robert Duvall (Old Man), Guy Pearce (Veteran), Molly Parker (Motherly Woman), Garret Dillahunt (Gang Member), Michael Kenneth Williams (Thief)
Companies: 2929 Productions
Genre: drama, survival
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0898367/



Summary: A father and son's journey in a post-apocalyptic world

After an unspecified catastrophe, the world becomes a vast wasteland, with desolation and darkness as far as the eye can see. Human civilization has collapsed in the calamity of doomsday. Under these extreme conditions, survivors resort to desperate measures, including appalling cannibalism. A nameless father and his son embark on an endless journey towards the south, trying to survive the harsh winter. On the road, the various horrors they encounter intertwine with the man's dreams about his late wife and the boy's innocent questions about whether or not they and others are good guys. As time passes, the father's health deteriorates, and he eventually dies, leaving the young boy almost defenseless. On the beach, the boy encounters another group of survivors, who suspiciously follow him and his papa before. Holding a pistol, the boy asks the new guy THE question—"are you also carrying the fire?"

Analysis: Die with dignity or live in desperation?

The script of Hillcoat's film was based on the Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Road* (2006) by American writer Cormac McCarthy, known for his profound and exploratory writing style. After reading this novel, producer Nick Wechsler came across the film *The Proposition* by John Hillcoat (b.1961, Queensland, Australia but raised in Canada). Impressed by the subtlety of the director, Wechsler decided to hire Hillcoat to direct this film, for "There was something beautiful in the way John captured the stark primitive humanity of the West in that movie" (in Fleming). Andrew Keller Estes draws

connections between McCarthy's works and broader themes in American literature, highlighting the allure of settings and environments that often symbolize dualities such as good and bad, positive and negative, with wilderness sometimes portrayed as sites of both sin and death (18). The stark primitive humanity of Hillcoat's style coincided with McCarthy's work, revealing vividly the dynamics in this love story between father and son.

The film was shot in the real places mentioned in the novel including Pennsylvania and areas devastated by hurricane Katrina (see Wikipedia). The depiction of abundant manmade and naturally decayed locations, accentuated by harsh weather conditions, creates an aura of mystery surrounding the underlying cause of the global trauma depicted. Additionally, these atmospheric elements serve to immerse actors, particularly the young Kodi Smi-McPhee, in the emotional tones of the narrative. At first, both director Hillcoat and the protagonist Viggo Mortensen (the Man) revealed their worry about how the producers could find a boy who had the ability to read the book and play the role (see FilmIsNwo). Fortunately, they were able to find young Kodi, still today an actor, then aged 12 (the boy is only seven in the novel). In the same interview, Charlize Theron, who plays the Mother (none of the characters have names), remarked that the chemistry between the father and son was particularly captivating.

The grayish and obscure tone of the film overwhelms viewers. A gloomy sentiment permeates the entire movie, interrupted only by moments when the Man reminisces about beautiful times shared with his wife, the Woman. A nostalgic but colorful filter warms his memories, simultaneously sharpening the frigid reality. The Man and the Boy, father and son, tread their way to the south, hoping to survive winter. On the brink of utter despair, the figure of the Boy kindles both our longing for humanity's enduring resilience and our deep-seated anxiety for his survival.

Walking with a child on this road is akin to carrying a treasure box in a dangerous place. Yet, although the father deeply loves his son, his actions also have elements of self-preservation. In that cruel environment, with practically no life, survival is the top priority. To ensure his son's survival, he has to take extreme and strict measures, demonstrating his authoritarian parenting. As Baumrind suggests, authoritarian parenting styles involve controlling children's attitudes and behaviors through strict requirements of conduct. Obviously, the boy has little autonomy of choice. He passively trails his father's footsteps, adrift in this cannibalistic world. When the boy expresses that he wishes he was with his mom, the father rejects his wish: "You mean you wish you were dead? You mustn't say that. It's a bad thing to say." While intended to protect his son, such behavior deprives the son of his rightful freedom to express his feelings and reduces him to a mere extension of the father's will to live.

The father sees the son as the very heart in his chest, his sole reason for being. It might be argued that the Boy is the man's God, the only reason and source of courage that keeps the Man alive. However, he neglects his son's mental needs. He doesn't realize that his son has his own thoughts, and that his son also worries about both of them. This raises a key question: is the father motivated by profound love for the child, or by a selfish instinct of self-preservation? Dragging his son into the perils of a harsh existence, exposing him to the threat of death, does this constitute genuine love? As a child, the Boy should grow up untroubled, without having to endure such harrowing ordeals. Has

the father deprived the child of his rightful entitlements? Has he exploited the Boy's innocence and helplessness in any way?

To be or not to be, that seems to be the question, to die with dignity or to live in desperation. The film portrays distinct responses from the father and the Mother. When the father and son encounter an old man on the edge of starvation, the old man murmurs the sentence "No. It's foolish to ask for luxuries in times like these," meaning death. In stark contrast, the Mother expresses her despair in the Man's memory right before she leaves to commit suicide: "They're gonna rape me and then they're gonna rape your son. And then they're gonna kill us and eat us." For her, she and her child are doomed to be ravaged and devoured; death is the only deliverance. For the old man, who may have consumed his own son and still treads the road overwhelmed by mourning, death is a luxury. These diametrically opposed perspectives on life and death reflect the divergence in male and female psyches under extremities.

Ponder this: the Boy has been thrust into this cruel, apocalyptic world since birth, never experiencing peace and joy. His parents seem to have imparted little moral guidance. Yet, he harbors kindness, and is driven to be a good person. The boy is by no means naïve. He witnesses suicide, and he even wears a blanket removed from a corpse by his father right in front of him. Still, he consistently demonstrates empathy. When they meet the starving elderly man, the child implores his father to spare some canned food for charity. Later, when they narrowly escape a robbery, the boy insists on leaving the thief some survival supplies, unwilling to leave him naked to die. His innate inclination towards benevolence is precious in the polluted and perilous environment, reminding us of the enduring radiance of human nature even in darkness.

This raises the key question: what would a true God be like? Is it the pure innocence of a child, or merely a romanticized notion of salvation and hope? Though the film offers no answers, it provides a starting point for reflection. It seems that even in the darkest moments, kindness and compassion are worth pursuing. Buddha once sacrificed his flesh to feed an eagle. Is our last 'God' on the road going to bring virtues to the others? Will he succeed in such a dystopia? However, maintaining kindness and compassion in the face of cruelty may also bring suffering upon oneself. Intriguingly, Nida et al analyze the Boy's character from a psychological perspective, suggesting that he employs a projective identification as an important defense mechanism because of his mental and emotional chaos (5750). By projecting his own helplessness and cluelessness onto others and attributing these feelings to outer objects, the Boy guarantees himself a certain satisfaction and stability. While his acts of kindness may initially seem innate, Nida et al. suggest that they may serve as a coping mechanism in the face of his harsh reality. As the Boy traverses the road, he is forced to confront challenges that force him to grow and adapt. His journey becomes a poignant exploration of resilience and the human capacity for compassion amidst adversity. Ultimately, the boy's transformation underscores the harsh realities of growing up in a dystopian world, where innocence is both a strength and a vulnerability.

When the Man dies (possibly of a lung infection), the Boy stands alone on the beach. Though he wants to go with his father, he doesn't choose to use the pistol to end his life, at least not immediately. But is this perseverance born of the child's independent choice or a primal survival instinct? We cannot be sure. Leaving almost no time for him

to contemplate, a veteran approaches him. The poor little boy raises his pistol, asking the veteran THE questions: are you one of the good guys? Do you also carry the fire? At last, he chooses to join the veteran's family, though the doubt lingers on our hearts about their intentions as there are hungry children in it.

Luke Davies comments in his review that although the film continually riffs on the theme of whether "we're the ones who are carrying the moral goodness" (the fire to which the Boy refers), audiences might not respond. Mortensen delivers a gut-wrenching performance, the effect of which, ultimately, strangely, is not gut-wrenching. The child indeed endures too much hardship and trauma and it is evident that he should not have been exposed to any philosophical dilemmas concerning life and death so young. However, his resilience and kindness also represent the essence of humanity, bringing a glimmer of hope. While we highly appreciate his qualities, we should not completely ignore the cost of such a sacrifice. Perhaps the film intends to remind us of the preciousness of hope, but also that hope comes at a price. This prompts us to reflect on the concept of 'value' itself: are we affirming the sacrifice, or questioning this way of attaining hope? Can anyone survive a situation so extreme?

In conclusion, the portrayal of the 'last God' in *The Road* compels us to ponder the complexities of human nature and the sacrifices it demands. We often idealize the child as the savior of humanity, yet he is but a pawn in a larger struggle for survival. Forced to endure unimaginable hardship and trauma, he becomes a beacon of hope at a profound cost. As we contemplate his journey, we must question our own complicity in his fate and reflect on who truly stands alongside him. In a world where hope flickers precariously amidst darkness, we are reminded of the resilience of the human spirit and the sacrifices it entails. It is a reminder that innocence should be preserved, and that the burdens of salvation should not rest on the shoulders of the innocent. Thus, we are urged to contemplate in as much depth as we can: who is truly 'walking with the last God'?

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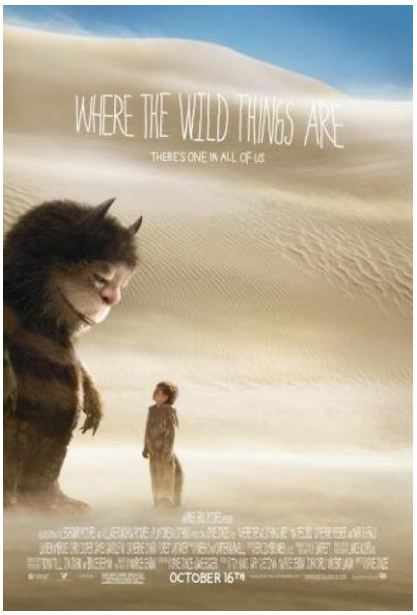
Where The Wild Things Are: Imaginative Creatures or Monsters Within?

YASAMAN PARASTOOK

Release date: 13 October 2009
Director: Spike Jonze
Screenwriters: Spike Jonze, Dave Eggers
Based on the children's book by Maurice Sendak
Producers: Tom Hanks, Gary Goetzman, Maurice Sendak, John Carls, Vincent Landay
Cast: Max Records (Max), Catherine Keener (Mom), Mark Ruffalo (Mom's boyfriend), Pepita Emmerichs (Max's sister)
Companies: Warner Bros, Pictures Legendary Pictures, Village Roadshow Pictures, KLG Film Invest GmbH, The Worldwide Maurice International Company
Genre: adventure, drama, family, fantasy
Nationality: Australia, USA, Germany
IMDB:www.imdb.com/title/tt0386117/



Summary: A boy in his own world

Where the Wild Things Are is an adaptation of Maurice Sendak's classic children's book. Max is a young boy struggling with feelings of loneliness and frustration in his own world. After an argument with his mother, Max runs away and finds himself on an island inhabited by the Wild Things, large and emotionally complex creatures. Max, seeking acceptance and a sense of belonging, convinces the Wild Things to accept him as their king. Initially thrilled by his newfound authority and the freedom to be wild, Max soon realizes the challenges of leadership as the Wild Things' interpersonal conflicts mirror his struggles with understanding and managing his emotions. Despite his efforts to bring balance to the group, Max finally understands the limitations of his role and the importance of facing reality and decides to go back home.

Analysis: Childhood imagination or monstruous traits?

Maurice Sendak's original book, published in 1963, was revolutionary for its effort to explore the complex emotions and behaviors of children, and Spike Jonze's film adaptation prevails in this approach. The layered essence of childhood is demonstrated in nine-year-old Max's rage, his need for connection with his family members, and his desire to have control over his surroundings. It is quite apparent that the relationship

between family members affects children's mental health (see Altheide). Defining children's fears and the conflicts that limit their social behavior and protecting them from social issues and dangers is a global concern that the director addresses with ability in this film.

Jonze (real name Adam Spiegel) is an American filmmaker whose first feature film was the extremely singular *Being John Malkovich* (1999). *Where the Wild Things Are* was his first film as a scriptwriter as well. The editors comments in the introduction to the collective volume *Refocus: The Films of Spike Jonze* that "He has often crossed the boundaries of entertainment and experimentalism" (Wilkins and Moss-Wellington Epub). Also, Jonze has emphasized in his interviews that his films are always personal down to the last details; that might be the reason why his films are strange, philosophical, and complicated, as it is in this movie:

> "What I never waver about is what the movie's about to me and the feeling I started with. Sometimes I just need to close my eyes and get quiet or close my eyes and go for a walk to remind myself, 'What's this scene about'? 'What's this moment about?' 'What's this movie about?' We might be in the middle of set with 100 extras and it's really loud or we might have done a scene 50 times. I'll just need to reconnect to what I started the movie with and why I'm doing it then I can always go back to exactly what the scene should be." (in Kaufman)

Jonze addresses social, philosophical, and psychological issues. These are presented in *Where the Wild Things Are* by connecting parental behavior with social issues. Parental involvement is always desirable, but the long working hours and economic challenges parents face have led them to be neglectful of their parental responsibilities and cause new obstacles for the child's development (Zhao, et al.). As seen in the film, Max is experiencing a state of restlessness due to his weak relationship with his only parental figure, his mother, which prompts his escape from home.

Childhood maltreatment is recognized as the primary factor influencing children's socialization, personality formation, and decision-making skills, which can lead to physical and mental problems that may restrict their social behavior and alter their future life. The importance of this phenomenon lies in its positive correlation with prosocial behavior and emotional intelligence. Diverse scholars note that this trait is part of a lower level of personality defined by a constellation of self-perception and emotion-related dispositions (see Mavroveli, et al.). Max's compelling imaginary world is indicative of how influential imagination is in forming a child's worldview and represents how children experience a gap between childhood and adulthood while growing up; because of this, they tend to flee into the realm of imagination to maintain their childhood freedom. According to Piaget, children's imagination leads to improvements in their skills, knowledge, and overall development process. He argues the case that a child's capacity for imaginative play is crucial for their development both physically and mentally. Accordingly, creating a nurturing environment with mental security and peace can be an effective approach to facilitating children's socialization process.

Max is portrayed as a child who lacks friends and has a strained relationship with his family; he is an eccentric boy who has difficulties being sociable. He is, despite this, a typical 6 to 8-year-old boy; a naughty character engaging in mischief such as chasing after the dog with a fork. Max is impulsive and actively vandalizes home and roars at his

mother. He is exploring independence and being bold. Like other children, he is growing up in quiet confidence. His imagination is a powerful tool for achieving independence and order in his mind, forming a world to improve his communications (Lowne). This is why his mother calls him a "wild thing" when he is cheeky to her and he is sent to bed without supper.

Representing the wild creatures as independent of gender can promote mental freedom for all children, allowing them to explore without being constrained by the issues and limitations they may be facing. Jeff Levy argues that this might be a subtle way to convey a message to society that children who appear abnormal need to be accepted and encouraged to step out of their comfort zone. Levy discusses how human beings are chosen to help others and how people's struggles can change their mindset. Accordingly, these wild creatures serve as a source of inspiration for their audience by showcasing both the negative and positive aspects of life. They help children understand bravery, strength, fears, and the ability to overcome adversity, bringing them closer to themselves (Levy). It is worth noting that Sendak's childhood was affected by the loss of many family members during the Holocaust (he was the child of Polish Jewish immigrants). Some researchers believe in the relationship between Sendak's difficult childhood experiences and his stories, which is significant because he illustrated *Where the Wild Things Are* himself (Turan). The fact is that the monsters in the story are genderless, depicted as grotesque creatures capable of conveying different emotions and feelings to the children depending on their treatment, the fear of being separated from caregivers and family members to become an only child in the story, and the absence of a scientific basis for the entire narrative. This is because children have an inquiring mind and try to find the reasons and processes behind every change in the story: "The question 'why?' is a favorite with preschoolers. It can make the cleverest adult feel like an uneducated primary school dropout" (Sorin).

Investigating the reasons why monsters are included in children's fictions takes us to Freud's theories. Freud believed that using monsters can unlock new insights into the unconscious parts of children's personalities, helping us to understand their mental conflicts and perceptions of the true value of things in life. Monsters are not necessarily terrifying for all children and adults in today's fiction; this is why they are so ubiquitous, standing as symbols of human vulnerabilities and crises. Thus, every time we see a monster, a 'wild thing', our imagination plays a role in clarifying our response and mapping the inner and outer forces that have shaped our fears as Asma explains that: "Monsters can stand as symbols of human vulnerability and crisis, and as such they play imaginative foils for thinking about our own responses to menace."

Beyond his personality, family also matters. Max, is an eccentric boy, who delves into the intricacies of life and ponders over his queries internally. Consequently, he endeavors to establish connections between everything he observes or hears within his family, fueling his fantasies. This notion is exemplified by his mother referring to him as a "wild thing" when he lets out roars and by his choice of wearing a wolf suit and expressing his anger, sadness, and disappointment by saying "I will eat you" to his mother. Max is trying to hide his real personality, his need for affection and attention, and finds it easier to let out his feelings by pretending to be a wild wolf (Sorin). These instances highlight his desire for a strong nurturing bond, despite circumstances not aligning. Essentially,

Max utilizes this self-protecting mechanism as a means of unearthing his concealed emotions and comprehending his family dynamics. If the reactions of his family members were different, Max would have constructed an alternate whimsical world.

Sendak mentions that he was constantly worried as a child, always thinking about how adults were big, different creatures for him: "It was inconceivable to me as a child that I would be an adult. (…) They were awful, they were mostly dreadful, and if the option were to become an adult was to become another dreadful creature" (in Gross). Co-scriptwriter Dave Eggers (a noted novelist) explains that the creatures in the film are depictions of humans from a child's worldview: "huge, dangerous, hairy, smelly, full of pain and often finding it difficult to sleep at night. But they're also just as capable of joy and goofiness, and irrational acts of creativity and hope, as children" (in Heller). Accordingly, the wild things in the movie can be read as a reflection of Max's perception of his real family, friends, and environment. Although Sendak has never mentioned the presence of Freudian ideas in *Where the Wild Things Are*, it is clear that, following Freudian tenets, Max is imagining a situation which he can take control, and in which he can order others about as a king with no limitations, unlike what is happening in his real life. Sendak asserts that "Being a child was being a child, was being a creature without power, without pocket money, without escape routes of any kind. So, I didn't want to be a child" (in Gross). This lack of agency is, in the end, the main issue Max struggles with. Parental neglect, the disregard for his decisions, and his lack of confidence, transform him into the eccentric child that imagines the no less eccentric wild things and the land where he can be king until he finds that privileged but onerous position too perilously close to being… an adult.

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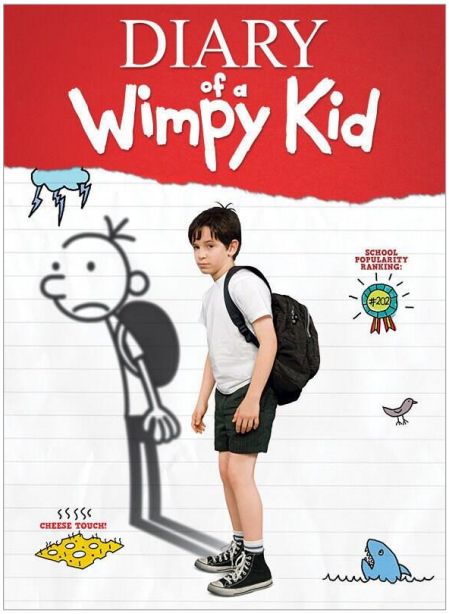
Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Generational Role Model?

ZUZANNA SARLEJ

Release date: 19 March 2010
Director: Thor Freudenthal
Screenwriters: Jackie Filgo, Jeff Filgo, Gabe Sachs, Jeff Judah
Based on the children's novel by Jeff Kinney
Producers: Nina Jacobson, Jeff Kinney, Brad Simpson, Ethan Smith
Cast: Zachary Gordon (Greg), Devon Bostick (Rodrick), Robert Capron (Rowley), Rachael Harris (Susan Heffley), Steve Zahn (Frank Heffley), Connor/Owen Fielding (Manny Heffley), Chloë Grace Moretz (Angie Steadman)
Companies: Fox 2000 Pictures, Color Force, Dune Entertainment
Genre: comedy, drama, family
Nationality: UK, USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1196141



Summary: The search for popularity

Eleven-year-old Greg Heffley lives in an idealized American town with his parents, his older brother Rodrick, and his younger brother Manny. As Greg is about to begin middle school, he becomes fixated on the ambition of becoming popular and being voted 'class favorite' in the yearbook. He worries that his uncool friend Rowley Jefferson, who is in no hurry to grow up, will make this goal more difficult to achieve. Greg undertakes numerous challenges, such as joining the wrestling team, becoming a member of the safety patrol, and acting in the school play, all with the failed intention of boosting his popularity. His selfish actions strain his relationship with Rowley, who ultimately becomes more broadly liked and accepted than Greg. In the end, he and Rowley reconcile, and Greg learns the most important lesson: that true friendship is more valuable than popularity.

Analysis: The challenge of finding a role model for boys

"Well, I was a bit of a wimpy kid when I was growing up" (in Bennet) declared Jeff Kinney, the creator of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid,* in a recent interview. The inspiration for the extremely successful book series and multi-million-dollar franchise is clear: Kinney wanted to capture the experience of an average kid, relatable and often wimpy. Born in

1971 (in Fort Washington, Maryland) he hoped to become a newspaper cartoonist, a dream which fell through due to his limited artistic skill but was eventually transformed into a more lucrative career as a children's literature star author, with over 290 million copies sold in more than 60 languages.[8] The story of Greg Heffley became a trendsetter in storytelling for pre-teens, both in terms of content and format. The *Wimpy Kid* universe is ever-expanding: ongoing book series, extensive merchandise, online resources, and, of course, movie adaptations. Between 2010 and 2017, four live-action movies were released, followed by fully animated Disney Plus adaptations in 2021 and 2022.

As Karin Beeler points out in her essay on the film *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2010), the mix of live-action and animation elements reinforces the mutual links of novel and movie and ties the works together, generating in turn a larger interest (89). The *Wimpy Kid* universe relies on and enhances media savviness in its audience, the majority of whom are children under 12. The intertextuality and intervisuality are explained in the companion book, *The Wimpy Kid Movie Diary: How Greg Heffley Went Hollywood* (2011), equipping children with a better understanding of the medium and of concepts like breaking the fourth wall (Beeler 94-95), a narrative trick incorporated in the movie. Naturally, the extensive multimedia presence makes Greg Heffley an important character in the collective cultural awareness of young audiences, a fact that makes the task of adapting his story all the more demanding.

Thor Freudenthal was the director who undertook the challenge. A German-born director, he is best known for directing *Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters* (2013) and other family-friendly movies. He claimed that this project was particularly exciting as the convention of the diary gave him a "license to go beyond our average kids-movie" (in Rivera). The extent to which the *Wimpy Kid* movie is unusual remains debatable, given that numerous children's films, including some from Disney, interact directly with the audience and invite them to get to know their secrets. Yet, *Wimpy Kid* certainly acquired a significant fan base, regardless of its originality. This audience, young readers excited to see their favorite story translated onto the big screen, is arguably one of the toughest crowds. As many reviews, including one from *The New York Times,* have pointed out, the 2010 adaptation failed to rise to the challenges, leaving the young viewers not so much offended but worse—bored (Scott).

This is despite the good job done by the actors. Both Kenney and Freudenthal mentioned how rewarding the casting process was, particularly for distinctive characters such as Robert Capron in the role of Rowley Jefferson, the chubby best friend with pure energy, or Grayson Russel, who plays Fregley, an odd and gross classmate. Casting Greg was slightly more challenging, but Zachary Gordon ultimately captured the arrogance and laziness of the protagonist in a (supposedly) likable way (in Rivera). To this day, this is Zachary Gordon's most notable performance, one which earned him immense popularity amongst his peers.

'Peers', precisely, seems to be the right word, since although the main protagonists are male, girls became equally interested in the narrative, perhaps because they are on average more avid readers (see Jabbar and Nosheen). Jeff Kinney admitted

[8] According to the official Wimpy Kid website: https://wimpykid.com/books/ (Accessed 25.05.2024)

that upon publication, parents and teachers sent him emails of gratitude because their "reluctant readers" were really fond of his book. He clarified that "'reluctant reader' can sometimes mean code for boys" (Kinney). Even the characters themselves are divided along that line. Greg, absolutely disinterested in books, is in stark opposition to the only two notable female characters. Patty Farrell, played by Laine MacNeil, is a stereotypical straight-A student, who additionally takes on the role of Greg's chief enemy.[9] Chloë Grace Moretz's character, Angie Steadman, is a filler character invented solely for the movie. She is a wise-beyond-her-years, Allen Ginsberg-reading 12-year-old who acts as Greg's moral compass—needless to say, a completely unrelatable character who did not make it to the sequel. Patty and Angie emerge as one-dimensional and unfavorably archetypal girl characters.

Still, there are many more narratives specifically catered to girls, where the female audience can look up to more well-rounded and complex female protagonists. *Dork Diaries* or *Dear Dumb Diary* (also adapted into a movie) are examples pointed out by Nancy Taber and Vera Woloshyn. In their essay, they argue that all of these narratives promote heteronormative gender roles (227) across multiple themes, one of them being body image. While for girls the old quest of staying thin remains, boys need to get big and muscular. In sports, boys get divided into different weight categories, and Greg is desperate to move up from 'Chihuahas' to 'Bulldogs'.

Another body-related aspect that seems to be gendered is the broadly understood grossness. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* is full of burps, farts, and gross moles, including a scene when Greg urinates on his older brother, Rodrick. What seems to be somewhat of a rite of passage for boys is often a taboo topic for girls. Natural body processes, like menstruation, are thoroughly avoided in public discourse and fictional narratives, regarded as something unspoken and often gross. This view on periods is rather flawed and outdated, but it does beg the question: do girls have societal permission to be gross? Secondary considerations arise about whether being gross is something girls should aspire to or want to be included in, or if the category of grossness should be altogether redefined. However, the conclusion remains, supported by the adaptation, that grossness is an aspect of adolescence almost monopolized by boys.

A pre-pubescent theme that applies to both boys and girls, although in different capacities, is popularity. Typically, the quest to fame and shallowness associated with it are gendered female. Numerous female protagonists, like the iconic Cady in *Mean Girls* (2004) or Tai in *Clueless* (1995),[10] struggle with insecurity and seek external validation, usually by mingling with the popular crowds. For Greg, this issue is less about socializing and more about avoiding bullies (Taber and Woloshyn 231); ensuring your social status as a boy consists of steering clear of becoming a victim, rather than being particularly likable. An interesting observation from Taber and Woloshyn refers to the role of individuality in determining popularity in terms of gender; the position in relation to a sought-after group or the most popular person is what determines the status of a girl, whereas "the boys have no such desire to be a certain boy" (239). In other words, the

[9] Notably, this is a movie-specific development; in the book, the dislike towards Patty is one-sided.
[10] Though both these films are set in high school rather than middle school, I believe they encapsulate the archetype of the insecure teenage girl seeking recognition, so prevalent in popular culture.

criteria that make a boy 'cool' are less fixed than those that apply to a girl. At the same time, more freedom means less guidance, which explains Greg's unfruitful chase for a group, sport, or activity that will catapult him into middle school stardom. Paradoxically, given the immense popularity of his character, it is not clear whether Greg truly became a generational role model, a certain boy to be.

"I love it when writers let kid characters be incredibly flawed people instead of just making them one-dimensional, precious angels" enthused one of the more favorable *Letterboxd* reviewers (Tarantella), though many more expressed popular disdain towards this (overly?) flawed character. Jeff Kinney, who at the time of writing was reading *Harry Potter,* with its courageous and magical protagonist, seems to have accomplished his task of creating a more relatable character. But was he also aspiring to bring to life an upgraded role model for tweens? Greg Heffley has been identified as an anti-hero, a protagonist who "lack[s] some of the conventional attributes of traditional heroes like courage or morality" (Hussein Al-Jubouri 17).

Some of Greg's 'villain backstory' can be explained by his being a middle child trapped between a violent older brother and a spoiled younger one, without enough attention from the parents. What he lacks at home he wants to overcompensate for at school, which is a difficult task considering the harsh reality of being a middle schooler. A situation definitely relatable to many 11-year-olds, perhaps even sympathy-inducing for others, yet not severe enough to explain the laziness and arrogance of the protagonist. "As a parent," Jacobs writes, "all you can do is pray your children understand irony. And that they don't view the Greg Heffleys as role models." This perspective reflects the worry about the superhero-to-antihero pipeline and appeals to the intelligence of young viewers, much like the narrative itself appears to their media savviness.

If not Greg Heffley, then who? Asking children (or boys, more specifically) to reevaluate the actions of their favorite character is, by extension, asking them to invent their aspirations, figure out their problems, and essentially navigate puberty without much guidance. This conclusion, though possibly exaggerated, builds upon the notion that fictional role models are crucial in the development of often confused and impressionable youth. Yet this is a figure that seems to be lacking in the current fictional landscape, especially the one catered to boys. One of the main findings of a research project that this essay is a part of is that the image of girls in movies is progressing (though slightly), but that of boys seems stuck. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* exemplifies this issue, presenting a relatable yet unsatisfactory and uninspiring role model for the younger generation of boys.

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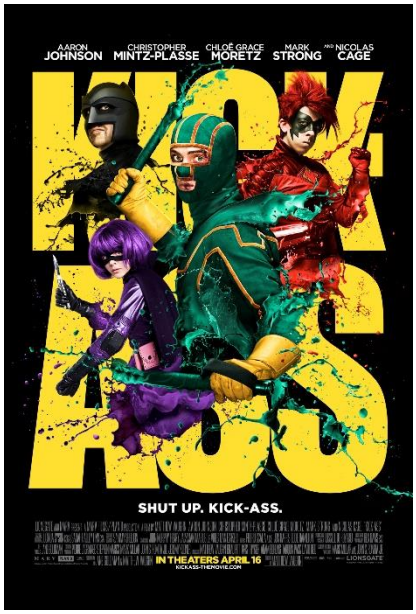
Kick-Ass: Of Masked Vigilantes and Female Violence

ANDRÉS SANTIAGO BERRÓN

Release date: 12 March 2010
Director: Matthew Vaughn
Screenwriters: Jane Goldman, Matthew Vaughn
Producers: Matthew Vaughn, Brad Pitt, Kris Thykier, Adam Bohling, Tarquin Pack, David Reid
Cast: Aaron Taylor Johnson (Kick-Ass), Chloë Grace Moretz (Hit-Girl), Nicolas Cage (Big Daddy), Christopher Charles Mintz Plasse (Red Mist)
Companies: Marv Films, Plan B Entertainment
Genre: dark comedy, superhero
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1250777/



Summary: Powerless superheroes

Dave Lizewski is a teenager who feels he is a social outcast. When he and his friends get mugged, he decides to become a real-life superhero, Kick-Ass. After a life-endangering failure, he receives attention by means of a viral video and he eventually meets Big Daddy and Hit-Girl, a father and daughter superhero duo. They want to put an end to Frank D'Amico's crime empire, since he framed Daddy, causing his arrest, the loss of his job, and his wife's suicide. When Kick-Ass and Big Daddy are captured, and Hit-Girl is wounded, she rescues them though too late to save her father's life. Kick-Ass decides then to help Hit Girl avenge Big Daddy. Together, they storm the building owned by Frank D'Amico, managing to kill him. Despite her initial reticence, Hit Girl reveals her real identity to Kick-Ass. She then starts attending the same school Dave attends, and their life returns to normality, with their superhero personas finally discarded.

Analysis: A bloody, potty-mouthed superheroine

Matthew Vaughn's 2010 dark comedy superhero film, *Kick-Ass*, was developed at the same time as Mark Millar and John Romita Jr.'s eponymous comic book. Nevertheless, the film's tone is extremely different from that of the graphic novel, which is much more cynical and darker. This difference can be perceived in one of the main characters, the 11-year-old Hit-Girl, whose usage of foul language and gruesome murders of criminals provoked the consternation of some critics. By presenting the young Chloë Grace Moretz as a ruthless vigilante whose behavior contrasts with the

expectations of female childhood, the filmmakers generate a seemingly confusing discourse regarding the role of superhero fiction in the upbringing of children, as well as the consequences and implications of infantile engagement with violence and with vulgar language.

In order to understand Mindy Macready, whose alter ego is the purple-clad Hit-Girl, we ought to take into account her relationship with her father. Our introduction to them is a scene in which Damon (alias Big Daddy) is convincing his daughter to undergo a peculiar sort of training: he is about to shoot her with a revolver. The girl is noticeably scared, but her father attempts to calm her down by making her recite some facts regarding the mechanical workings of the weapon, which he has managed to make her memorize. It is later revealed that Mindy, who is home-schooled, lives in an apartment with Damon, and that the walls therein are lined with firearms of all sorts. In a sort of compensation for her lack of formal education, Damon has made sure that his daughter becomes acquainted with a vast amount of information regarding guns and knives, a fact that is showcased in multiple scenes. It seems evident that this is producing abnormal results; her knowledge of violent tools is far beyond that which would be expected of any normal adult, let alone an 11-year-old girl. Despite this, the screenwriter, Jane Goldman, asserted in an interview that "We just really wanted Hit Girl to be a character who, in a sense, simply happens to be an eleven-year-old girl" (in Day). However, it is clear that, even if Mindy did not participate in her father's vigilante adventures, she is not comparable to any other girl of her age. On the contrary, she has suffered from her father's militaristic education, which, in the comics, is coupled with right-wing ideological indoctrination. The film avoids politics to make Damon—as well as Mindy—as sympathetic as possible. It also should be noted that, by shooting Mindy, Damon desires to help his daughter overcome her fear of guns, a fear that she should not be experiencing to begin with, but one that, evidently, she has developed during her activities as a sidekick to her father's vigilante persona.

Despite her fears, the father shoots her and she is thrown back, experiencing for the first time the violent force of a bullet impacting against her bulletproof vest. This scene, meant to shock the audience, relies on the contrast between Mindy's innocent appearance, highlighted by her childlike eyes and outfit—meant to appeal to the spectator's sympathy for cuteness—with her behavior when dressed as Hit-Girl, which is revealed later. The father's Ned Flanders-esque appearance also makes his actions striking, particularly since his Batmanesque superhero persona, Big Daddy, looks completely different. A desire to parody ideas concerning the father-daughter bonding is evidenced by Mindy's desire to get ice-cream and go to the bowling alley after enduring two more shots. The next scene further confuses the audience's expectation of 'girliness' by having Mindy play a joke on her father: she initially states that she wants a puppy and a doll for her birthday, but then reveals that she actually would like a butterfly knife. Her usage of cuss words also starts in this scene, upsetting any misdirected impression of her being at all yet another example of innocent female childhood.

Later, the movie presents Mindy in her first action scene. This is accompanied by up-beat music making her actions seem playful rather than heroic; the representation of the violence itself is meant to be taken as entertainment, or just something to provoke laughter and amusement due to how unbelievable it is that a pre-teen girl could chop off

a gangster's leg, while smirking at the protagonist, Kick-Ass, as if proud of herself. It is interesting to note that Chloë Grace Moretz had to train for the action scenes in ways similar to Mindy's own training—although, certainly, meant for altogether different ends. The actress apparently "practised gun-handling and learned how to use the swords and butterfly knives wielded with utter authority on-screen" (in Wallace). The appropriateness of teaching a 12-year-old, even if for an acting role, to make use of violent tools, such as the ones mentioned in this article, seems somewhat questionable; besides this, "shooting the action sequences proved gruelling" (in Wallace) for Chloë Grace Moretz. The making of the film proved to be an altogether physically exhausting experience for the performer, who nevertheless seems to have found it enjoyable, stating that the final action scene was her favorite: "It's so fun; it was the coolest thing ever" (in Carrol).

It must be taken into account that, when challenged by his former friend Marcus (who was once Mindy's foster father), Damon states that he has attempted to present their vigilante activities as a game to his daughter, not to "brainwash her," which is what Marcus accuses him of. The filmmakers represent this 'playfulness' by means of the music that accompanies her action scenes, as noted, as well as by the videogame-like POV camera in the scene in which Hit-Girl rescues Big Daddy and Kick-Ass. Evoking what appears to be the style of first-person shooters, the filmmakers engage with the controversy regarding the effects of videogame violence in children. The implication seems to be that Mindy herself perceives her actions in that way, as if she was playing a videogame, not conceiving of her actions as ultimately real. This, of course, is possible in part due to her adoption of a superhero costume and moniker, which helps delimit Mindy's actions from those undertaken by Hit-Girl.

Because of the contrast between her character and the expectations of female childhood, Hit-Girl has provoked much controversy. Some scholars, such as Keith Friedlander, affirm that "Hit-Girl is a subversive figure whose entrance into the adult world of R-rated movie violence pushes at the limits of acceptable gender and age roles" (86). There is no doubt about this, yet the question is whether the film condemns, glorifies, or trivializes vigilante violence and, what is more, the manipulation of children by their parents to partake in it. Scriptwriter Jane Goldman has also emphasized Hit-Girl's subversiveness, stating that "she's a feminist hero by token of the fact that she pays no attention to gender stereotypes. I think she also doesn't want special treatment because she's a girl" (in Day). This view is echoed by Mark Millar, who stressed that "people were positive about Hit-Girl even saying she was empowering female character" (in Fetters), and by Chloë Grace Moretz, who asserted that playing Hit-Girl fulfilled her desire to get "an action hero, woman empowerment, awesome, take charge leading role" (in Itzkoff).

What seems to be ignored here is the fact that Hit-Girl only acts the way she does because she has been taught by her father from a very early age that this is a proper way to address criminality. Vigilante justice is certainly far from ideal, causing problems to law enforcement, and leading to the deaths of many who participate in it; it is, besides this, certainly not something that a responsible parent would recommend to their children. It could be affirmed that, rather than an empowered heroine, Hit-Girl is an urban version of a brainwashed child soldier, who murders criminals irrespectively of the severity of their crimes (some of those she kills, such as the woman in Rasul's apartment, are not shown to be part of any criminal organization at all) and of the circumstances that led them to

commit actions that are against the law. Mindy is taken away and hidden from Marcus, who certainly seems to be a better father than Damon, so that she can continue helping her disturbed father fulfil his personal revenge, no matter the cost. It might be true that Mindy challenges "sacrosanct (...) standards" (Friedlander 86), but that does not mean that she is something other than, as suggested above, the vigilante equivalent of ideologically indoctrinated child soldiers; it is inconceivable to perceive the role played by these as somehow empowering for boys. It must be admitted, in spite of this, that the cinematic presence of Hit-Girl allows for the embodiment—or filmic representation—of the real-life engagement by female children with superhero narratives. A study run by Jackie Marsh found that "superhero play is strongly attractive to girls, who explore agency through such play and actively position themselves as females within a heroic discourse" (209).

The most troubling incident is Hit-Girl's response to Frank when he taunts her noting that she never plays. This could be understood either as a reversal of the notion that her agency has been overruled by her father's brainwashing, instead portraying her as a vigilante of her own accord all along; or as a transformation: she now does not distinguish between Mindy and Hit-Girl, and knows her actions are real, not part of a game. This latter view seems more probable due to the aforementioned POV scene, which confirms that she has perceived Hit-Girl's actions as a game before, and also because she will also use violence in school against any bullies (in all likelihood, in excess, as that is what she is portrayed as doing in the movie).

Another issue that must be examined is the audience's reaction to the young Mindy's use of vulgar language. Chloë Grace Moretz addressed this controversy in an interview explaining that "If I ever uttered one word that I said in [*Kick Ass*], I would be grounded for years! I'd be stuck in my room until I was 20. I would never in a million years say that" (in Carrol). Surprisingly, the language issue was found to be more worrisome than Mindy's murdering sprees during her vigilante escapades. It would seem that American audiences object to the use of cuss words by a child more vigorously than to the portrayal of an 11-year-old murdering criminals in gruesome ways. The perception of the lives of criminals as utterly disposable surfaces here more evidently than in other superhero films. Usually, superheroes do not kill their opponents, merely incapacitating them in order to allow the police to capture them later. Kick-Ass himself does not initially kill the people he fights, and only does so in the final confrontation, when he has become influenced by Mindy and Damon's preferred way to deal with those who break the law.

In conclusion, Matthew Vaughn's *Kick-Ass* portrays an uncommon father-daughter relationship, allowing the film to explore the educational role of fathers when mothers are absent, as it is Mindy's case. Besides this, the role of videogames and of play in general in relation to violent acts committed by children is brought into question, as is the issue of the usage of vulgar language by children. The controversial Mindy Macready, alias Hit-Girl, thus becomes not only a complex character in her own terms, but also the catalyst for a new discourse regarding female childhood and its interaction with violence, as mediated through superhero narratives.

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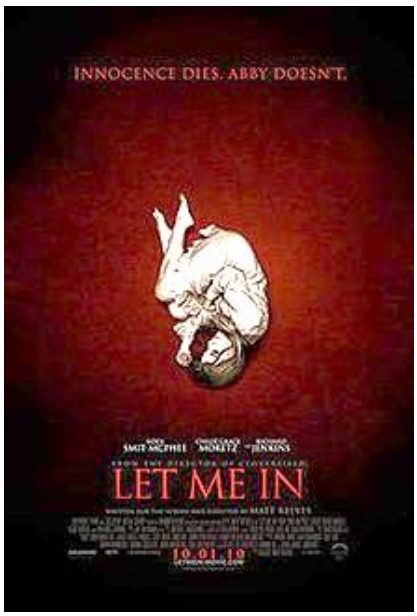
Let Me In: Children, Killers

Anastasiia Lytvyn

Release date: 13 September 2010
Director: Matt Reeves
Screenwriters: Matt Reeves, John Ajvide Lindqvist
Based on the novel by John Ajvide Lindqvist *Låt den rätte komma in*
Producers: Alex Brunner, Simon Oakes, Guy East, Tobin Armbrust, Donna Gigliotti
Cast: Kodi Smit-McPhee (Owen), Chloë Grace Moretz (Abby), Elias Koteas (The Policeman), Richard Jenkins (The Father)
Companies: Exclusive Media Group, Hammer Films, EFTI, Relativity Media (United States), Icon Film Distribution (United Kingdom)
Genre: horror
Nationality: USA
IMDb: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1228987



Summary: Violence is the answer

Let Me In is a story about a 12-year-old boy, Owen, who lives in Los Alamos with his divorced mother. Owen is lonely, neglected by his parents, and struggling to fit in with his peers who bully him. One evening, he meets Abby, a girl who has just moved in next door. They become friends, as Owen confides in Abby about the problems at home and school. Abby seems to be as secluded as Owen; she does not have any friends and lives with her father, claiming that her mother died. Soon enough, it is revealed that Abby is a vampire and the man she is living with is not her father but a guardian whose sole purpose is killing people to harvest their blood for her. Owen accepts her as she is, but it is too late because Abby has to flee Los Alamos for safety reasons. Before leaving, she helps Owen deal with his bullies: as they are trying to drown Owen in the school pool, Abby storms in and kills them. After that, Owen and Abby board the train to escape the town together.

Analysis: Gothic Romeo and Juliet

Let Me In (2010) is a compelling adaptation of the novel *Let The Right One In* (2004) by Swedish author John Ajvide Lindqvist and a reinterpretation of the Swedish adaptation of the same title. The US film's unique perspective stems from the fact that Lindqvist himself is one of the screenwriters together with director Matt Reeves, so the narrative follows the book, while some of the film's scenes mirror the Swedish adaptation.

Reeves had a distinct vision for the film. He aimed to stay true to the original story while infusing it with his own experiences of growing up in the Reagan era, thus "contextualising it an American way" (in Giroux). As far as the contextualization goes, the main influence on the film's plot is the additional religious components that were absent in the Swedish adaptation. While in the original adaptation, the socio-political context was drawn through the mentions of the instability in the Baltic States, the American version presents us with the religious context of the American South. Owen's mother is an avid Christian believer, so their home is full of images of Christ. In one of the scenes, viewers can hear Reagan's anti-Communist "Evil Empire Speech" about the Cold War and the war in Afghanistan. While these are background elements that do not necessarily influence the plot, Troy claims that "framing what is frightening in religious terms may actually serve to make the film less uncanny than its Swedish counterpart" (32).

To analyze the prominent gender issues of the American version, the film's protagonists, Owen and Abby, are here reviewed in contrast to their Swedish versions, Oscar and Eli. Both children are 12 years old, which positions them at the beginning of their journey into puberty and sexuality. While Owen is on the verge of adolescence, Abby's transformation into a teenager is replaced with another, more monstrous transformation. Even though Abby is estimated to be around two or three hundred years old, Matt Reeves argues that she is still "someone who's stuck at that emotional development" (in Giroux), meaning that Abby, just like Peter Pan, will never grow up, either physically or mentally. While, in the Western tradition, children are perceived to be innocent, Abby's mental state as a child and her violent nature are juxtaposed, seemingly in contrast with each other. In her interview, actress Chloë Grace Moretz observes that Abby loses her innocence at the exact moment she is bitten, just like children are perceived to lose their innocence once they become teenagers (in Radish).

Calhoun claims that while in the majority of Western horror films, children are portrayed as victims, it is the monstrous children who appear to have lost their innocence that instils fear in the adults (28). In this respect, Owen (played by Kodi Smi-McPhee, known for *The Road*) is also a child who is far from being innocent, as we see the film from his perspective and get a glimpse into his dark, sometimes violent impulses. He regularly spies on people in their most intimate moments, and when he is alone, he practices his fighting with a knife, imagining stabbing his bullies. Because of his religious upbringing, in the beginning, Owen is preoccupied with Abby being evil and voices his concern to his father, who dismisses it. In the Swedish version, Oscar, free of any religious context, does not grapple as much with the evil nature of his vampire friend, Eli, recognizing, at one point, that he also has evil and even murderous instincts in him. In one of the key scenes of the Swedish film, Oscar accuses Eli of killing people, and Eli replies that Oscar would do that as well if he could, and he agrees with her. This scene is not present in the American version; nevertheless, the director claimed that it is missing only because it would disturb the flow of the film (in Leader). The fact is that many of the scenes present in the Swedish version that might hint at the uncanny nature of the boy are omitted; this helps to make Owen and Abby's relationship look like a tragic Romeo and Juliet story, which Matt Reeves recognizes was his intention (in Giroux). Siegel claims that this difference in interpreting the relationship between the two main child characters reflects most evidently the clash between the American romantic tradition and

European Gothicism (547). In one of the British film reviews, the American version is labelled as "sanitised and cleaned up for the Harry Potter generation" (Bradshaw), which is a crude but arguably justified way of describing the plot compared to its Swedish predecessor.

While discussing the two films, it is important to note a stark difference between the American and the Swedish versions of Abby's gender identity. Throughout both films, Abby repeatedly tells Owen that she is not a girl. In the American version, this might be explained by the fact that she considers herself a vampire, not a female, while the situation is radically different in the sources. In the novel, Eli is actually a boy who was castrated when he was turned into a vampire. While the Swedish adaptation does not reveal this detail, Oscar eventually sees the mutilated genitalia of Eli, which presents her as essentially sexless. Despite that, Oscar accepts Eli, with whom he is in a relationship at this point, and the viewer sees Oscar's choice to stay with Eli as only natural. This, Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska argues, adds a layer of uncanniness to the narrative by articulating "queer fear" and an "unabashed presentation of homosexuality" (77). To highlight Eli's androgynous appearance, the Swedish movie changed her voice to a more masculine one in the post-production. In the American version, Abby is clearly female, and indeed in one of the deleted scenes in which the still human Abby is bitten by a vampire, she is presented as a female. Siegel claims that American romance is "a dream of domestic bliss based on a deeply held national belief in gender complementarity" (548), which is why, arguably, the seemingly happy end of the Gothic love story between two children is firmly based on their gender heteronormativity.

Nevertheless, despite the director's efforts to make the story as romantic as possible, the relationship between Owen and Abby is quite ambiguous, especially considering the fact that the girl is not human. In her interview, Chloë Moretz admitted that while she thinks that Abby does love Owen, she is also manipulative and "basically needs a servant to kill for her and get the blood for her" (in Radish). As to why Owen falls in love with Abby and ultimately flees with her, this might be explained by the fact that she represents his repressed violent and sexual desires (Weinstock 4). Notably, the loss of innocence in the two cases is attributed to the parental failure that these children are experiencing. Owen's mother is struggling with alcoholism, so she does not pay enough attention to her son to notice that he is being violently bullied at school. Abby, in turn, does not have parents anymore and lost her innocence because a man turned her into a vampire in an act of clear child abuse. Her guardian, as well, in the end, gives up his responsibility to care for her and ends his own life. Both Abby's guardian and Owen's mother are single parents, which puts them in a vulnerable position and exposes a possible underlying critique of the incomplete nuclear family. Troy argues that in the Western imagination, a single mother in particular is usually a "scapegoat for all kinds of ills befalling children in American society" (35).

As a standalone film, *Let Me In* is a compelling narrative that focuses on serious issues such as children's innocence, bullying, parental negligence, and its disastrous consequences. It is also a tale of forebodings about adolescence and the sexual confusion that follows it. Nevertheless, if compared to the Swedish predecessor that challenges sexual normativity and presents Eli as an uncanny and Othered being, the

American version rather plays along with the heteronormativity creating a modern Romeo and Juliet interpretation of a narrative with a Gothic twist.

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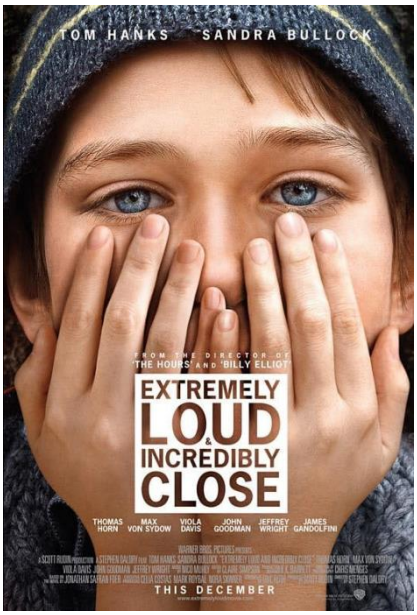
Exploring Gender in Light of Childhood and Trauma in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

YOMNA KHREIFICH

Release date: 25 December 2011
Director: Stephen Daldry
Screenwriter: Eric Roth
Based on the novel by Jonathan Safran Foer
Producers: Scott Rudin
Cast: Tom Hanks (Thomas), Sandra Bullock (Linda), Thomas Horn (Oskar), Viola Davis (Abby Black), Jeffrey Wright (William Black), Max von Sydow (Renter)
Companies: Scott Rudin Productions, Warner Bros. Pictures
Genre: Adventure, drama, mystery
Nationality: US
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0477302/



Summary: A quest for closure

Nine-year-old Oskar Schell lives in New York City with his parents. He shares a special bond with his father, who engages him in missions to explore the city. When his father dies in the 9/11 attacks of 2001, Oskar struggles to cope with the loss. A year later, he discovers a key in his father's closet with the label 'Black' and convinces himself that this is a clue left for him. He embarks then on a quest to find the lock it fits, visiting hundreds of people with the last name Black. Along the way, Oskar learns to face his fears and develops a connection with a mysterious elderly renter whom he believes to be his grandfather. Eventually, he discovers the true owner of the key and finds closure in a message left by his father under his favorite swing in Central Park, leading him to accept his death and to reconcile with his grieving mother.

Analysis: A journey from loss to discovery in New York City

Oskar Schell (played by Thomas Horn) is a child narrator who tells most of the story, and the entire narrative of the movie revolves around him. Screenwriter Eric Roth makes it clear in this way that he has deliberately preserved the novel's focus on him in the adaptation (Debruge). Oskar's presence is not only dominant in terms of screen time but also in the sheer force of his personality, which commands attention from everyone around him. His portrayal is anything but mundane; he loudly expresses feelings of loss, grief, and anxiety throughout the movie. This aligns with a common stereotype in films

where male protagonists, particularly young boys, are depicted as taking up space by being overly active and assertive, perpetuating the restrictive idea that 'girls appear' while 'boys do.' Both older and younger males, Dafna Lemish explains, are "the main heroes of most children's programs. They succeed in overcoming everyday problems, deal successfully with all sorts of dangers, and have many adventures" (2). In this case, cinema is no different. Indeed, Oskar is predominantly associated with action, adventure and even violence, though these portrayals are contextualized within the narrative to align with the nuances of his mental disorder and his grief.

A thorough analysis of the portrayal of Oskar's gender in the movie is necessary. While his emotions are loudly depicted, spanning from anger and fear to excitement and love, research by Rebecca Martin shows that young male characters are far more developed than girls who usually display stereotypically female emotions, namely sadness and fear, further complicating Oskar's gendered representation. Additionally, Oskar and his father Thomas (played by Tom Hanks) take precedence in driving the narrative forward over the mother and widow Linda (played by Sandra Bullock). Despite the father's limited on-screen time (mostly through flashbacks) compared to the mother's continuous presence throughout the entire movie, both male figures, Oskar and his father, are far more central in the plot of the story, which highlights the prominence of masculinity in the storyline.

While it is evident that Oskar is an ordinary nine-year old—he enjoys drinking his "juicy juice," loves to be tucked in at night, and exhibits childlike wonder and vulnerability—he also displays a darker side (01:23:28). For example, he often blames his mother for burying merely "an empty box" as a symbol of his father's death and missing body in the 9/11 attacks: "Doesn't anybody know there isn't anybody in the coffin? We should've filled it with his shoes or something. It's like a pretend funeral" (00:02:09). Moreover, when he has a heated argument with his mother, in which he engages in cursing and throwing objects, he tells her, "I wish it were you in the building instead of him" (00:49:35). Oskar's violent reactions reveal an unfair lack of understanding of his mother's grief, since she tries to shield him from her emotions, by avoiding crying in front of him, for instance.

Instead of embodying the image of innocent childhood, Oskar personifies a more selfish and narrow perspective of the world, challenging therefore the notion of 'child healers,' a Romantic construct by which children are seen as survivors of trauma capable of guiding adults through pain with simple, honest values like love and perseverance. This departure from the idealized portrayal of childhood as a source of healing is significant, as Oskar's behavior exacerbates his mother's emotional suffering following his father's death rather than alleviating it. As a result, Linda finds herself not only grappling with the loss of her husband but also facing the additional burden of her son's mistreatment. This portrayal highlights the complexities of grief and the challenges of navigating loss within the family dynamic, underscoring the idea that childhood does not always equate to healing or comfort.

Critics have also raised concerns about the portrayal of mass tragedies through the lens of childhood, viewing it as an abuse of innocence. Carolina Rocha and Georgia Seminet, in their analysis of *El Espinazo del Diablo*, which deals with the Spanish Civil War, admit that "preadolescent children are much more frequently cast in filmic

narratives constructed on historical memory and trauma" (4). Indeed, traumatic events involving children can attract sensationalized media coverage due to the juxtaposition of horror and sentimentality. However, it is not guaranteed that such depictions serve the purpose of good fiction. Despite the frequency of these portrayals, questions remain about the intended audience for such depictions: are they created by adults *for* adults, or do they serve a broader purpose in exploring the impact of trauma on younger generations?

Still, the complexity in Oskar's character, from navigating through childhood and gender to his relationship with others around him, cannot be discussed outside the parameters of his developmental disability. In Foer's novel, there are essentially no references to autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The author has made it clear that he had never imagined Oskar as autistic, but added, "Which is not to say he isn't—it's really up for readers to decide" (in Kahn). When the director of the movie adaptation Stephen Daldry was asked about Oskar, he described him, however, as "a special child who is somewhere on the autistic spectrum" (in Gilchrist). That Oskar is autistic has in fact been so common an interpretation that Daldry admitted having "spent a lot of time with different experts of Asperger's and talked to them" prior to filming (in Gilchrist). Oskar even reports during the movie that he was screened for Asperger's, though "Tests weren't definitive" (00:30:06).

Interpreting Oskar as autistic uncovers a plethora of stereotypes embedded in his characterization, namely his social difficulties, severe anxiety, sensory issues, and phobias. Autism advocates were quick to speak up about the "trend" of depicting autistic children as "creepy," "weird," "snappish" and "superior" (Sheldon-Dean). The most significant critique of the film's depiction of autism, however, comes from Sonya Freeman Loftis, who identifies two main problematic issues. Firstly, Loftis argues that:

> This simplistic reduction of AS into a series of phobias that need to be overcome offers a fundamentally false picture of autistic experience, underplaying the true intensity of sensory responses, suggesting that one can 'cure' oneself of autism through courage, and, ultimately, representing autism not as a facet of human identity but as a problem that must be solved. (116)

Furthermore, Loftis criticizes the film's implicit disclosure of Oskar's autism. While it is implied, the film does not explicitly state it, almost shying away from labeling the child, which allows the movie to use the idea of 'overcoming' disability, while avoiding any potential critique for misrepresenting a character on the spectrum.

Oskar's PTSD-related symptoms are also evident throughout the film. One significant manifestation of trauma in Oskar's characterization is the shattering of his notion of reality. The loss of his sense of self and reality is frequently expressed through his inability to comprehend the world after 9/11 which he refers to as "the worst day" (00:09:43). In analyzing Oskar's gender in relation to his PTSD, it is intriguing to consider the way trauma can intersect with notions of masculinity. Widely seen as emasculating, trauma-related nervous disorders challenge traditional gender roles and expectations. The identification of trauma as 'male hysteria' illustrates how the emotional transformation that results from post-conflict or war trauma directly contradicts societal perceptions of masculine norms, undermining traditional constructs of masculinity. Thus,

grief is interpreted as a failure to perform masculinity rather than a natural human emotion. In this case, it becomes less plausible that Oskar's tendencies of self-harm, for example, stem from autism rather than from repressing his emotions to conform to societal expectations of what is considered appropriate manly behavior. The physical pain Oskar endures from bruising himself symbolizes his yet deeper pain of missing his father. Such analysis aims at underscoring the complex relationship between trauma, gender and societal expectations, shedding light on the internal struggles troubled children may face in reconciling their experiences with gendered norms.

The answering machine containing the father's last words serves as the central symbol of unresolved communication in the movie. Oskar hopes that finding the lock to the mysterious key he discovers in his father's closet, which he views as a message left for him, will bring closure to their incomplete conversation. Although by the end of his quest Oskar's search leads to reciprocal communication, he remains excluded from it: the message the key unlocks is not for him but for William Black. This quest carries significant dimensions. A review in *The Guardian* suggests that "The plot (...) fits into a Hollywood tradition of pictures about sons and fathers (...) where hurdle races are set up to test manhood and pass on life lessons" (French). These "hurdle races" symbolize the mental challenges Oskar is made to confront and potentially overcome as a means to test his resilience and character, further reinforcing traditional ideals of masculinity.

In essence, Oskar's quest mirrors a broader cultural narrative surrounding masculinity and his passage from boyhood to manhood. Mourning his idealized father, Oskar becomes reminiscent of Hamlet; in Oskar's eyes, the father he lost was the perfect parent, designing all of Oskar's expeditions to encourage him to "talk to people, which he knows [he] had a hard time doing" (00:04:13). As for his mother, Oskar feels distant from her until the very end of the movie, mistakenly believing she does not love him due to her criticisms and rebukes regarding his interactions with strangers. When he later discovers, however, that Linda has been aware of his visits and taken precautions to ensure his safety, he promises, "I'll be a better son. I'll be normal," to which she reassures him, calling him already "perfect" (01:46:14). The film leaves thus the term "normal" undefined. This could be seen as a reference to Oskar's autism, suggesting that he does not need to conform to neurotypical standards. Alternatively, it might relate to his struggle with his father's early and tragic death and his mistreatment of his mother as he comes to terms with it. Despite not directly bringing him closer to his father, then, the quest for the mysterious lock ultimately reconnects Oskar with his mother, from whom he was previously estranged and with whom he can finally overcome trauma.

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Hugo: An Orphan's Struggle Beneath the Love Letter to Cinema

YIFAN ZHOU

Release date: 16 October 2011
Director: Martin Scorsese
Screenwriter: John Logan
Based on the children's novel by Brian Selznick *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*.
Producers: Graham King, Timothy Headington, Martin Scorsese, Johnny Depp
Cast: Asa Butterfield (Hugo Cabret), Chloë Grace Moretz (Isabelle Méliès), Ben Kingsley (Georges Méliès), Sacha Baron Cohen (Station Inspector Gustave Dasté), Helen McCrory (Jeanne Méliès), Jude Law (Hugo's father), Christopher Lee (Monsieur Labisse)
Companies: GK Films, Infinitum Nihil
Genre: adventure, drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0970179/

Summary: Surviving in a railway station

1931. Hugo Cabret, a 12-year-old boy, lives in Paris with his father, a widowed clockmaker. One day, his father discovers a broken automaton, and they decide to fix it together. Tragedy strikes when Hugo's father dies in an accidental fire, leaving Hugo with limited options: either the orphanage or living with his alcoholic uncle in the clock tower. He chooses his uncle and maintaining the railway station clock. Mostly Hugo is alone, trying to repair the automaton with pieces he steals from a toy shop. One day, he is caught by the angry owner of the shop, Georges Méliès, who threatens to burn the notebook about the automaton that Hugo's father left. To get it back, Hugo asks Isabelle, Méliès' goddaughter, for help. Astonishingly, the necklace that she wears is the key to activate the automaton. This contains not a letter as Hugo expects but a picture with the signature of Isabelle's godfather, from the first movie Hugo's father ever watched. As the two children embark on a journey to unveil the mystery, they discover that papa Georges once was a renowned and extraordinary filmmaker, who ended up sadly selling all his films to shoemaking factories. The two children decide to cheer the crestfallen man up with the repaired automaton. On the way to retrieve it, Hugo is caught by the harsh Station Inspector until Georges Méliès announces he is to adopt Hugo. At last, Hugo and his new family celebrate the recovery of Méliès' lost films.

Analysis: Underlying misery masked by dreamlike nostalgia

Martin Scorsese (b.1942) is an American filmmaker, known for *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Goodfellas* (1990), *The Departed* (2006), *Shutter Island* (2010), and a long etcetera. Much influenced by his Italian-American background and upbringing in New York City, his films mostly center on macho-posturing men and explore crime (see Wikipedia "Martin Scorsese"). *Hugo*, an adaption of a children's book, is quite different from the rest of his filmography. For Scorsese, the turning point was the moment when his wife gave him a singular order: "read the book, and I want you to make a film that our daughter could see for once" (in CBS News). Influenced by his traditional Italian grandparents, Scorsese values family greatly and accepted his wife's challenge.

The original novel, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* by Brian Selznick, is already cinematic, being elaborately illustrated with many lovely handmade sketches. Thanks to screenwriter John Logan, the story translates well into the 3D version. Nevertheless, Scorsese's own childhood life and his passion for cinema also contributed to this project. He explains in an interview with Film4 that he associated Hugo's life with his own. When he was three years old, little Martin contracted asthma. His parents often took him to cinema to make up for keeping him away from nature. He believes that Hugo finds resolution through tinkering with machinery, just as he did through early cinema. After all, the book centers on French illusionist and pioneering filmmaker Georges Méliès, played by Ben Kingsley. "I was fascinated by the sleight-of-hand concept," Scorsese recalls. "[Méliès] saw the potential in these moving images, and these images that came up on the screen (…) absolutely took me to another planet" (in NPR staff).

The child Scorsese also often observed people on the street through a small window, corresponding to a scene in the beginning of the movie when little Hugo watches people talking through a hollow number on the tower clock face. Employing advanced shooting technique and 3D special effects, Scorsese built a dreamcatcher to capture his love for film and to commemorate his childhood. The movie begins with a longshot, zooming from an overview of the city, including the Eifel Tower, into the main train station in Paris. Steam-powered machinery shot with a nostalgic sepia-tinted filter and the sound of meshing gears immediately transport audiences back to 1930s. Peeking through the window, Hugo sees men and women hustle and bustle in the platform, everything seems idyllic. The next moment, little boy Hugo slides down the clock tower, as if engaged in playing hide & seek with someone else. As Michael Phillips of the *Chicago Tribune* put it, "every locale in Scorsese's vision of 1931 Paris looks and feels like another planet."

Despite all these dreamlike moments, the real miserable situation of the orphan Hugo (played by Asa Butterfield) is largely disguised. In a snowy night, when the little boy runs after the toy shop owner, Georges Méliès, trying to retrieve his father's notebook, he wears nothing but shabby short trousers. Compared to healthily grown Isabelle (played by Chloë Grace Moretz), he is extremely skinny, living by scavenging food and stealing milk and bread from the baker's. Meanwhile, the train inspector Gustave (played by comedian Sacha Baron Cohen) viciously hunts any wandering orphans in the station, including Hugo, who, in Gustave's words, is cheekily exploiting its resources. Incidentally, in a scene when Gustave is chasing after Hugo, two familiar and renowned faces, those of James Joyces and Salvador Dali, bump into the frame. For a moment, the audience

feels like the protagonist in Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*, who wanders back into the golden interwar era. Gustave's antics may entertain the audience; however, Gustave's pantomime also conceals Hugo's fear. What little poor Hugo suffers is not only physical coldness and hunger, but also mental anguish. He witnesses how another little boy feeding off leftovers is caught by Gustave. This is only the tip of the fear's iceberg. Imagine how scared Hugo must be of finally landing in an orphanage.

Apart from his fear of being sent to the orphanage, Hugo is lost, stuck in the clock tower. Hugo loves mechanics and is in fact, obsessed with fixing stuff, for he believes everything should function as it was designed. This may correspond to what the author of the novel Brian Selznick argues in an interview: "the orphan in children's literature allows the child protagonist to move the story forward themselves and it is about finding your place in the world" (in Vulliamy). However, Hugo's resoluteness discloses his deep-down helplessness and his anxiety of being abandoned by the world. As he comments in the film:

> "I'd imagine the whole world was one big machine, machines never come with any extra parts. They always come with the exact amount they need. So I figured if the entire world was one big machine, I couldn't be an extra part. I had to be here for some reason, and that means you have to be here for some reason, too."

Apparently, Hugo wants to figure out his reason to be in the world, but he goes astray. As he states, this world, including the station, is a big machine, every part has its own usage. The station is a place of work, as the repeated scenes of shopkeepers, commuters, and Hugo working at the clocks stress. However, although Hugo has skills and talents in mechanics, as a 12-year-old child, he shouldn't have been working. Yet, he has to keep the clock functioning, so that no one will notice the absence of his uncle, and no one will notice him, either. Ironically, as Jennifer Clement and Christian B. Long observe—quoting Gustave's words, "We're here to either get on trains or get off them. Or work in different shops. Is that clear?"—children have no place in this world of work. Hugo is stuck in this dilemma, and the case of automaton seems like the last straw. When the automaton he tries so hard to repair only manages to produce random scratches, he is on the verge of a breakdown, angry and desperate: "It's broken, it'll always be broken (…) I thought if I could fix it, I wouldn't be so alone." It's worth noting that he also blames himself for his father's death, as we also read in the book: "This was his fault! He had wanted his father to fix the machine, and now, because of him, his father was dead" (Selznick,124). Possibly, Hugo strives so hard to compensate for his guilty. Without any parental guidance, everything that supports him deep inside collapses. His failure to fix the automaton even leads to a negation of his reasons to exist.

Hugo loves machines, claiming that the automaton is all he has, but, paradoxically, he also dreads becoming a machine. In his nightmare, when he finds out that the ticktock he is hearing comes from his chest, all the gears and clocks in the clocktower overwhelm him. In fact, his insecurity grows in the film. Hugo has no shelter, not to mention that he has long lost his opportunity to attend school. In contrast, Isabelle, also an orphan who is the same age and lives comfortably with her godfather and godmother, is surrounded by loving care and books. She quotes and cites from them, claiming she's half in love with David Copperfield (the Dickensian orphan), a choice may be too mature for a 12-year-old girl but that serves as an extreme contrast to the real situation of Hugo. The only

happy time he has after his father dies is when Méliès allows Hugo to stay in the toy shop and even learn magic tricks. But this does not last long. When Méliès finds out that his secret hiding is revealed, Hugo has no choice but to leave. When the interviewer from HitFix asked Asa Butterfield if 1931 was an era he wants to live in, he replied "It was amazing working there, but I might imagine for orphans and kids in Hugo's age, it would be very, very tough."

Still, all these insecurities and misfortunes are wiped out largely by the sentimental approach. Troy claims in her essay that the function of the orphan in *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* harks back to earlier uses of this figure to heal the adult world. In the movie, the adventure of Hugo and Isabelle, two orphans, heals the adult world, too. As Méliès says in the movie: "if you ever wonder where your dreams come from, just look around." Finally, when Hugo and Isabelle help Georges Méliès recover his love and his lost memory, Hugo is also adopted. This looks like a happy ending, but as Méliès wisely warns, "happy ending only exists in the movies," and Hugo's future remains a mystery.

In conclusion, while Martin Scorsese skillfully employs a dreamlike nostalgic filter to evoke the enchantment of cinema, this serves as more than just aesthetic flair. Rather, it becomes a veil that subtly obscures the grim realities faced by the orphaned protagonist, Hugo. Beneath the elegant veil there lies the harsh reality of Hugo's life as an orphan. Thus, how childhood innocence, loss, and resilience intersect in the life of orphan Hugo deserves further reflection, beyond Scorsese's homage to venerable cinema pioneer Georges Méliès.

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The Right to Childhood: Navigating Race, Animality and Natural Disaster in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

Yomna Khreifich

Release date: 27 June 2012
Director: Benh Zeitlin
Screenwriters: Lucy Alibar, Benh Zeitlin
Based on the play *Juicy and Delicious* by Lucy Alibar.
Producers: Dan Janvey, Josh Penn, Michael Gottwald
Cast: Quvenzhané Wallis (Hushpuppy), Dwight Henry (Wink), Levy Easterly (Jean Battiste), Lowell Landes (Walrus), Pamela (Little Jo), Gina Montana (Miss Bathsheba), Amber Henry (LZA), Jonshel Alexander (Joy Strong)
Companies: Cinereach, Court 13, Journeyman Pictures
Genre: drama
Natuonality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2125435/

Summary: A fantasy of survival

Hushpuppy, an African-American six-year-old girl, lives with her father Wink on an island in the Louisiana bayou called the 'Bathtub'. Though their island is gradually sinking, its impoverished inhabitants consider it the most beautiful place on Earth and look down on people living on the other side of the levee. One day Hushpuppy finds out that Wink has gone missing. When he returns, wearing a hospital bracelet and a gown, they argue. Back to her own house, Hushpuppy finds her food burning on the stove. In an attempt to draw her father's attention, she turns up the heat, which sets her house on fire. The narrative takes a turn when a devastating storm floods the Bathtub overnight. At once, the residents start building floating homes, and making plans to drain the water and reconstruct their community. Although the water recedes, the authorities order a total evacuation of the Bathtub, removing the residents to an emergency shelter. Wink undergoes an operation against his wishes, but this comes too late to restore his health. He tries to send Hushpuppy away to be raised by others but she refuses. While Wink lies dying, Hushpuppy and her friends swim in search of her mother. They are picked up by a boat and taken to a floating bar, where Hushpuppy meets a cook she believes to be her mother, though the woman does not recognize her. Once home, Hushpuppy honors her father's wish, giving him the funeral he asked for. The film concludes with Hushpuppy,

now motherless and fatherless, leading a group of Black and white children and adults after bidding farewell to her father's body at sea.

Analysis: Black girlhood between inspiration and tragedy

At only five years of age, Quvenzhané Wallis took on the role of Hushpuppy in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Auditioning for a role reserved for children aged six and above, Wallis lied about her age, eventually earning the title of the youngest Best Actress Oscar nominee in history when she was nine, as well as the first person born in the 21st century and the first African-American child actor to be nominated for an Oscar: "It was just the feeling behind her eyes," director Benh Zeitlin stated (in Haramis).

The character of Hushpuppy, in fact, underwent both racial and gender changes. Initially based on white author Lucy Alibar's own childhood and her then dying father, Hushpuppy first morphed into a ten-year-old white boy in the play *Juicy and Delicious*, and then into a six-year-old Black girl in the movie adaptation. Alibar offers no explanation for this racial change or for turning Hushpuppy into a female, which led several critics to read the transposition as a mere attempt to "effect a sense of specieswide commonality" (Nyong'o 257). In other words, the story's abstract and universal message allegedly transgresses gender and racial boundaries, and could therefore be portrayed by any child. Others, however, call into question the dimension that such race and gender changes might add to a story about climate change in a deeply impoverished area of the USA, and the stance of a Black girl in a narrative that aggrandizes survivalism, individualism and self-reliance.

Despite Hushpuppy's gender metamorphosis across theatrical and cinematic adaptations, the story depicts in both cases a father's continuous but failed attempt to impose his virile, patriarchal masculinity onto a child he deems incapable of surviving constant abandonment, a natural catastrophe, poverty and deprivation—all circumstances from which a child should be protected in the first place. All the same, both versions of Hushpuppy can and must be, as I shall be arguing, distinguished from one another.

In her critique of *Beasts*, Tavia Nyong'o explains that one way to portray human vulnerability is via "the defenseless, impoverished, raced, and gendered child" (252). Certainly, Hushpuppy's precarity can be seen in the movie through several moments of "un-care," as Kyo Maclear calls her situation (6). Wink is very neglectful, encouraging his daughter to drink liquor, slapping her when she talks back to him, causing her most of time to fall on the ground, and leaving her unaccompanied for extended periods—long enough that she starts cooking cat food on a dangerous stove and wonders whether she will eventually have to eat her pets.

Such a distressing depiction of childhood prompted Cristina Sharpe, among other Black critics, to refuse the tropes of bravery and survival the movie tries to present, viewing these recurring instances of abandonment as acts of violence against a defenseless child. Sharpe focuses on the role Wallis was given to play, and questions the connection between her race, age, and gender on the one hand, and the narrative she is asked to embody on the other. Only through a Black actress, Sharpe reasons, could

Hushpuppy convincingly convey an ecological message by being relentlessly placed in perilous situations, with no social context being offered:

> The film needs black bodies because how else could incipient sexual and other violence, the violence of extreme poverty, flooding, the violence of a six-year-old girl child living alone in her own ramshackle house with no mother or father, be inspiring and not tragic? How else could it "just be" with no backstory, no explanation? (Sharpe)

Aside from harsh external circumstances, Hushpuppy equally grapples with profound internal turmoil and intense self-blame, feeling that the situations that befall her, from her father's illness to the thunder and disruption of glaciers, are the result of her individual actions. The moment she punches her father in the chest, a violent storm erupts: "I think I broke something," she reflects in her voice-over. Although, as Maclear notes, it is common for children to take things happening around them or to them very personally, Hushpuppy's feelings are emblematic of the broader classic yet problematic image of the Black child in pain (4). While the distress of white children is shocking and calls for immediate action, the suffering of Black children is usually disregarded and normalized as they are *expected* to persist. The narrative, thus, reinforces the notion of Black invulnerability, whereas the meticulous expectations of care afforded to white children diminish around Black children who are constantly and deliberately placed in extreme situations. Disavowing Black suffering entails viewing Black children, like Hushpuppy, as too experienced, not weak enough to be innocent, therefore placing them, "out of childhood," denying them the right to be protected (Bernstein 42).

The film not only overlooks Black suffering, but it naturalizes it. The setting of the Bathtub, predominantly populated by Black individuals and modelled on a real place in southern Louisiana, allows the film to draw on the historical struggles of Black communities. Nonetheless, while the context clearly points to real suffering, this is naturalized, framed as the result of global warming and not of neglect by the US Government. Depicted through the lens of a child, it is even embellished through the modes of magical realism and fantasy "wherein we are not always certain whether what we are seeing is to be understood as actually happening in the reality of the film, in the imagination of Hushpuppy, or some blend of the two" (Nyong'o 256). Only through a little girl's perspective could a place like the Bathtub, for instance, be declared the "prettiest place on Earth." Although it is possible to forget that the movie is about an unaccompanied and abused six-year-old, suffering should never be romanticized.

Beasts additionally aligns with cinematic representations of Black people as primitives so that in many instances it is uncertain—deliberately, I argue—who truly is the "beast" of the Southern wild. Jayna Brown notes that:

> Hushpuppy, in her grime-covered and half-naked childlike innocence, embodies the Western fantasy of the primitive. With her whimsical exploration of the world, her little head tipped to one side as she listens to the heart of chick, or a hog, or her father, she narrates for us the wisdom of the ages, delivering the primitive's message to mankind.

Hushpuppy's wildness and affinity with animals, as she continually oscillates between human and animal identifiers, are presented as the origin of her strength and ultimate

survival. Her ability to interact with and tame animals, sharing their food and space, could be directly linked to her race. Barnsley calls out "the connection between wildness and blackness" which the movie establishes (245). Indeed, Hushpuppy's portrayal is not solely defined by her age but also by her Black identity; it is this racial dimension that enables the movie to become not only an ecological allegory but also a celebration of feral human nature.

Beyond her position as a complex character written in both human and animal terms, Hushpuppy equally embodies the paradoxical nature of childhood. This duality allows for a split reading of this child as the resilient survivor of the Bathtub, the marginalized and racialized inhabitant of the island, as well as the innocent, helpless girl that fears being abandoned, which she repeatedly is. Such a dichotomy results in a child who is simultaneously delinquent—confronting her father, telling him, "I hope you die and after you die I'll go to your grave and eat birthday cake all by myself"—and dependent, expressing sincere gratitude the moment he saves her from the storm: "For the animals that didn't have a dad to put them in a boat, the end of the world already happened," she tearfully confesses.

Hushpuppy's character is further complicated through Wink's endorsement of the widespread perception of stereotypical masculinity as essential for meeting the world's demands of survival, evident in his recurrent directives such as, "No crying," "Burp like a man," "Show me them guns," "Say I'm the man," etc. Hushpuppy's refusal to accept the position of the disempowered, docile child can be explained by her father's gendered upbringing of her, but also by the absence of her mother. Deprived of feminine nurture and tenderness, Hushpuppy can only cling to a basketball jersey which she calls "mama" and seeks solace in when things go wrong.

Finally, it can be said that Hushpuppy is othered not only by her gender, race and age but also her class. The poor are diseased, as seen in Wink's case. They cannot afford to love or to be loved: "I can count the times I been lifted on two fingers," Hushpuppy mournfully admits. In the closing scene of *Beasts*, Hushpuppy and her community's survival is represented as both a transition to a better future and an ending in itself. The six-year-old, now orphaned, is left to fend for herself. Though depicted as a survivor, she clearly remains a victim of neglect that goes far beyond her missing parents and into the heart of the USA.

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Moonrise Kingdom: First Love and New Beginnings

MERITXELL LANCIS TRIBÓ

Release date: 16 May 2012
Director: Wes Anderson
Screenwriters: Wes Anderson, Roman Coppola
Producers: Wes Anderson, Jeremy Dawson, Steven Rales, Scott Rudin
Cast: Bruce Willis (Captain Sharp), Edward Norton (Scout Master Ward), Bill Murray (Mr. Bishop), Frances McDormand (Mrs. Bishop), Jared Gilman (Sam), Kara Hayward (Suzy), Jason Schwartzman (Cousin Ben)
Companies: Indian Paintbrush, American Empirical Pictures
Genre: drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1748122/

Summary: Runaway kids

In 1965, on the remote Island of New Penzance, Sam Shakusky flees from Boy Scout Camp Ivanhoe to escape with his pen pal Suzy Bishop. Sam and Suzy walk through an old colonial trail on the island as they develop their relationship and fall in love. When the adults discover their disappearance, they set up a search party commanded by Captain Sharp, the island police officer, with the Khaki Scouts. A day later, they find Sam and Suzy sleeping in a tent on the beach, and the two children get separated. Because of this incident, Sam's foster family announce they are not going to host him any longer. The social services take Sam to a juvenile refuge and force shock therapy on him. When hearing this, the other Scouts decide to rescue Sam with Suzy's help. They seek Cousin Ben, who works at a larger scout camp and can help them escape the island on a boat. However, a great storm stops their plans, and the characters gather at the church for protection. Social Services tries to take Sam again, but Captain Sharp adopts him.

Analysis: The last summer of childhood

In 2012, the Cannes Film Festival opened its 65th edition by introducing audiences to *Moonrise Kingdom*, the new movie by auteur director Wes Anderson. *Moonrise Kingdom* tells a story close to the director and fellow screenwriter Roman Coppola, who set out to tell a tale about the transformative power of first love and the difficulties of growing up. Anderson told in an interview for *Vanity Fair* that with the movie, what he

"wanted to do was re-create the feeling of that memory. The movie is kind of like a fantasy that (…) [he] would have had at that age" (in Miller).

Wes Anderson (b. Houston 1969) crafts a personal story that, as Manohla Dargis points out in her review for *The New York Times*, follows "characters (…) who, through their harebrained schemes, grand pursuits or art (…) transcend the ordinary." Anderson rose to fame at the end of the1990s and the beginning of the 2000s with a clear directorial vision, which critic Jeff Simons compares to fellow director Paul Thomas Anderson by stating that both succeed in creating films which "are part of a coherent, beautifully constructed insular world that captivates audiences with something outrageously new every time." *Moonrise Kingdom* occupies a distinctive place in Wes Anderson's filmography after the success of *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) was followed by a period of underwhelming box office returns, with *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* and *The Darjeeling Limited*, which were received as "self-consciously quirky and overly clever" (McCollum). *Moonrise Kingdom*, with a more limited budget, propelled the American director forward, gaining once again the favor of audiences and the companies that would later produce *The Grand Hotel Budapest* (2014), his most celebrated film to date.

The story unfolds in a remote time and location; as Anderson himself noted in an interview for Film 4, he wanted to represent "the America that existed one generation earlier," setting the movie in 1965 on a fictional island on the coast of Rhode Island, as most of the islands there were still connected with land at the end of the 1960s. This melancholic setting is combined with the information at the beginning of the film that there is going to be a big storm at the end of summer, which, in a way, foreshadows "the approaching turmoil of adolescence," leaving as Robert Ebert points out, main characters, Sam and Suzy "sharing the experience of a lifetime, as they seem aware that this will be their last summer for such an adventure. Next year they will be too old for such irresponsibility." The use of the remote location, thus, serves to keep the children from the adult world before they leave their childhood behind.

The story and characters in *Moonrise Kingdom* seem close to the real lives of the screenwriters, integrating parts of their childhood, such as Wes Anderson finding a pamphlet on how to cope with a troubled child on his parent's fridge (in Miller). At the same time, Anderson cites influences from classical movies that portray young love through the perspective of children, such as *Small Changes* (1976) by François Truffaut or the less-known *Melody* (1971). Similarly, in *Moonrise Kingdom*, all the actions are seen through a child-like perspective, using "the adult-child as a classical dramatic device" (Zaher), as everything the two children encounter seems deeply important.

As the core characters of the movie, the casting for the child actors took eight months, with the director finally deciding on Kara Hayward and Jared Gilman for the distinctive personality traits they expressed. Hayward pointed out in an interview to commemorate the eleven years since the movie's release that "Anderson cast them because they fitted his style, as his direction was very specific" (in Focus Features). Although the movie was their acting debut, critics were quick to remark that "Anderson's camera shoots them predominantly in close-up so there is nowhere to hide fake emotion, and both young actors are magnificent, capturing the vulnerability" (Smith). To achieve this kind of performance, the child actors recounted that they received months of training

from the director, which helped them learn new skills, connect, and be comfortable (in Focus Features).

As noted earlier, the comedy in the children's performance stems from their behaving like adults, a similar strategy previously used by Anderson in *The Royal Tenenbaums*. However, since the film's focus is the romance between two children, it elicited mixed reactions from the public and critics, questioning the ethics of shooting the beach scene. This scene features both children in their underwear as they dance and share two kisses on the lips. Later, they sleep in the same tent, huddled together, a scene described by some critics as "cluelessly innocent and profoundly touching" (Simon) or as a "chaste affair capped with a hilariously symbolic deflowering." In contrast, others remarked that the constant shots of children in their underwear introduced children to a "sexualized exploitative scene" (Elwood).

What is worth noting is that the scandalous reaction of adults upon gazing at this scene also extends to the characters in the movie, as they separate both children because they appear to be "unable to cope when the audacity of Suzy and Sam's youthful idealism" (Meas), as exemplified by their naïve actions. In this scene, we can experience a separate way of treating the children. Whereas for Sam, the incident is ignored and later the object of Captain Sharp's sympathy, for Suzy there are consequences, as her father refuses to talk to her, and her little brother implies that she is a traitor to her family. This highlights the double standard in their romantic and sexual awakening, since "People expected behaviours [are] associated with high sexual activity more from men than from women, and behaviours associated with low sexual activity more from women than from men" (Endendijk 168). This distinction between male and female reactions also extends to the parents, as "the moms or their surrogates in *Moonrise Kingdom* often come off as bad or worse than their male counterparts" (Tyree 26) in their treatment of the situation, as we can see with Suzy's mom, who fails to understand the young love between her daughter and Sam.

Complementary to this, Suzy's treatment throughout the movie is at times relegated to supporting Sam in his journey and helping him find a home, often reducing her to a stereotypical female role of "helping, nurturing, and caring" (Endendijk 164). She comforts him, reads him fantasy stories and even signals to him that Captain Sharp's proposal of adoption is a good option he should accept. As Joshua Gooch mentions in his analysis of objects and desire in Wes Anderson's films, "Suzy carries objects of passive consumption and viewership (…) that limit [her] to a passive role" (193-194), as opposed to the actions that Sam carries through the film. On the other hand, her anger issues, clearly depicted when she hurts one of the scouts, are presented as a source of confusion and comedy, which, in the end, are not resolved.

In contrast, Sam's transformation is handled with much more care. Sam's internal struggle is due to the passing of his parents; in fact, he begins the story hiding the fact that he is an orphan: "Their absence creates the hole that Sam tries to fill on the cusp of his adolescence with new love and, later, a new parental figure" (Joseph 61). Sam's longing to find a family is evident in his sartorial choices. His predisposition for uniforms is not only a personality quirk, as uniforms can "represent the wearers themselves and are usually used as an 'identity kit'" (Hong 1). As he runs away with Suzy and becomes a sort of 'child criminal', Sam also runs towards a new family in the person of law enforcer

Captain Sharp; in this way, "paternity remains an important means for Anderson to bring the anarchic desiring narrative of *Moonrise Kingdom* to a close" (Gooch 185). Anderson reverses the typical child criminality plot that we can see in drama movies and instead grants the audience a happy ending and a newfound family. Even so, Sam's insecurities associated with belonging are not entirely fixed at the end of the movie, as when he is escaping, he asks a camp counsellor to 'marry' him to Suzy; later, despite being already adopted, he feels the need to wear a police uniform, mimicking Captain Sharp.

At the end of the story, *Moonrise Kingdom* achieves what Chris Hewitt describes as a "naive, children's-book quality to the storytelling" in which all the conflicts are fixed in the span of the great flood that reunites the characters inside the island's church, as a callback to the representation of Noah's Ark, that appears at the beginning of the movie. The ending presents the characters after the storm and that formative summer, introducing Bishop's house again. This time, Suzy and Sam are still together but with their respective families. Despite their failed plan to run away, the end credits display their campsite on the beach, and there is "a certain tone of hopeful melancholy" (Rybin 48), leaving the characters to enter the turmoil of adolescence during the remaining of the 1960s.

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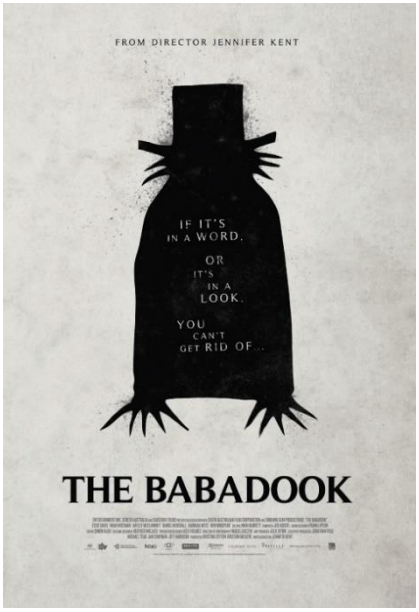
The Babadook: The Horrors of Motherhood

CRISTINA FRANCO ROSILLO

Release Date: 17 January 2014
Director: Jennifer Kent
Screenwriter: Jennifer Kent
Producers: Kristina Ceyton, Kristian Moliere
Cast: Essie Davis (Amelia Vanek), Noah Wiseman (Samuel Vanek), Hayley McElhinney (Claire), Daniel Henshall (Robbie), Barbara West (Grecie Roach), Ben Winspear (Oskar Vanek)
Companies: Screen Australia, Causeway Films, South Australian Film Corporation, Smoking Gun Productions, Entertainment One
Genre: horror
Nationality: Australia
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2321549/



Summary: Alone against the invisible

Amelia is a single mother whose husband, Oskar, died in a car accident while driving his wife to the hospital to give birth to their son, Samuel. The film takes place almost seven years after Oskar's death. Although her sister Claire lives nearby and social services are aware of her delicate situation, Amelia does not have a safety net nor does she receive any help. On the contrary, she is constantly questioned as a mother due to Samuel's behavior, which has started to become more aggressive. His attitude worsens after reading a mysterious pop-up children's book called *The Babadook.* Although she destroys the book, it re-appears on Amelia's front door. However, the content has disturbingly changed: Amelia appears killing her son and her dog. From this moment, Samuel is drugged with tranquilizers. Now that Samuel cannot talk about the Babadook, Amelia starts seeing him and becomes more depressed, and struggles to keep herself in the realm of reality. Finally, Amelia defeats the Babadook by confronting him and protecting her son from the monster.

Analysis: The ambivalence of motherhood

Jennifer Kent (b. Brisbane 1969) is a filmmaker who started her career in cinema as an actress, participating in Australian TV series such as *The New Adventures of Black Beauty* (1992) or *Murder Call* (1997). However, she eventually abandoned her acting career and became a directing apprentice to Lars von Trier during the production of *Dogville* (2003). In addition, she has continued to direct other productions, such as the

TV series *Two Twisted* (2006) or *Guillermo del Toro's Cabinet of Curiosities* (2018), as well as her most recent film, *The Nightingale* (2018). Kent's debut project, the short film *Monster* (2005) brought to life *The Babadook* (2014), a full-length film which addresses the distress that parents, especially mothers, endure during the upbringing of their children.

Overall, this production seems to have been curated with an extreme amount of care and sensibility, especially towards the starring actors. Kent has talked about how she made sure that Noah Wiseman (who plays Samuel) was "heavily protected" from the explicit content of the story because she "also acted when [she] was a child, so [she] related to this little boy" (in Free). Also, in another interview, Kent stated that "it was [her] job to take care" of Essie Davis, who plays the mother, due to her "enormous respect for actors" (in McInness). Hence, the work of the director is notable for her emotional intelligence, which is not only reflected in the care of the actors but also in the portrayal of the story.

The Babadook's reception was marked by praise for the crude depiction of parenthood. Many parents saw themselves reflected in Amelia's loneliness and welcomed the classical horror techniques through which a silenced reality about the alienating nature of parenting is portrayed: Kent "plagues the subconscious—asking us what exactly we're supposed to do with all of these everyday monsters that we can't get rid of" (Murray). Nonetheless, the narrative goes a step further by showing how lonely motherhood might take a violent turn, which might even escalate to child abuse. Still, Amelia's abusive behavior is not presented as monstrous, but as an extreme consequence of desperation, which makes it an extremely empathetic narrative (Kang). The film voices an ignored and uncomfortable question: what are the consequences of not offering proper care to mothers who struggle with mental health?

Kent's obscure narrative (she's also the film's writer) deals then with two delicate topics: motherhood and sanity. Distancing herself from any easy scare, Jennifer Kent created a horrifying psychological scenario. The heavy atmosphere filled with tension and uncertainty haunts the spectator with many fears about the fatal outcome that a lack of support for a widowed, single mother might have. Therefore, instead of portraying widowed motherhood as a space for resilience and self-growth, the experience is presented as horrific and dangerous both for the mothers' and the children's mental health. Because Amelia cannot address her grief, seemingly due to her maternal duties, the mother-child bond weakens. As Kent herself explains, she wanted to distance herself from these idealistic ideas about motherhood and show the dark side of a very much sugar-coated subject: "As women, [we are] educated and conditioned to think that motherhood is an easy thing that just happens. But it's not always the case. I wanted to show a real woman who was drowning in that environment" (in MacIness online).

In contraposition to the romanticized ideas surrounding motherhood, Kent successfully addresses a reality that many single mothers could be undergoing. For instance, the economic stress and the lack of institutional and social support that single mothers are put through affect their psychological well-being directly (Dey and Cebulla 80; Freeman 684). In the film, Amelia Vanek is going through a very similar situation. Her economy is not thriving and both family and institutions seem to have turned their back on her. Sometimes, she needs her sister Claire or her neighbor, Gracie, to take care of

Samuel because she does not have the financial resources to hire a babysitter. This situation is accentuated by Samuel's misbehavior, which causes him to be expelled from school and the refusal of his aunt to take care of him anymore after he breaks his cousin's nose. Amelia's difficulties to keep herself afloat are increased and her mental stability starts to collapse from this moment onwards. Besides, she stops going to work as she must stay home to take care of her child. When Amelia loses all kinds of emotional support the Babadook grows stronger.

The presence of the monster becomes more difficult to ignore as fiction and reality merge and become more difficult to differentiate. This vulnerable situation is evidence of how lonely the Vaneks are. Amelia asks her sister for help when she thinks someone is stalking her because the book that she tore apart has reappeared on her doorstep, but its content is even now more gruesome and explicit. If the original book told the story of a haunting monster, whose presence you cannot escape and that might make you insane, in this new version of the book, Amelia appears killing her dog and her son, and then killing herself. At this point, Samuel cannot stop talking about the Babadook, he notices him everywhere they go. The Babadook seems to be the incarnation of grief that mother and son carry. While Samuel cannot help seeing the monster, who embodies the absence of his father and its horrible consequences, Amelia actively ignores the Babadook's presence. She is still in denial. Amelia does not recognize that she is in utter pain and her son, as a mirror, reflects the disgusting truth: she is alone, her husband is dead, and maternity has made her even lonelier.

Still, it is impossible to ignore the despairing state in which the Vaneks are. Claire does not want to hear Amelia's worries anymore, the social services think of Amelia as a terrible mother, Samuel has been expelled from school, and the police mock her due to her evidently unstable mental health. Throughout the film, Samuel acts as a mirror image of his surroundings, especially his mother. When the situation becomes unbearable and he is completely abandoned, he loses all control and convulses. His mother seizes then the chance to start drugging him. Now that he cannot talk about the Babadook—that is, his and his mother's grief—Amelia must face that her psychological state is at its worst and she is dragging her son with her.

Indeed, *The Babadook* offers a crude and horrific perspective on the realities of children whose parents struggle with mental health. Rather than being beacons of sanity, these children often are affected by the disturbing state their parents are trapped in and must carry over their shoulders the responsibility of taking care of them. Moreover, as Aldridge and Becker acknowledge, "their parenting functioning had been compromised by their illness (…) and that their children were not cared for as effectively as they would like during these times" (58). Indeed, individuals who have struggled with their mental health cannot give proper care to their children. If they do not enjoy proper support, it is likely that the children themselves will become the caretakers of the parents, as it is the case of Amelia and Samuel, who reverse their roles when the Babadook takes over their home. Despite the film's focus on the mother's struggle with grief, I believe that it also poses the question of institutional neglect on mothers and children who do not have a proper safety net. This may have fatal consequences, as the book warns.

Because Amelia has ignored her feelings and so has her environment, her grief has turned into an uncontrolled mental breakdown. Thus, Amelia must face for once the

suffering that the death of Oskar and the raising of Samuel is causing her: "By continuing to deny her feelings, she has let *The Babadook* in and now Amelia is fully under its control. (…) her mourning has developed into melancholia" (Chusna et al. 120). Mother and son invert their behaviors and even their relationship roles. Amelia becomes more aggressive and confesses to Samuel that she "wished that it was [Sam] not [Oskar] that died."

Still, Sam, despite not even being seven years old yet, tries to be understanding and help his mother through this traumatic process. The boy goes through a process of parentification, in which he takes a fatherly role and takes care of his mother. Indeed, Samuel seems to take his father's place by becoming the protector of the home; "I'm protecting you," he tells Amelia. As Chee and Goh suggest, throughout this experience, a child gains agency and is also able to draw boundaries between his desires and his mother's (73). Indeed, Sam recurrently manifests that he wants to protect his mother, he doesn't "want [her] to go away," but it is her job "to get it [the monster] out" because she "let it in" in the first place. In that way, they can fulfil their promise, because they "said [they'd] protect each other" (in Free online). Henceforth, Samuel, who had been a stressor and once filled Amelia with despair, becomes a healing force.

Her son makes Amelia Vanek come back to reality and banish the Babadook. In a hallucination, the monster, disguised as Oskar, asks Amelia to sacrifice her son to be together as a family again. The source of their unhappiness, indeed, is Oskar's death. The neglect of their grief has transformed Oskar's memory into a monster that threatens to kill them. I find this aspect important due to its exceptionality; the trope of the ideal dead father is fairly popular within Western cinema. In contrast, *The Babadook* offers the image of a terrifying father, whose death is causing great damage to his living wife and tormented son. He is not faultless, but rather presented as a catalyzer of insanity.

Nonetheless, although it seems that the Babadook might be Oskar's embodiment after death, I suggest that the monster is mainly a projection of Amelia's sorrow. As a sensitive child, Samuel detects the presence of this morbid sadness. He tries to protect her mother and, to some extent, replace his father by filling the void he has left and embodying the traditional protective role of the *pater familias*. However, it is Amelia who finally conquers the role of the protector when she refuses to sacrifice her child; when the monster comes back, he makes her relive the traumatic death of her husband and confront her grief. Amelia's sadness turns into rage and when Samuel's body starts to be pulled by the dark force of the Babadook, she holds onto him and fights the monster: "If you touch my son again, I'll fucking kill you!" For once, Amelia's love overcomes her grief and tames the Babadook. It is with Samuel's help that Amelia frees herself of her former identity and discourse of an ideal mother; this way, Kent portrays a transgressive image of motherhood based on action, mutual protection, and trust in the ability of mother and son to overcome the other's belligerences (Briefel 12-13). Furthermore, their reconciliation is strengthened with the celebration of Sam's birthday, which had never been celebrated on the day he was born. That way, life and love prevail over death and hatred.

Because Amelia is shown feeding and taming the Babadook after this amiable scene, we may assume that since that tumultuous moment, the mother is able to control her grief. Even though her pain is still present, it is kept in the basement, where both the

Babadook and Oskar's belongings are. There, in the home where she happily lives with Samuel, Amelia finds a proper space to face her grief, both mentally and physically, and manages to keep it away from her son. In return, the once maimed maternal bond strengthens, symbolized in the film's last scene, in which Amelia praises Sam for his interest in magic and, full of joy, sits him on her lap and hugs him lovingly. Therefore, Kent provides the spectator with a bittersweet portrayal of motherhood. The film does an excellent job of contesting the idealistic assumptions we might still have about maternity, and addresses how important it is to feel hate, as well as love, and the critical need to value death to celebrate life. In addition, the film also contests the ideas regarding ideal childhood. It presents the crude and terrifying reality of those children who are alone against their parent's mental illness and who must renounce their childish games to take care of them. This antinatural reality is the consequence of institutional and familial abandonment, which conveys the perfect uncanny scenario for a horror film.

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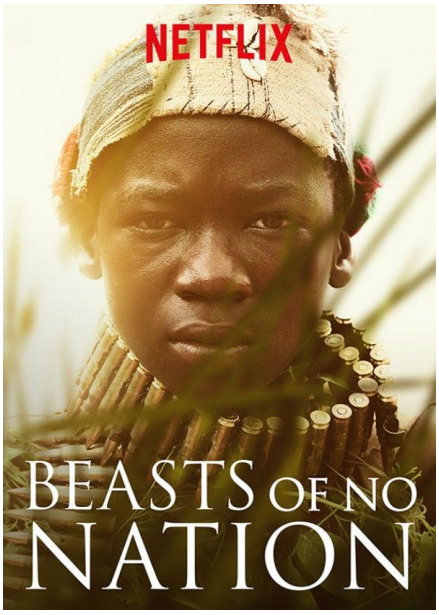
Beasts of No Nation: The Shell-Shocked Child

CRISTINA FRANCO ROSILLO

Release date: 16 October 2015
Director: Cary Joji Fukunaga
Screenwriters: Cary Joji Fukunaga, Uzodinma Iweala
Based on the novel by Uzodinma Iweala
Producers: Amy Kaufman, Cary Joji Fukunaga, Daniela T. Ludenberg, Riva Marker, Jeffrey Skoll, Daniel Crown, Idris Elba, Uzodinma Iweala
Cast: Idris Elba (The Commander), Abraham Attah (Agu), Kurt Egyiawan (Two I-C), Jude Akuwudike (Supreme Commander Dada Goodblood), Emmanuel Nii Adom Quaye (Strika)
Companies: Participant Media, Red Crown Production, New Balloon, Primary Productions, Parliament of Owls
Genre: drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1365050/



Summary: Lost innocence

In an unnamed African country, 12-year-old Agu happily lives with his family. He spends the day teasing his older brother and taking care of his disabled grandfather and his baby sister along with his parents. Although there is an apparent climate of peace, U.N. soldiers surround Agu's village and offer food to the children. War breaks due to a rebel uprising and Agu's mother and sister manage to flee in a neighbor's car by bribing him. However, the men must remain in the village and are executed by the Government's army, who mistake them for rebels. Agu, the only one who survives, hides in the jungle, where he is found by the rebel militia and trained as a child soldier. There, Agu is a victim and a perpetrator of atrocities until his group disintegrates. He is finally sent to a missionary camp with other children and realizes that after everything he has gone through, he cannot consider himself a child anymore.

Analysis: The slaughter of childhood and identity

Cary Joji Fukunaga (b. Oakland, 1977) is a film director, screenwriter, and producer known for his direction of acclaimed films such as *Jane Eyre* (2011), *Sin Nombre* (2009), and *No Time To Die* (2021). Especially, *Beasts of No* Nation and *Sin Nombre* hold numerous similitudes as they are both striking motion pictures in their

depiction of childhood. These productions are renowned for their crudity in the representation of the loss of innocence, while still refraining from portraying overly explicit images. In an interview with Thomas Paige, the American director insisted on his aim to keep "the violence (…) off camera" because "it is for the most part inconsequential to the story and character (…) [and] there's no reason to necessarily linger on it as a voyeur." Fukunaga's directing style is also evidenced in the film's unconventional cast of *Beasts of No Nation*. Although there are renowned actors such as Idris Elba, the starring role of Agu was given to Abraham Attah. Kay reports that the child actor was discovered at the age of 13 by the casting director Harrison Nesbit when he was playing football on the streets of Accra in Ghana. However, the rest of the shooting was not any closer to normality. Fukunaga admitted to the journalist Benjamin Lee that "the shoot in Ghana involved malaria, extortion, and near-death experiences."

Indeed, from beginning to end the production of the film hit one snag after another. Nine years before shooting started, Fukunaga had read Uzodinma Iweala's novel *Beasts of No Nation* (2005). He finished the screenplay in 2007, but filming was pulled back by the release of another motion picture, *Johnny Mad Dog*, that dealt with child soldiers and had an underwhelming international reception (Kay). Fortunately, this was not the case of Fukunaga's film. *Beasts of No Nation* was highly praised when it premiered on Netflix and was awarded the Freedom of Expression Award by the National Board of Review in 2015 and the Cinema for Peace Award for the Most Valuable Film of the Year in 2016. Furthermore, the film was praised as a "study of manipulation and manufactured loyalty (…) surely grounded in the particular brutalities of its setting" (Hornaday) and "morally urgent to the end" (Edelstein). Even though the film depicts a crude reality and portrays childhood in an unconventional way, far from the Victorian ideal of the innocent child, it was welcome as a much-needed cultural production that gave voice to the realities of many children in the Global South.

Here I argue that Agu's character is marked by vulnerability, in spite of his being a naughty child from the beginning of the story. He is a child from a humble family whose main pastime is to perform for the U.N. soldiers to get some food that ought to be given to the war refugees camping in his village. Even though he does attend school anymore due to the war, it is not until war strikes his village that Agu's safety net crumbles down. None of the institutional forces who could have protected him take proper action. The U.N. soldiers who had been helping refugees from other conflict zones in his village vanish, and the Government soldiers lay siege to the settlement, executing any suspected rebels, including Agu's father and brother. Institutional abandonment is evidenced when Agu is chased, shot, and forced to hide in the woods, where he is found by the insurgent Native Defense Forces (NDF). Then, although Agu had not been a rebel, the lack of child protection throws him into the maw of slavery, as he must now serve the NDF for the sake of his survival without the support of any reliable institution.

Agu's situation is not extraordinary because this armed group's infantry is mainly composed of other children and teenagers, who have presumably found in the NDF the opportunity to survive and a second family of sorts. As Wessells argues, usually children feel called to become soldiers because they want to survive; they also seek authority figures to give them a life purpose (in DeArmey 236). This is an excellent chance for predatory adults, such as 'The Commander' of the militia, to create a faithful and

brainwashed group that will follow orders blindly and will accept his abuses. As Honwana acknowledges, "the systematic preference for children as soldiers is based on the assumption that children make good soldiers because they are especially susceptible to ideological conditioning" (44). Therefore, their psyches are easier to manipulate and adapt to the demands of the battlefield, but also to the wishes of men like The Commander himself, who sexually abuses Agu and Strika. It is through this traumatic event that the two boys bond, even in this emotionally numbing environment. Despite his abuse, The Commander gives prep talks to the young soldiers so that they feel compelled to perform the brutal actions they are required to do in order to satisfy the needs of the NDF:

> COMMANDANT: Young men! Gentlemen! We will not wait to inherit it, we will not wait for them to just give it to us, we will take it, we will seize it from their rotting and decaying old hands.
> EXT. PRIESTS JUNGLE CAMP (INTERCUT) - DAY
> Agu looks at the charred remains of the MAN who they dispatched on the smoking platform.
> COMMANDANT (O.S.): Victory!
> AGU AND TROOPS: Victory!
>
> (Fukunaga, *Beasts of No Nation's Script* 44)

The frenzied discourse of the leader appeals to the children's interest and agency, while his words suggest that they are part of a revolutionary movement, and these soldiers are actively fighting for it. Nonetheless, the purpose of this fight seems empty. As for the audience, we do not know what they are battling for nor what is their revolution about. The NDF strives for a new order whose values are never mentioned, but its vague goal justifies the brutal slaughter of civilians.

Through the normalization of violence, the child soldier becomes less intimidated by its presence. Agu detaches himself from his moral values when the military training begins. Wessels argues that training is a mere "euphemism often obscuring a regime of brutality and psychological manipulation. (…) Not uncommonly, forced participation in atrocities provides the rite of initiation into an armed group" (in DeArmey 237). Agu's initiation rite consists of the execution of a young engineering student, supposed to fix a bridge that the group intended to assault. At first, the child is reluctant, but his internal discourse reveals how his former values have been altered and subverted, Agu knows that killing that man "is the bad sin and [he's] feeling that [he's] dying inside […] but [he's] knowing, too, it's the right thing to be doing" (Fukunaga, *Beasts of No Nation's Script* 56). Through a process of psychological manipulation, Agu has given up on his former beliefs. At the same time, by executing that man, his innocence and his childhood are slaughtered as well. The manipulation of the child's psyche has irreversible effects, which is evidenced in the rest of the battalion as well.

In this coercive process, the members of the gang lose their identity. None of the members, but Agu, keep their proper names. They use nicknames in relation to their position in the army. Its leader is simply called 'The Commander', the second in charge is literally 'Two In Charge', and 'Strika', Agu's friend, apparently receives that name for his talent at striking the enemy. I suggest that this is one of the many methods that ensure that the children will not abandon the group. Besides the fear that their comrades might kill them if they flee, they feel that their person begins and ends within the group and

their identity might crumble if they are apart from it. This is what happens to The Commander when Dada Goodblood, his chief, asks him to stop fighting. Although they do not receive any funding and their cause has no purpose anymore, he refuses to let go of his position and tries to convince the children to do the same thing:

> COMMANDANT (CONT'D): When you are poor and hungry with nothing to do with your nothing days, you will remember these days as your best. And know, one day I will call on you again. And you will come. Because you will remember this, and you will come running. Nobody has it better than us. (Fukunaga, *Beasts of No Nation's Script* 105)

The leader believes that their lives will not go back to normality. If they refuse to continue with their military life, even if there is nothing to fight for, they "will be nobodies" (104) and their families will reject them out of fear. Then, nobody will understand them or sympathize with them, the only family that they will have will be the army itself, which they will have abandoned and lost forever. Besides being a manipulative attempt to keep the youngsters by his side, The Commander foretells the void the children will feel in the reformatory camp they are sent to after they desert, despite the efforts of the preacher running it:

> PREACHER: They are saying they are needing soldier, fighting is what I am knowing and that is what I should be doing. You are sure you do not want to fight?
> Agu nods. Preach and TWO other NDF ADOLESCENTS jump the fence and sneak off. (Fukunaga, *Beasts of No Nation's Script* 109)

Because these men and boys have done nothing but fight all through their lives, they do not know how to live far from conflict. The rehabilitation camp seems to be failing at giving these young boys a reason to keep going and at allowing them to create an identity of their own aside from the armed group, which compels them to go back to the same environment that traumatized them. Therefore, identity and trauma seem to be so intricately connected that these individuals feel they cannot become or do anything else disconnected from warfare.

Even though Agu refuses to abandon the rehabilitation program, he is not satisfied with it either because its staff cannot understand his war experiences. He might be labelled a child veteran who, I suggest, suffers from undiagnosed PTSD. Agu's stream of thought reveals that he is suffering symptoms similar to the ones that Great War or Vietnam soldiers experienced. For instance, Agu cannot fully express what he has gone through, nor thinks that others will be able to understand the horrors he has endured:

> AGU (V.O.) She thinks that my not speaking is because I can't be explaining myself like baby... but I am not like baby, I am like old man and she is like small girl because I am fighting in war and she is not even knowing what war is. (Fukunaga, *Beasts of No Nation's Script* 110)

Agu believes that his psychotherapist, Amy, assumes he cannot articulate his traumatic experiences because he does have not the necessary linguistic baggage that this would require. However, from Agu's perspective, his inability to speak resides in the unfeasibility of accurately conveying the horrors of war to someone who has not experienced it. This horrible experience has scarred him forever and he seems indeed to be suffering PTSD

symptoms. The images of warfare visit him continuously in flashes. He cannot stop "seeing more terrible thing than ten thousand men and [he is] doing more terrible thing than twenty thousand men" (111). In other words, Agu is a victim of the same atrocities that he has committed, which are greater than anyone could have experienced or done. In fact, it is offenders in armed conflict who suffer more PTSD symptoms than those who have not gone through war (Weierstall et al. 6). Therefore, Agu is a child who is severely psychologically wounded and who has already experienced the most brutal scenarios, which would even impact the mind of an adult.

It is through this trauma that Agu's identity becomes a paradox. Though he might appear as a child, his experiences make him a 'grown up' boy. Besides, Agu can no longer see himself as a child because he becomes aware that he "cannot be going back to doing child thing" (97). During his time with the rebel militia, he lost his innocence, which caused his childhood to be impossible to retrieve ever again. As Bouris indicates, these child soldiers are complex political casualties who do not fit the innocent and pure characterization of the ideal victim, but rather have some agency in their victimization (in Snell 198). Agu describes himself as "some sort of beast or devil" after everything he has done but, still, "[he is] also having a mother and father and brother and sister once, and they were loving [him]" (111). Therefore, Agu acknowledges his past and his present and unites them. Although he has detached his sense of self from his gruesome actions, he begins a healing path in which he aims to reconcile with himself and construct his identity again after everything he has gone through. However, he strives "to be happy" (111) regardless of the awful memories that will haunt him forever.

While the film depicts an extremely cruel reality, its ending gives the spectator a sense of hope for Agu. He watches how the other boys from the rehabilitation camp bathe and play in the sea. They seem happy and he observes them, longing to join them. At first, it seems that he feels he might not belong with them. Again, he thinks he is no longer a child and cannot go back to doing childish things anymore. However, he starts walking slowly towards his mates until he starts running and dives into the sea. Even if he cannot recover his former self, he can still find joy in life and live his childhood from a different perspective. Agu has gone through hell, but he might experience heaven again.

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Room: Perpetuating Heteropatriarchy

MARÍA NAVARRO GARCÍA

Release date: 16 October 2015
Director: Lenny Abrahamson
Screenwriter: Emma Donoghue
Based on the novel by Emma Donoghue
Producers: Ed Guiney and David Gross
Cast: Brie Larson (Joy) Jacob Tremblay (Jack) Joan Allen (Grandma), Sean Bridgers (Old Nick), Tom McCamus (Leo), William H. Macy (Grandpa)
Companies: FilmNation Entertainment
Genre: drama, suspense
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3170832/

Summary: An entire universe inside four walls

Room begins with a young woman, Ma, and her son, Jack, waking up in an enclosed, small room, to celebrate the boy's fifth birthday. Jack and Ma are trapped in Room, but Ma tries to do all sorts of activities such as watching TV, baking cakes, and doing crafts, for him to be entertained. Old Nick abducted Joy Newsome (Ma) when she was 17 and after two years of being held captive, she had a son, Jack. Unable to continue with their enslavement, Joy traces a plan to trick Old Nick and escape. By pretending to be dead, Jack manages to reach the outside world and ask for help. Although both are rescued, mother and son will have to continue surviving in a new world after their traumatic experience.

Analysis: Motherly sacrifice and child narcissism

Lenny Abrahamson is an Irish director who debuted with his 2004 film *Adam and Paul*; this was followed by other works such as *Garage* (2007), *Prosperity* (2007) and *What Richard Did* (2012). In 2014 Abrahamson became better known for his film *Frank*, a dramatic comedy about English musician and comedian Chris Sievey's alter ego Frank Sidebottom. The following year, he had his first big break with *Room* (2015), an adaptation of Emma Donoghue's eponymous novel published in 2010. Donoghue was the screenwriter of the film; as she has stated: "When I'd sold the novel to the publishers, even before it was published, I went ahead and started a screenplay because I just knew this, of all my books could make a good film" (in "Room Behind The Scenes Featurettes").

The story is 'loosely' inspired by the case of Elizabeth Fritzl, who was kept hidden and abused by his father Josef Fritzl for twenty-four years. As happens, the novel was written before Jaycee Dugard's case, a young girl who was also kidnaped and abused for eighteen years, became also known; Donoghue argued that unfortunately "life imitates art" (in Ue 102). Donoghue only took the "basic notion of an imprisoned woman raising her rapist's child as happily as possible" to turn it into "an extraordinary act of motherhood" (Ue 102). On his side, Abrahamson did not want to create a thriller about crime or captivity but rather a film about how "women and children raise above domestic abuse" (in Kermode).

Room narrates a story about darkness and horror from the perspective of five-year-old Jack Newsome. One of the challenging aspects Abrahamson had to deal with was a realistic adaptation which "preserved the boy's point of view without turning it into a piece of magic realism" (in "Room Behind The Scenes Featurettes"). As Emma Donoghue stated, her story focused on Jack's perspective as it expressed "originality, strangeness, innocence, and laughter" (Ue 103). In other words, *Room* emphasized, according to actress Brie Larson (who plays Ma), Jack's "sense of wonder not fully comprehending the complexity of the world" (in "Room Interviews"). His sense of innocence, and his lack of understanding about the horrific situation that his 'Ma' and himself are living depict him as free. For Jack 'Room' is not a prison nor awfully small, for, as he says in the film "it went every direction, all the way to the end, it never finished." Abrahamson accomplished this through the spectator never having a sense of claustrophobia but rather seeing 'Room' from Jack's perspective, as large for him as for us, an entire world. This was emphasized through the production design in which the actors participated decorating 'Room', as Brie Larson stated: "It was so ours, we had built those toys, we had made the drawings that we had put on the walls, and we chose were everything went" (in *Film4*). Therefore, as the director stated in the *Flickering Myth* interview, by centering on the boy's perspective the movie is "celebrating what is extraordinary about kids at that young age: optimism."

Jack's perspective shows his lack of exposure to the outside world, which can be understood as both negative and positive. On the one hand, after their escape, the doctors describe Jack as "still plastic," as he has not been properly exposed to the different germs of the world and he needs to adapt. Ergo, it could be argued that Jack, like Pinocchio (see Kermode), is still not a 'real boy', as he has not been exposed to the world, nor has he related to other human beings, especially children. On the other hand, his lack of exposure to society can be understood as positive, as he disregards and subverts the "rules about boyhood" (Ue 104). Jack's long hair is used by Donoghue and Abrahamson to reflect the horribly strict gender conventions which he rejects, as his hair is where his strength comes from. The misreading of Jack's gender after he jumps out of the truck to ask for help, enhances this. Jack is a gender-nonconforming child in Room, but this changes once he enters the patriarchal society of the outside.

Room discusses the double standard of motherhood, through Joy's character and the judgments on her mothering. Both the film and the book enhance the notion of motherhood as lifesaving for, if it were not for Jack, Joy would not have been rescued. Therefore, the film centers on the "extraordinary relationship between a mother, and child that is stronger than the horrors and cruelty that are its form" (Blackwood). Joy's

maternal instincts by deciding to keep the baby of her abuser sustain her, and eventually free her. However, *Room* is perpetuating the patriarchal discourse of women needing to have children, for them to be 'fulfilled': "When Jack came, everything changed, I just new I had to keep him safe," Joy says in the film. In other words, *Room* demonstrates how reproduction is used to "perpetuate heteropatriarchy" (Murphy 71). That is why Murphy discusses the concept of 'castration desire', not focusing on the literal action, but rather on the idea of how phallic individuals should be 'dephallicized'. That is, through Jack's upbringing and nurturing in this feminine zone, inhabited by Ma, he is rejecting the notion of how those individuals in possession of "phallic power marked by an ever-growing bounty of possessions financial and material, including human bodies should move towards a model which is less individualistic which focuses on more other-oriented relationality" (67).

Nevertheless, the film also questions Joy's motherly sacrifice. Ma is perceived as a saint by Jack, but as Larson discusses in the *Film4* interview, the movie is an "opportunity to show the reality of her, the complication of her and bring a more complete look at her." This 'complete' look is judged during Ma's interview once rescued, in which her decision to keep Jack, instead of 'giving him away' to her captor so he could be free, is questioned: "Was that the best thing for him?," she is asked. The film depicts motherhood as insufficient: mothers are never enough, and are constantly being judged for what they do, or they do not. Hence, as Blackwood claims, *Room* enhances the "assumptions about the bond between a mother and child, and about the shame that attends female sexual violation" (*LARB*) According to the director the film *Film4* interview: "It's extremely intense and dramatic (…) but it's this reversal of this discovery that what you're really watching is something extraordinarily positive (…) in its optimism about human nature and its capacity to wind of pressure itself in very difficult circumstances." Contrary to this, the film enhances the oppression women suffer and the pleasure patriarchal society obtains by gazing at hated women, through Joy's "private and public realms of punishment" (Shing). The shed in which mother and son are trapped represents women's private suffering through Joy's constant sexual abuse. The world and society after their entrapment represents the public suffering of women connected to how their enslavement and the gendered violence they endure, exploited by the media, become a form of entertainment. In other words, the film "looks so closely at women's deep suffering and yet somehow manage to still not see it" (Blackwood).

The absent figure of the father is one of the gender issues the film centers. On the one hand, Old Nick (the Devil himself, perhaps) has no relationship with Jack, as the boy is always hidden in the wardrobe during his 'nightly visits'. In fact, Joy refuses to name Old Nick "as the child's father" (Putra 100). Old Nick 'provides' for both Jack and his Ma, yet he does not even know when his birthday is nor how old he is. Thus, as Joy states during her post-rescue interview: "A father is a man who loves his child" regardless of the biological relationship, which for her is "not a relationship." Hence, Joy never tells Jack that Old Nick is his father. Similarly, Joy was also abandoned by her unfeeling father. Although we see them reuniting at the hospital, Robert is not able to look at or speak to Jack, as he "shudders at the sight of Ma's 'rape-child' betraying a fear that the biological father will resurface in Jack" (Murphy 58). After a heated discussion with her daughter

he disappears from the film. Jack is surrounded, in short, by toxic masculine figures who enhance a patriarchal discourse on pride and the possession of women's body.

The escape to the outside world entails moving into a more masculine world in which Jack loses the disavowal of normative gender (Murphy 69). Therefore, the 'Outside' represents the imposition of gender roles. Old Nick, a masculine figure from the outside, tries to impose gender on Jack by giving him a truck for his birthday, reinstating the notion of how boys play with toys associated with masculinity such as vehicles. Yet, Grandma also insists on cutting Jack's hair, perpetuating the idea boys should have short hair. Nonetheless, Joy challenges the 'Outside' gender roles, through a subversive attitude against the male gaze and women's compliance. In a heated discussion with her mother Joy states: "I'm sorry that I'm not nice anymore, but you know what maybe, if your voice saying, 'be nice' hadn't been in my head, then maybe I wouldn't have helped the guy with the fucking sick dog" who kidnapped her. Thus, Joy rejects the stereotypical portrayal of women as beings appealing to the male gaze, which led to her kidnaping.

In conclusion, *Room* is a film which through the perspective of a five-year-old boy rethinks the gender roles and stereotypes. Jack's perspective aims at disrupting the preconceived notions of boyhood and masculinity, through his innocence and imagination. On her side, Joy aims at depicting the 'other' side of motherhood as a dark experience, which, despite saving her, enslaves her within the patriarchal society, and becomes the main target for oppression and judgement.

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A Monster Calls: Conor O'Maley's Odyssey Through Childhood Trauma

ESTEFANÍA CORTÉS GÓMEZ

Release date: 10 September 2016
Director: J.A Bayona
Screenwriter: Patrick Ness
Based on the children's book by Patrick Ness
Producers: Belén Atienza
Cast: Lewis MacDougall (Conor), Sigourney Weaver (Grandma), Felicity Jones (Mom), Toby Kebbell (Dad), Liam Neeson (Monster's voice)
Companies: Participant Media, River Road Entertainment, Apaches Entertainment, Telecinco Cinema
Genre: drama
Nationality: UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3416532/

Summary: The journey towards healing in mourning

A monster calls is a poignant examination of love, grief, and the journey to healing. Twelve-year-old Conor O'Malley is experiencing a persistent nightmare, as he struggles to manage the household while his mother battles cancer. His connections with the other adults in his life are strained. Conor's father resides in America as his parents are divorced, and he has a difficult relationship with his demanding maternal grandmother. At night, he is visited by a monster that appears as a gigantic yew tree when he awakens from his horrible dream. Conor has to explain the fourth story—what occurs in his recurring nightmare—after the monster tells him the first three. He is thus forced to face the uncomfortable realities of acceptance, loss, and grief throughout these stories. Conor's life rapidly changes between the first two stories. His mother is so unwell that he has to stay with Grandma while she is admitted to the hospital for further treatment. The boy is scared, angry, and helpless since it appears that everyone around him is preparing for his mother's death and giving up on her.

Analysis: Trauma and emotional resilience

Similar to dreams and monsters, grief is an enigmatic, age-old feeling that is difficult to explain or classify. We will all experience grief, but it is a very personal, subjective, and universal emotion that cannot be easily remedied by letting go of a lost item, nor can it be reduced to a tidy, step-by-step process. Instead, it is something we

must all learn to cope with. Conor O'Maley portrayal in *A Monster Calls* (2016) provides a poignant examination of childhood trauma and its profound impact on emotional development. Throughout the novel by Patrick Ness and the film version by J.A. Bayona, Conor grapples with the trauma of his mother's terminal illness, which manifests in various ways, shaping his thoughts, actions and relationships.

Lewis MacDougall's portrayal of Conor O'Maley acts as the story's emotional center. Conor struggles from the beginning with the impending certain death of his unnamed mother, a fact that bears a great burden on his young shoulders. However, although death is a major element in the narrative, it is kept at a safe distance, and Conor's feelings take center stage as the reader interacts with the story. *A Monster Calls* depicts childhood trauma in a complex way, showing the different ways Conor's inner conflicts show up. His tense relationships with classmates and authority officials underscores how hard it is for him to communicate his feelings and find comfort in a society that seems to have little concern about his suffering. Moments of rage, impatience, and denial dot Conor's path; they are all normal reactions to the immense loss he is about to experience. The film effectively conveys the essence of mourning, even before actual death happens, as a journey of transformation through a moving narration and breathtaking imagery.

The monster, a massive, sentient yew tree, appears to help Conor on his treacherous adventure. According to Jenny Hamilton "Trauma survivors may see images of monsters in nightmares and visions when experiencing posttraumatic stress." However, in spite of its frightening appearance, the 'monster' (voiced by Liam Neeson) is a wellspring of wisdom and empathy, who provides Conor with a safe place to face his worst fears and the hard facts he has been avoiding. Clementine Simmons highlights "The guilt rising in [Conor's] chest, patiently waiting for the punishment he believes he deserves. *A Monster Calls* explores the hidden depths of childhood trauma, giving us an insight into the pain children carry when faced with the death of a parent." Conor's experiences are not just those of a normal youngster; they are tinged with the weight of impending death, which causes a deep sense of disorientation and loneliness.

Conor's dreams and thoughts are further sources of his pain. He is distressed by a recurring nightmare in particular in which he lets go of his mother's hand and lets her die. Conor is so sick of waiting and dreading the agony of losing his mother that he wants her to pass away already. Conor is obviously tired, but even though he is in agony, he cannot even begin to talk about it. It is crucial to discuss the feelings of shame and guilt he feels when he thinks about this. Conor believes he does not deserve love and that he should be punished because he feels guilty about his repressed feelings. Harry, Conor's schoolmate, and bully is the only one who has the power to punish the boy. Conor does not see this bullying as a threat or a place of danger, even though it physically leaves him injured and involves violence and brutality. Rather, Conor seems to find solace in Harry's abuse. All this mixture of feelings is a consequence of the previous grief one experiences before the actual grief takes place. Conor's feelings force him into a condition of in-betweenness that resembles his transitional existence while he waits for his mother to pass away, forcing him to experience loneliness and isolation. The monster acts as if it can move into Conor's place as his own mobility is limited by discomfort and terror. According to Donna Schuurman, "When a parent dies, a young

person's sense of security and stability in the world is turns upside down. (…) the death of a parent becomes the defining event in the teen's life, (…) [it] begins to define his/her life in two categories: 'before' or 'after' the death" (3). Conor embarks on a metaphorical trip as a result of his experiences with the monster, which tests his beliefs and makes him face painful realities about death and loss. The boy discovers how to accept vulnerability and draw strength from the memories he cherishes as he makes his way through his grief.

Beyond Conor's personal hardships, the movie explores topics of family dynamics and the ways that loss may reverberate across relationships in its depiction of childhood trauma. Christine Jørgensen explains that "children grieve in more complex ways than adults give them credit for" (16). Particularly moving are Conor's exchanges with his maternal grandmother, played by Sigourney Weaver, which highlight the intricacies of family ties during trying times. On the other hand, Conor and his mother are connected by the shared hope that she might get better. This notion, which creates a bond between mother and son, is well-known from folklore and children's stories, where it is customary to deny death. Conor holds fast to this hope even though he knows the truth in his soul. Because of their shared relationship with Conor's mother, Conor's affection keeps him connected to his grandmother even as he gives up on his dream. Open to the world around him, when vulnerability no longer seems like a dangerous place, Conor starts to realign himself. Rather than hiding from the world, Conor lets himself be seen as vulnerable, which enables others to share his sorrow and anguish. This forges a new relationship between Conor and his patient grandmother.

Because of conventional preconceptions about children's emotional resiliency, childhood grieving is frequently misinterpreted or disregarded. According to an article published by Alvis, Zhang, Sandler and Kaplow "death may not hold the same meaning in children under the age of 5 who lack the cognitive ability to understand the permanence of death compared with older children or adolescents." Stated differently, depending on the child's age and developmental stage, grief and mourning can take many forms and are influenced by ongoing developmental processes. This is best illustrated by Conor's perspective, as he struggles to understand his contradictory feelings while dealing with the impending death of his mother.

Literature and cinema for children has explored death in a variety of ways. Sobat discusses the strange ways in which death is handled in this genre: "Correspondingly, death and dying are often removed or hidden from young people who seldom witness family members die in the home. How does a young person process the idea of someone close dying, and his/her own mortality, when death is so sanitized and neatly removed to a comfortable distance?" (236). Today death is not usually a topic introduced in children's literature and cinema; however, the reality is that there are children that experience death from a very early age.

In the end, *A Monster Calls* reminds viewers of the resiliency innate in the human spirit by providing a moving examination of childhood trauma and bereavement. We are invited to observe the healing that results from accepting the whole range of human emotion and the transformational power of acceptance through Conor's journey. The film serves as a moving reminder of the value of empathy, connection, and the enduring power of narrative to get through life's most difficult situations through its representation

of loss and perseverance. Viewers are introduced to a world in *A Monster Calls* that they may be unable to even comprehend, a narrative about the hidden beauty of loss, the agony of parting, and the essential healing that can happen after.

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Hunt for the Wilderpeople: When Foster Care Fails

ANASTASIIA LYTVYN

Release date: 31 March 2016
Director: Taika Waititi
Screenwriter: Taika Waititi, Barry Crumb
Based on the novel by Barry Crumb *Wild Pork and Watercress*
Producers: Carthew Neal, Matt Noonan, Leanne Saunders, Taika Waititi
Cast: Sam Neill (Hec), Julian Dennison (Ricky), Rhys Darby (Psycho Sam), Rima Te Wiata (Bella), Rachel House (Paula)
Companies: Defender Films, Piki Films, Curious, New Zealand Film Commission
Genre: adventure, drama, comedy
Nationality: New Zealand
IMDb: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1228987

Summary: Boy in search of a home

The largest-grossing movie in New Zealand, *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*, tells a story about a 12-year-old boy, Ricky Baker, who is an orphan. Along his life, he has been placed in many foster homes because of his troubling behavior. His social worker warns him that if he does not change his ways, he will be sent to juvenile prison. Ricky's last chance for a foster home is a big farm in the lush New Zealand countryside, with Bella and her husband Hector in charge. Ricky grows attached to Bella, but she dies pretty unexpectedly, leaving Ricky with the prospect of going back to the Child Welfare Services. Determined not to return to the system, Ricky decides to run away to the wilderness and become an outlaw. Hector, who is reluctant to take care of Ricky, finds himself entangled in legal trouble and runs away with Ricky. In the end, both are apprehended by the police, and Ricky finds a foster home with a family he encounters while hiding. He and Hector stay in touch, continuing their friendship, which is a testament to the resilience and strength of their peculiar bond.

Analysis: A real bad egg

Hunt for the Wilderpeople is a unique coming-of-age film that tells the story of a Māori boy and his struggle to find parental comfort and his place within the society he has been brought up in. It is made by one of the most famous film directors in New Zealand, Taika Waititi, who is known not only for his indie movies and TV shows with Māori protagonists, such as *Boy* (2010) and *Reservation Dogs* (2021-2023), but also by

big Hollywood productions such as *Thor: Ragnarök* (2017) or *JoJo Rabbit* (2019, see the essay in this volume). In an interview, Waititi states that he was approached with the idea of adapting a novel by Barry Crump called *Wild Pork and Watercress* (1986), which he enjoyed reading (in Gorber). Despite being an adaptation, there are significant changes in the film's narrative: many of the violent hunting scenes were excluded, and the end of the story was changed (in the book, Ricky and Hector both die in the wilderness). While necessary for a family-friendly rating, these alterations also provide a fresh perspective on the original story. Talking about the changes he has made to the plot, Waititi states that he wanted "to make it more of a fun adventure while still retaining the deeper themes and ideas from the book" (in Gorber). Indeed, despite the light and playful atmosphere Waititi has managed to create, the film raises serious questions and issues connected to child protection and parental abandonment.

The narrative is set in the mountainous region of New Zealand, the bush, one of the locations that has rarely been featured in the national cinema before. This is not only the location used in the book but also the place where Taika Waititi grew up (Fox 20). The film also features several Māori characters, such as the protagonist and the family that adopts him: a girl named Kahu, played by Tioreore Ngatai-Melbourne, and her father, TK, played by Troy Kingi. Unlike the other famous film with the Māori protagonist, *Whale Rider* (2002, see the essay in this volume), which features the tight-knit community and their family values, Taika Waititi admits it was not his aim to portray the community in *Hunt for the Wilderpeople.* Instead, he claims, "there are Māori who are not connected to their family, to their culture. Ultimately, the movie is just about people looking for family" (in Devereaux).

In the film, all the parents are a failed presence rather than functional role models. Ricky's biological father is never mentioned, and his mother is said to have given him up right after birth. Hector, Bella's husband and Ricky's foster father, is reluctant to take on his parental duties and, due to his criminal past, is not considered as a possible adoptive parent for Ricky, either. When both of them are hiding in the bush, Hector is suspected of kidnapping and possibly molesting Ricky. While neither allegation is true, Hector does have anger issues, and on different occasions, he is seen ready to attack Ricky. Kahu's father, who ends up adopting Ricky, is immature and careless, projecting more of a 'cool friend' image rather than a parental one. Lilja and Dahlbeck contend that Ricky, in fact, lives "in a world with few recognisably responsible adults" (409). Ricky's most significant loss is that of a maternal figure, which is why, in various scenes, he talks about his biological mother and why losing foster mother Bella is what ultimately pushed him to run away. Fox argues that in this case, the bush Ricky runs away to might serve as "the embrace of a protective mother" (218), revealing how Ricky's biggest desire –to be protected– is not being fulfilled either by the adults or the Government.

Unable to be reunited with his biological parents and struggling with the emotional struggle of abandonment, Ricky is presented to the viewers as "a real bad egg," the name that the social worker Paula gives him. Ricky is an outcast "raised on hip-hop and rejection" (Ide). At the beginning of the film, the social worker recites all the wrongdoings that Ricky has been charged with, in a montage where we can see Ricky doing all of those things: "disobedience, stealing, spitting, running away, throwing rocks, kicking stuff, defacing stuff, burning stuff, loitering and graffiting." The robotic nature of her

speech is most probably intended to be ironic, and she repeats this speech again on national television. The host tells her that Ricky is just a kid, to which she replies: "he's a spanner in the works, and I'm the mechanic who is gonna take that spanner and put him back in the toolbox where he belongs."

Her dislike of the boy serves to highlight how foster care is inundated with bureaucratic processes, which seem to obscure the fact that what social workers deal with are actual children, many times in very traumatic circumstances. Paula ends every one of her speeches with, as she claims, her motto: "No child left behind," which is another ironic method to expose the hypocrisy of Child Protective Services and their real priorities. At one point, Ricky also mentions a girl called Amber in foster care who disappeared, a situation inspired by an actual case that happened in New Zealand when one of the foster children committed suicide (see Devereaux). Taika Waititi addresses these issues but warns that this was not the intended focus either: "anyone who knows about that may know, okay, this is the world [Ricky] is from. It's all about him though. It's gotta be focused on him" (in Deveraux). It is also important to note that despite satirizing the character of Paula, she is not portrayed as a villain of the show. Lambie contends in her review of the film that Paula is even likeable because of Waititi's skill in presenting the plot in a light and heartfelt way.

As we can see, while the social issues play in the background, the sole focus of the narrative is Ricky and his struggle to fit in. He tells Hector that he wants to be a gangster and an outlaw; his dream, he says, is to die in a shootout. Thus, the film presents us with and, at the same time, satirizes the type of hyperbolized masculinity that boys are brought up with, especially in the New Zealand context. Waititi claims that the fact that Ricky sees himself as a gangster, when in reality, he does minimal damage, is an ironic attempt to show "men's infatuation with being tough" (in Loughrey). This is an important message which tries to debunk the toxic influence of patriarchy on boys since Ricky, just like any other boy, is a product of his surroundings.

For this very reason, a female Ricky would not work for this type of narrative, not only because her presence would destroy the purpose of satirizing patriarchal masculinity but also because there are many taboos connected to girlhood that could be borderline unacceptable to feature or make comedy out of. Parry claims that girl's experiences are erased from the public eye because they are considered taboo (577). For example, the fact that Ricky is overweight is heavily accentuated in the film, and he goes on adventures in the forest alone with a man who is not her relative, which would not have worked that well with a female protagonist. Also, Ricky's desire to become a gangster is more believable than if he were a girl; most probably, Wooden claims that violence is more tolerated in boys because of the naturalizing of the "boys will be boys" approach that prohibits them from developing more nurturing qualities (xvi). Hector is also an example of a failed masculine upbringing, which is a consequence of his inability to express feelings and bond with people on a personal level.

Overall, *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* is a tale about a boy who, engulfed in a masculine fantasy and repeatedly let down by those around him, decides to run away from society. Despite the many social issues raised in the film, the narrative focuses solely on Ricky and his growth into a mature person who can eventually re-enter society and accept its rules, however unjust they might seem.

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The Jungle Book: Exploring the Odyssey of Mowgli, the Feral Child

ESTEFANÍA CORTÉS GÓMEZ

Release date: 15 April 2016
Director: Jon Favreau
Screenwriter: Justin Marks
Based on the stories by Rudyard Kipling
Producers: Jon Favreau & Brigham Taylor
Cast: Neel Sethi (Mowgli), Bill Murray (voice Baloo), Ben Kingsley (voice Bagheera), Idris Elba (voice Shere Khan), Lupita Nyong'o (voice Raksha), Scarlett Johansson (voice Kaa), Giancarlo Esposito (voice Akela), Christopher Walken (voice Rey Louie).
Companies: Walt Disney Pictures, Fairview Entertainment.
Genre: Fantasy/ Adventure
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3040964/

Summary: Mowgli's adventure into the wilderness

Mowgli (Neel Sethi), an orphan child abandoned in the jungle, is adopted by a pack of wolves under Akela's leadership and put under Raksha's care. Mowgli is thus trapped between two worlds, those of the humans and the animals. Under the threat of being killed by Shere Khan (voiced by Idris Elba), who hates humans, Mowgli embarks on a unique journey of self-discovery and survival. With his brainy mentor, the authoritative panther Bagheera (voiced by Ben Kingsley), and his fun new friend, the crazed bear Baloo (voiced by Bill Murray), Mowgli finds out that nature is filled with creative personalities. He makes friends with other animals like the psychic yellow python Kaa (Scarlett Johanson) and Louie, King of the apes (Christopher Walken). In his jungle adventure, Mowgli faces entanglements that measure his valor, forethought, and the fidelity that he owes to his people. Shere Khan becomes the main antagonist. His role is to highlight the conflicts of identity between humans and animals, between outsiders and insiders, as well as relationships between enemies and friends. Mowgli's encounters with Shere Khan serve as the film's central conflict, highlighting themes of identity, belonging, and the power of friendship.

Analysis: The wild child's identity inside and outside the jungle

In Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894), the hero, Mowgli, a human child raised by wolves, undergoes a journey that presents the difficulties some children experience in their search for identity. Mowgli's story shows a profound picture of childhood, identity, and belonging that is similar to the true case of feral children. Via Mowgli's life, the reader can explore deeply what specific difficulties children face while searching for their place in the complex society.

The Jungle Book has also received other memorable film adaptations; the most famous of which is the Disney animated version in 1967, whose catchy songs made it famous among children. Another live-action movie version was made in 1994 by Disney with Stephen Sommers on the director's chair and Jason Scott Lee as Mowgli, bringing much more adventure into the events. The latest achievement in this series of adaptations is a Jon Favreau's *The Jungle Book* (2016) which mixes live action with computer-generated images. Celebrities such as Bill Murray and Ben Kingsley lend their voice to the characters for another vivid interpretation of Kipling's stories. Every adaptation is captivating, and each has offered a different approach to telling the same story, attracting different generations and viewers.

Favreau's *The Jungle Book* is an enlightening movie for children that continues the anthropomorphic tradition of giving human voices and personalities to the animals, which is the case with many children printed fictions, TV cartoons, and movies. In this exciting new adaptation of the Rudyard Kipling tale, Mowgli, a boy who grows up in the Indian jungle with wolves as his foster parents, sets out on a journey with his faithful allies Baloo the bear and Bagheera the panther. The climax of the movie presents Mowgli standing up to his dangerous and longstanding adversary, the tiger Shere Khan. In the end, Mowgli accepts his fate and is content with his choice of being part of the jungle and of the family he now has in the animal kingdom.

Despite his deep bonds with his wolf family and the guidance of the panther Bagheera, Mowgli yearns to understand his place in the human world and to find acceptance among his peers. According to the study conducted by Ekra et al. there is always a need "to incorporate children's perspectives to achieve a 'child friendly' environment" and to work on the "tension between the adults' responsibility to protect children and the children's own right to participation in decision-making" (1). Inevitably, many children find themselves in environments that are out of a child's comfort zone or downright hostile or unfriendly, struggling to harmonize their instinctive sense of self with cultural and societal identity. Mowgli searches for love and appreciation, which is often a tough situation, further complicated in his case by his isolation from other humans.

According to Kudratova, Mowgli's story "tries to question the general view of people and reverses the position of animal and man. (…) this work shows a different point of view rarely seen by humans. This makes an animal as valuable as a human being" (166). The plotline, which we should perhaps call posthuman, criticizes the prevalent belief that humans always outrank than other species on the planet and is congruent with the anthropocentric viewpoint, which no longer regards humans as prevalent over all living things, but part of an animal continuum.

Precisely, feral children, like Mowgli, provide a poignant glimpse into the complexities of human development and the impact of the environment on identity formation. These children, raised in isolation from human society, often face profound challenges as they attempt to integrate into mainstream culture. In his article, H. Peter Steeves explains that "Our peculiar treatment of feral children is partially a direct result of our confusion over their, and more fundamentally our, nature" (11). As he adds "Surely there is a desire to see these children act in a more familiar manner (…) In such cases there is an attempt to mold the habits, personality, and even the body of the child into something more recognizably human" (11). The case of Kamala and Amala, two feral girls discovered in India in the 1920s and allegedly raised by wolves, serves as a haunting example of the enduring effects of social deprivation on cognitive and emotional development. Serena DeBois explains that

> After perhaps a half-dozen years with Singh [the rector of the local orphanage who narrated their case], Kamala had a vocabulary of about 40 Hindi words, (…) Singh was able to get Kamala to walk, eat and sleep as the other children (…) but at the time of her death he was still far from seeing her become socialized. (20)

Despite efforts to rehabilitate them, Kamala and Amala struggled to adapt to human society, underscoring the deep-seated imprint of their early upbringing. They could be neither fully human nor fully wolf.

Mowgli's journey is also defined by the difficulty he faces in figuring out what to do with the identity he has been given as a human being, and what to do with the upbringing he has experienced in the jungle. For the whole movie he struggles to deal with himself, as for him the essential question is where he belongs. His contacts with human beings give him a chance to deal with the impossible dilemma of choosing who he will be. Likewise, real-life feral children not only experience the most profound sense of disconnection, which they circle as they struggle to establish links with others, but do not know what they need to fit in present society as well. Without the support and guidance of caregivers and peers beside them, they are confounded when encountering social complexities leading to difficulty in understanding formal conventions. According to Michael Newton:

> The story of Mowgli in *The Jungle Books* is of his progress away from the jungle, savagery, and his childish irresponsibility, and towards a tentative maturity, an acceptance of his place in the human world. (…) In the jungle, Mowgli possesses a double identity, he is both man and animal. It is likely that this freedom of identity, unfixed and fluid, is as much a condition of his childhood as of his savagery. Throughout the stories it remains a matter of confusion as to whether Mowgli is a boy or an animal. He himself oscillates between one and the other according to his mood and circumstance. (Newton 304-306)

Despite Mowgli's efforts to assimilate, he is often met with fear and suspicion among both the animals and the humans, viewed as an outsider whose origins are a threat to the established order. His journey underscores the inherent biases and prejudices that shape societal attitudes towards those deemed different or other. Benporath argues that "the relationship between adults and children [is] biased on two flawed assumptions: first, that childhood is an impediment, a passing phase of impaired maturity: and second, that

children benefit from the proliferation of rights ascribed to them" (1). Similarly, feral children often encounter societal stigma and marginalization, and are viewed as anomalies or aberrations rather than individuals deserving of empathy and support.

Mowgli's childlike innocence and vulnerability are pivotal to the narrative, as he represents the innocence and purity of childhood, untouched by the complexities and prejudices of adulthood (his adult equivalent would be Edgar Rice Burrough's Tarzan of the Apes). His journey of self-discovery and growth reflects the universal experience of children navigating the world around them, free from the burdens and biases that often accompany adulthood. The film explores thus themes of growth, development, and resilience. Moreover, Mowgli's vulnerability and innocence evoke empathy and emotional resonance from viewers, drawing them into his journey and allowing them to relate to his experiences on a deeply personal level. In their article, Haeny Yoon and Tran Nguyen Templeton argue that children's views should not only be heard for educational purposes, for the entertainment of adults, to forward neoliberal agendas, or to further our own objectives. Rather, by listening, we can better appreciate the brilliance and inventiveness of young children whose social environments have significance (Yoon & Templeton 1). Audiences may witness Mowgli's evolution from a naïve and sheltered young boy to a courageous and self-assured older individual, highlighting the transformative power of experience.

In *The Jungle Book* Mowgli's odyssey turns out to be the dramatic portrayal of the journey of childhood, the struggle to accept who one is and feel a part of the society. His life is a reflection of the feral child' culture, with its interplay of nature and nurture, as well as instinct and socialization. Through Mowgli's story, as compared to real-life cases of feral children, we achieve an understanding of the significant and, sometimes, the insurmountable challenges faced by children as they cope with complexities of their environment. Finally, Mowgli makes us realize that the principal quality of the human spirit is its resilience and the fact that love, acceptance and comprehension aid in the development of one world community, joining human and non-human animals alike.

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Giftedness: The Dilemma of Educating a *Gifted* Girl

JUDITH CALLEJA ALTÉS

Release date: 7 April 2017
Director: Marc Webb
Screenwriter: Tom Flynn
Producers: Karen Lunder, Andy Cohen
Cast: Chris Evans (Frank Adler), Mckenna Grace (Mary Adler), Lindsay Duncan (Evelyn Adler), Jenny Slate (Bonnie Stevenson), Octavia Spencer (Roberta Taylor)
Companies: FilmNation Entertainment, Fox Searchlight Pictures, Grade A Entertainment
Genre: drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4481414

Summary: Solving the family equation

Gifted (2017) is set in St. Petersburg, Florida, and follows the story of seven-year-old Mary Adler, an exceptionally gifted little girl who lives with her maternal uncle, Frank Adler. Mary has a natural talent for mathematics, inherited from her dead mother, Diane, a brilliant mathematician who committed suicide when Mary was still a baby. Evelyn, Diane's and Frank's mother, went back to England after learning that Diane was pregnant. Mary's grandmother refused to maintain any contact until she found out through the school Principal that Mary is also gifted. After Diane's death and in Evelyn's absence, Frank becomes Mary's de facto guardian. He raises her to have a normal childhood, differently from Diane's high-pressure environment. However, when Mary's mathematical abilities catch the attention of Bonnie, her teacher, the school suggests that Frank enrolls Mary in a school for gifted children. It is after his refusal that Evelyn is made aware of Mary's giftedness. She sues then Frank for Mary's custody, hoping that the girl will develop her full academic potential and finalize Diane's work on the Millenium Mathematical Problems. The court rules in Frank's favor but compromises and lets Mary attend a school for gifted children part-time to allow her to explore her mathematical interests while still enjoying ordinary activities, just like any other of her friends.

Analysis: Bridging STEM and childhood

Marc Webb (b. Bloomington 1974) is an American filmmaker and music video director known for his cinematic style and his indie productions with mainstream appeal. His career started directing music videos for popular artists such as Green Day, Maroon

5 and My Chemical Romance. His filmmaking breakthrough came with the film *(500) Days of Summer* (2009), starring Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Zooey Deschanel as the protagonists of the singular romantic comedy-drama. Webb's next hit productions were *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014) with Andrew Garfield as Spider-Man and Emma Stone as Gwen. In 2017, Webb directed *Gifted*, a heartwarming story about a young girl with a gift for mathematics. *Gifted* presents an ongoing dilemma among families and educators of gifted children and what is the best approach to ensure their well-being while still allowing them to attain their full academic potential.

The gifted little girl in this film is Mary Adler (played by Mckenna Grace), who at just seven-years-old is already able to solve advanced problems and equations, yet has only been homeschooled and has not had contact with other children her age. Frank (Chris Evans), her uncle and guardian, decides to enroll her in a public school to let her have as much of a normal childhood as possible. Frank's wish to protect Mary's childhood also springs from what happened to Mary's mother, Diane, who, under the strict surveillance of their mother Evelyn (Lyndsey Duncan), was not allowed to have friends or boyfriends as they would distract her from academic excellence. The result of this upbringing was Diane's ending her life after experiencing depression and loneliness. In view of this tragedy, Frank is trying to protect Mary from having a similar fate marked by early excellence followed by isolation and unhappiness.

Although Mary's family is just her uncle Frank and her one-eyed cat Fred, she feels happy surrounded by them. As film critic Simran Hans states, "The film's heartfelt advocacy for an unconventional family model is easy to love." However, one of the key points Evelyn uses in court to claim that Frank is unfit to take care of Mary is the fact he is not wealthy, while she can easily afford to pay for tuition in the best schools and let her granddaughter live comfortably. Yet, as it is shown, family is about protecting each other and ensuring the safety of children, as Frank has done for years while Evelyn remained uninterested in Diane's daughter. Frank is depicted as a good guardian raising a kind girl who stands up for those who are being wronged and who loves him very much. Although Frank scolds Mary saying that violence is not the solution, he is still proud of her for defending a classmate who was made fun of in the school bus. In an interview for *Collider*, Marc Webb states that the movie is not "thematically ambitious, but the heart of it is good and warm, and it's important to reinforce the idea that our family is not necessarily the one that we're born into. When that's reinforced in the stories we tell, it feels like a really powerful and important thing" (in Radish).

The decision to make Mary gifted in her mathematical abilities is also worth commenting on, as it seems to challenge the gendered stereotypes which exclude women from STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), a male-dominated field. Her abilities inevitably make Mary stand out among the other students of her class as a math prodigy. While her peers are studying sums, she is "able to solve differential equations in a millisecond, with a mind that soars over that of her child peers" (Gleiberman). Mary is a smart, sweet, and playful girl who enjoys reading books about advanced formulas as well as interacting with other children. In this sense, the movie subverts gender stereotypes about femininity and masculinity. Mary Adler is smart and capable in mathematics and defends other kids by punching an older student who was

bullying one of her classmates. Violence has been traditionally attributed to masculinity, but Mary shows that she can also fight for what she believes is fair and right. Nevertheless, she also explores her girlhood by playing in the playground with her girl scout friends, which is a proud achievement for Mary.

As noted, the key issue in the film is how to deal with special talent, whether to embrace it or try to ignore it and promote an average upbringing. Mary's grandmother, Evelyn, is convinced that gifts must be cultivated thoroughly regardless of age. According to Gleiberman, Evelyn's attitude is snobbish in its core, as she is trying to differentiate Mary, making her feel superior to the rest, just as she did to Diane throughout all her childhood. As he notes, "Evelyn has returned because she too is a mathematician, as well as a sparkling and cultivated British snob who wants the child to embrace her 'superior' nature." As McGee states "8-15 percent of young children fall into this category" (100) though teachers only identified 2% of gifted children. Nonetheless, McGee argues that "Recognizing these children's unique characteristics is the first step in helping them reach their full potential" (100).

McGee also tackles the issue of the economic resources in families with gifted children, as their special education requires considerable funding: "Parents most likely to seek additional resources for their child's talents and intellectual strengths tend to come from backgrounds that are economically sound and are confident in their abilities" (101). This applies to Evelyn, who is highly educated and wealthy, while Frank is just able to offer Mary emotional support as his resources are slim. As Herrington states, Frank is limited by his low wages and lack of comforts: "Frank fixes boat engines; the grime under his nails (and the beer he swigs) suggest that he's firmly rooted in the working class." So, this is not only a battle for Mary's custody, but also a clash of classes within the same family as mother and son are separated by their income. For Evelyn, thriving consists of gaining recognition and wealth and contributing knowledge to society; for Frank, it is better to live a happy and peaceful life, have good morals and let a kid grow in a normal and healthy environment.

Mary finds herself embedded in a family conflict beyond her age and agency. Even though she is considered a mathematical prodigy, she is still a little girl, unable to make her own decisions about how she wants her life to be. Since she is not given the choice to stay with Frank, on the grounds that her talent could be key to solving mathematical problems, Mary ends up attending university lectures about complex topics, with adult students. As Herrington points out in an ironic tone: "Next stop: the local court, where a fight for her 'best interest' ensues, bogging down the story." Frank and Evelyn are, in short, fighting for Mary's best interest, all the while without asking her directly for her opinion. It can be inferred that she enjoys studying mathematical problems but, clearly, she also wants to stay with Frank. The little girl knows that Frank has always loved her, regardless of her mathematical skills, while Evelyn only wanted her after finding out she is gifted.

Mary Adler is portrayed by Mckenna Grace, a child actor who started acting in 2012. Director Marc Webb commented in an interview that "Separating her from Mary was difficult because she's incredibly smart, very articulate, really mature, and very professional. She knows she's got a job to do, but she's also got this kid quality to her" (in Radish). Webb's perspective on Mckenna is interesting, since he acknowledges that

she is a child and not only an actor who has a job to do. In an interview when she was ten years old, Mckenna offered her childlike perspective on acting in *Gifted* and established that her favorite line of the movie was "He wanted me before I was smart" (in O'Neil) in reference to Frank. In the interview, she also says that the message to be taken from the movie is that families come in all shapes and forms:

> "I hope that they find the message that people might tell you that the perfect family has to have money, and a big home, and a mom and a dad and a kid and a pet, but that may not be the perfect family for you. The perfect family for you could be… maybe you have one mom, or one dad, or two moms, or two dads. You live with a friend or an uncle, just like Mary does. But at the end of the day, the perfect family for you is the people you love and who love you and who you care about." (in O'Neil)

Gifted, to sum up, is a heartwarming movie about a math prodigy who finds herself immersed in a custody battle to decide what is best for her future. Mary, a character with childlike interests and a brilliant mathematical mind, challenges gender norms with her determination, interests, and attitude. What makes the movie worth watching is that it discusses unconventional yet loving families (here one formed by an uncle and his niece) and explores the dilemma of gifted children and how to ensure their happiness as well as their academic development. Both, the movie concludes, must be protected for the child prodigy's sake.

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Logan: The Sunset of Wolverine

YIFAN ZHOU

Release date: 3 March 2017
Director: James Mangold
Screenwriters: Scott Frank, James Mangold, Michael Green
Based on *The X-Men* comics franchise
Producers: Hutch, Parker, Simon Kinberg, Lauren Schuler Donner
Cast: Hugh Jackman (Logan), Patrick Stewart (Charles Xavier/Professor X), Dafne Keen (Laura/X-23), Richard E. Grant (Dr. Rice), Boyd Holbrook (Pierce), Stephen Merchant (Caliban)
Production Companies: 20th Century Fox, Marvel Entertainment, Hutch Parker Productions, the Donners' Company, TSG Entertainment
Genre: superhero film, western genre
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3315342/

Summary: The aging hero

In 2029, the aging Logan (Wolverine) works as an ordinary limo driver to earn money for the prescription drugs to help sedate Charles Xavier, Professor X, the man with the most powerful brain in the world who now suffers from dementia. A suspicious woman, Gabriella, approaches Logan and asks him to escort her and a little mutant girl, Laura, to a shelter called Eden. Logan, who believes that everyone close to him will suffer and even die, never voluntarily offers any help and, unsurprisingly, rejects Gabriella's request. Soon, Gabriella is killed and Logan finds Laura hiding in his car, so he, Professor X and Caliban start being hunted by a group of hired guns, sent by the Reavers. It turns out that Laura (X-23) was cloned with Logan's DNA. There are many children like her with other mutants' genes, and they are being hunted to be euthanized. Logan questions her story when he discovers that their destination is an address from an X-Men comic book. While on the road, a family that shelters them are killed by the gunmen; Professor X is also killed by a younger clone of Logan, X-24. Finally, Logan and Laura meet her friends. The children want to reach a refuge in Canada, but right before they cross the border are caught by the Reavers. To rescue them, Logan uses a serum to boost his powers temporarily. Together, they win the battle, but Logan is too injured to recover, leaving young Laura alone again in their anti-mutant world.

Analysis: Weary Logan and wild-child Laura's mutual redemption

Best known for the films *Cop Land* (1997), *Identity* (2003), and two films in the *X-Men* franchise, James Allen Mangold（b.1963) is an American film director, producer and screenwriter. When asked about his motivation for the last film of the *X-men* trilogy, he answered that he wanted to avoid the predictable, empty, loud and expensive superhero pictures and preferred to create something both entertaining and moving (see 20th Century Studios Singapore). What frightens most Logan, the Wolverine, is not death, or a villain, but love and commitment. Therefore, Mangold decided to make a more intimate film, much like his other films.

One can clearly see the homage to classic films such as *Shane* (1953) or, more closely *Unforgiven* (1992), in the way *Logan* deconstructs the line separating man and heroic legend (Tallerico). Michael Welsh from 615 FILM also regards *Logan* as the mutant version of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), another masterpiece dealing with a closer approach to the superhero. The success of this movie is undoubtedly credited to the impeccable performances of skilled actors Hugh Jackman (Logan) and Patrick Stewart (Charles Xavier/Professor X), but also to the thrilling interpretation of Laura/X-23 by the shining new star Dafne Keen, which is in no way inferior. Her "intensity, composure, inner-life" in the improvised audition impressed Sir Patrick Stewart, who wondered how the little girl could create the intense feelings she was projecting around her (see SYFY).

As noted, Logan fears intimacy. He witnessed the death of his supposed father and took vengeance against the killer, who turned out to be his biological father. He also had to kill his love, Jean Gray, a potent Omega-level mutant who lost her control of her powers. To some extent, the traumatic curse he bears—losing the ones he loves—keeps him away from any close relationships. Paradoxically, Logan loves and respects Charles Xavier, the man whose brain is comparable to a weapon of mass destruction, and who is suffering from dementia. In order to buy medicines for Charles on the black market, the weary Logan keeps a low profile as a mundane limousine driver, who even takes bullets with his flesh just to protect the rented car from scratches. He and the albino mutant Caliban (Stephen Merchant) stay in an abandoned plant in Mexico, taking care of Charles, as if they were the Steptoe and Son of the mutant world (Harp). This quasi-father-and-son relationship is by no means one-sided. Prof. X always wants Logan to have a normal life, at least to take a moment of respite and feel it.

Xavier also understands how similar Laura is to Logan. At first, Logan refuses to help the child because her troubling existence destroys every tranquil moment he has. Even when he learns that Laura is his clone, he does not treat her as his daughter (or sister). Rather, he shouts and reprimands Laura whenever she behaves wrongly, using swear words. He even leaves Laura alone, though at that time Xavier's safety is his priority and he possibly trusts that the girl can handle their hunters on her own. Logan's rejection and reluctance are justifiable to some extent, as even in his craziest dreams he never imagined he would have a child, or that he and Prof. X would be forced into the dangerous situation to protect her. Nevertheless, all these reasons increase the misery of Laura's young life.

Laura appears to be an uncivilized beast. When left alone inside the house, she calmly eats a bowl of cereal calmly, waiting patiently like a leopard for its prey before tearing the mercenaries apart with ferocity and agility. Be that as it may, beneath her monstrously violent behavior there lies a fragile and delicate child who longs for love and care. Laura was brought up in a lab, trained to be a killing machine, a weapon easily replaced by a better clone, the ruthless X-24. In the past 11 years, she has been constantly maltreated. Indeed, the Mutant Children experience further dehumanization as their bodies are marked as commodities (Orozco 320). "We do not call them baby or kiss boo boos. They're part of a study. Do not think of them as children. Think of them as things. They have patents and copyrights," says one of the workers in the lab. There is a scene in which Laura cuts herself cooly with her metal claw, just to watch the wound self-heal. She also witnesses the death of her caregiver, Gabriela, and the torture of her friends. Logically, she is furious and violent because this is the only way she can defend herself. However, her anger demonstrates how much she cares for her friends and for Gabriela, which could explain why she seeks Logan's recognition so desperately when she realizes that he is her biological 'father', one of her few connections to the world. Yet Logan's reaction only pushes her away, leading her to refuse to talk until the middle of the film.

Despite her inborn hyperviolence, Laura embodies the idea of "working with what you have, whatever you have" (Chrystos 58). Her subjective initiative is truly impressive. She never stays and waits for others' help; she is strong enough to take care of herself and even of the adults. When Logan is exhausted and passes out, she drags him to a clinic, and she even drives him to join her friends. On the one hand, her independence is heartbreaking, for she can rely on nobody but herself. On the other hand, her tenacity is inspiring. She uses all her resources to negotiate and construct her identity in the world. When Logan rejects her, she responds by rejecting him. Initially, she remains silent, but when she starts to talk, in her mother tongue Spanish, she shouts at Logan "¿Tú esperas que hable contigo sin mirarme? ¿Tú esperas que hable contigo cuando me insultas y tratas de dejarme atrás?" (Do you expect me to talk to you when you don't look at me? Do you expect me to talk to you when you insult me and try to leave me behind!?）As a Latina (the actress Dafne Keen is half-Spanish), her language choice contributes to her image as a smart, self-determined girl who voices her complaints straightforwardly. The way she expresses herself indicates her agency, with her intentionally ignoring the fact that Logan does not speak Spanish but understands anger. Even though she wants recognition, she does not compromise easily. When Logan decides to leave Laura with her friends, she is hurt and falls silent again. But when Logan eventually saves all of them, she calls him "Daddy." The language switch reflect her attitude, from doubt to acceptance and a final approval of Wolverine.

Thankfully, to some extent, all her efforts soften Logan, who then becomes willing to share his nightmares, his own thoughts about killings, about the guilt he carries, even though it's hard to discern whether his motivation comes from being an adult and a predecessor or from being a 'father'. "You're gonna have to learn how to live with that … all the same," he tells her. The man who fears intimacy finally is ready to welcome a new inhabitant into his heart, which facilitates a mutual redemption between Wolverine and his 'daughter'. When Logan lies dying, he murmurs "this is how it feels" and rests forever,

which corresponds to the final monologue in the movie *Shane*, when the violent hero says goodbye to the farm boy that so admires him:

> "A man has to be what he is, Joey. Can't break the mould. I tried and it didn't work. There's no living with a killing. There's no going back. Right or wrong, it's a brand. A brand that sticks. Now run on home to your mother, and you tell her... everything's alright and there aren't any more guns in the valley."

The death of Logan signifies the beginning of another era for Wolverine: his young female successor Laura will write a new chapter. Compared to other powerful but stereotyped female characters in comic books, such as Jean Gray, who becomes an evil mutant out of control, or Black Widow, a talented but sexualized agent who dies by sacrificing herself, or Wonder Woman Diana who values her boyfriend above all else, Laura is a refreshing innovation. As a girl who is allowed to be silent, angry, and violent she is undoubtedly one of the most fascinating female characters in recent movies. Some may argue that Laura is a bad model for children, potentially encouraging them to resort to violence. Yet, arguably, she narrows down the gender gap and undermines gender stereotypes, offering a broader platform for girls in action-adventure cinema. Hopefully, there will be grown-up female characters in the future like Laura, who do not need to wear body-hugging sexy tight suits to please the audience. In a world without Logan, his 'daughter' Laura—young, female, and Latinx—becomes the embodiment of boundless potential (Asif et al.).

To sum up, through the outstanding portrayal of this female character, *Logan* conveys the progressive concept of gender equality and challenges stereotypes, making it a landmark work. The humanistic elements, such as the emotional entanglements, and ethical dilemmas of the characters, form a stark contrast with the action scenes in the movie, leaving a profound impression. Undoubtedly, this work will inject new vitality into superhero films. Young star Dafne Keen may very well stand alongside other great actresses like Chloë Grace Moretz and Natalie Portman, providing an exemplary model for more young girls. After all, "The thing you must remember about a camera, it photographs thoughts," says Patrick Stewart in the interview, and "I look at Daphne and I see scrolls of thoughts going across her eyes, she's incredible" (in SYFY).

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The Florida Project: On the Outskirts of the American Dream

MERITXELL LANCIS TRIBÓ

Release date: 6 October 2017
Director: Sean Baker
Screenwriters: Sean Baker, Chris Bergoch
Producers: Sean Baker, Chris Bergoch, Kevin Chenoy, Francesca Silvestri, Shih-Ching Tsou
Cast: Brooklyn Prince (Moonee), Christopher Rivera (Scooty), Aiden Malik (Dicky), Josie Olivo (Grandma Stacy), Willem Dafoe (Bobby), Bria Vinaite (Halley), Valeria Cotto (Jancey)
Companies: Cre Film, Freestyle Picture Company, June Pictures. Distributed by A24
Genre: drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5649144/

Summary: Summer adventures

The Florida Project follows Moonee and her friends during a summer in two low-grade motels outside Disney World. Scooty and six-year-old Moonee meet Jancey when they spit on her grandma's car and must clean it up. While the children explore the motels and stores, Bobby, the motel manager, keeps an eye on them. Halley, Moonee's mother, cannot find a job and struggles to make ends meet. To make quick money, she buys perfumes wholesale and peddles them outside an expensive resort until the security guard catches her. After this, Halley decides to offer sexual services in her motel room. During a game, Moonee and her friends accidentally set an abandoned building on fire, after which Ashley (Scooty's mother) forbids him from playing with Moonee. Because of the kids distancing, a fight ensues between Halley and Ashley, prompting the latter to contact Social Services. Their investigation determines that Halley is unfit to raise Moonee because she used the motel room for sex work. Upon hearing this, Moonee runs away to Disney World with her friend Jancey.

Analysis: A transient childhood

The story of *The Florida Project* originated in the minds of Sean Baker and Chris Bergoch when they read news articles about families living in low-grade motels after the 2007 housing crisis. Baker noted in particular the stories in Orlando, Florida, better known as a theme park destination. As Baker explained, the stories focused on the

contrast of "children growing up in budget motels just outside the place we consider the happiest and the most magical place on Earth for children" (in Tutt). For the director, these stories adapted perfectly to the narratives he likes portraying on screen. After starting his career in indie cinema in the early 2000s, Baker gained recognition with *Tangerine* (2015), a movie focused on the lives of transgender sex workers shot entirely with an iPhone 5S. Following this success, Baker and his team of producers could secure a budget of 2$ million, the largest of his career, to make *The Florida Project*.

Despite the harsh topic of the movie, the director wanted to portray a realistic depiction of the families' living conditions, with critics praising how he "avoids the traps of condescension and prurience that ensnare too many well-meaning movies about poverty in America" (Scott). As the *New York Time*s critic further points out, Moonee and her friends are not inherently tragic characters since they are also able to experience joyful moments. When crafting the script, Baker and Bergoch took inspiration from the series of classic comedic shorts *The Little Rascals* (1929-1944), which followed children during the Great Depression and influenced the film's episodic nature. As Travers concludes in his review for *Rolling Stone*, Baker "blending *The Little Rascals* with his brand of indie neo-realism, cuts a direct path to the heart," creating, in turn, "one of the best and most provocative films ever made about childhood."

The childhood depicted in *The Florida Project* is sustained through the performances of the child actors who, as Scott points out, "run wild with an exuberance that adult viewers can only envy." Achieving this type of naturality is especially surprising because all the child actors were newcomers to the movie industry. Baker and his team let the children improvise during the play scenes; he used this type of directing because, as Baker stated in an interview, he "hates when he sees child performances that are too adult-like" (in Mink). This approach helped some child actors, like Christopher Rivera, who plays Scooty, and who, before the movie, lived in similar conditions to his character. On her side, Brooklyn Prince, the actress who plays Moonee, plays her character with unique depth, putting into the screen a "mischievous and fearless-heroically bratty; devilishly cute" character (Scott), easy to latch on with and follow on her journey. Her performance sustains and fuels Bobby (played by Willem Dafoe, the only famous actor in the movie), a character that can be described as "a gruff hardhead who is also a nice guy" (Gleiberman). Newcomer Bria Vinaite, who plays Halley, managed to encapsulate the polarizing factor of her character despite being new to acting, as she is at "the early stages of a restless, acting out personality" but when she is with Moonee, she gives her "a great deal of smiling love" (Gleiberman). The crucial factor in Vinaite's casting was her natural chemistry with Brooklyn Prince; as Baker remarked, when they met, they instantly clicked into a "sibling relationship" (in Bradbury).

The importance of this casting pairing underlines Moonee's relationship with her young mother as the heart of the movie. Through *Project*, the audience follows Moonee's adventures while perceiving Halley's struggles only indirectly. We see her struggling to pay rent every week, but we do not dive into her anxieties. At times, it is difficult to discern what Halley is doing; for example, it is not clear if she is doing sex work at the motel because the camera stays locked in the bathroom with Moonee and her confused perception, though it is assumed this is what is happening. Halley's struggles as a single mother corresponds to a common trend in the reality of teen motherhood, as young

mothers are often unable to move forward; as Anne Driscoll warns, US "Teen mothers in more recent birth cohorts are at an increased risk of being single parents and of being poor, even if working full-time" (1288). As we can see in the movie, only Dicky's heteronormative family can overcome the situation and leave the motel.

As Hennessy points out in her study *Work and Family Commitments of Low-Income Women*, there is a clear push for impoverished women to enter the workforce because "if poor women do not engage in paid work (…) they are punished by the elimination of welfare benefits" (7); this argument opposes the pressure for middle and upper-class women to choose to take care of the family. However, in Halley's case, she does not seem to follow any of the "two gendered cultural scripts" proposed in the study (Hennessy 69): she does not have a real job, like other mothers, but at the same time, she does not pay attention to Moonee and even brings her sex work into their shared room, ignoring the core beliefs of the "family commitment." In general, Halley's behavior with her daughter throughout the film is neglectful; as Brian Minty states in his definition of emotional neglect, "neglectful parents offer little comfort or reassurance when a child is ill or upset" (64). In many instances, Halley is not aware of Moonee's feelings and emotions; instead, she always expects her to have fun and be happy, missing how much she understands of life. This misreading of her daughter's emotions ends with Moonee having to force a simulacrum of happiness despite her distressing circumstances, as we can see when she is forced to pose for a photo next to a burning house.

Halley's neglect also extends to the physical realm, as she is unable to provide proper safety for Moonee, which, according to *The Human Givens Approach*,[11] is one of the core needs of all human beings. Thus, Halley's inability to ensure Moonee's safety, especially when she locks her in the bathroom, leaving her scared when a man walks in, "indicates serious neglect, both physical and emotional" (Minty 65). Nonetheless, Moonee, who is only six, does not see any fault in her mother; she constantly strives to connect with her by copying her behavior. Even if, at times, she "comes on like a pint-size ballbuster, she is really just a sweet kid doing whatever it takes to please her mom" (Gleiberman). As the plot advances and Halley decides to do sex work, we see Moonee in more uncomfortable situations, with her taking sensual photos of her mom and, at times, replicating her poses.

The harsh reality surrounding Moonee is contrasted with the film's settings; the motels that serve as a home to the protagonists "are micro versions of Disney World, which is itself a simulacrum of the American Dream" (Paszkiewicz 147). However, once the camera lingers in the rooms and the hallways, we see the degradation of the place. Despite referencing the luxurious Disney resorts, the motels have feeble security and constantly need repair, as Paszkiewicz mentions in her analysis of the aesthetics of the film (153). This juxtaposition of location and space allows the social message of the movie to shine through as "Baker employs this imaginary in *The Florida Project* to mark the carceral and hyperreal quality of the present but also to highlight the glaring disparity

[11] "The human givens (HG) approach originated in the field of psychotherapy, and the many new insights provided by the research of its founders, Joe Griffin and Ivan Tyrrell, have been quietly revolutionising the effective treatment of mental health and behavioural problems for the last 30 years." From https://www.hgi.org.uk/human-givens/about-human-givens-approach.

between the fantasmatic dream of the self-designated 'The Happiest Place on Earth' and the desperate situation of his young protagonists" (Paszkiewicz 147).

Along the film, the children long for a real home, imagining what it would be like to live in the abandoned houses that surround the motels. A motel is a place "marked by transitoriness and mobility" (Paszkiewicz 149), what Marc Augé called a non-place. Moonee and her friends have lived in these spaces for years, confronting the precarity of their situation every month when they must vacate their rooms for 24 hours to prevent them from claiming residency. This makes them part of what David Rooney calls the "invisible homeless population—families living hand-to-mouth in motels originally designed to catch the tourist overspill." The children's play and actions are actually constantly interrupted and censored to avoid interaction with tourists. Nevertheless, in Moonee's reality, the motel is her only known home, which paints the ending as a double tragedy. Moonee is not only sad about suddenly losing her mother because of the intervention of Social Services and scared of Halley's violent tantrum; she also mourns the loss of her community. Moonee's relationship with her friends allows her to express a vulnerability that Halley does not seem to perceive; in fact, the only time Moonee allows herself to break down is when saying goodbye to her friend Jancey.

The film's ending leaves the audience with mixed emotions. As Jancey and Moonee escape to Disney World, they appear to transcend their reality and at last experience the magic of the place. According to Baker, the visit to Disney World can be seen as a "moment in which we are putting the audience in the headspace of a child, if only for a fleeting moment" (in Lee) to experience a last happy moment. However, this happiness is tinged with the knowledge that it is temporary, as the looming threat of Moonee's separation from her mother is not over. As Scott remarks: "No magic exists that can make the pain of reality disappear, but we do not know how to believe in anything else." Rather than emphasizing the tragedy, the movie focuses on the happy moment that wraps up the children's summer; spectators are left to decide whether their escapade is real, as we hope, or mere fantasy, as we fear.

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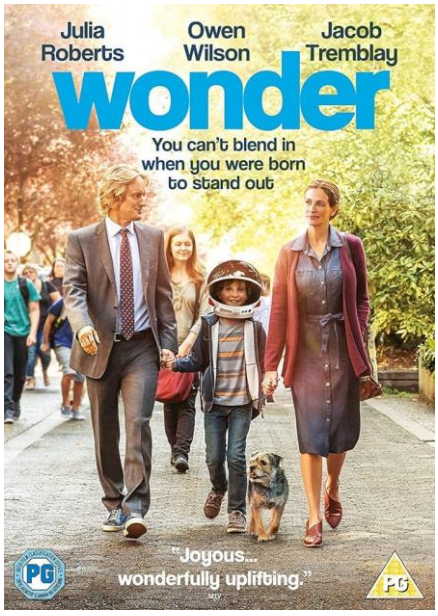
From *Wonder* to Wander: Auggie's Journey to Infinity and Beyond!

ESTEFANÍA CORTÉS GÓMEZ

Release date: 17 November 2017
Director: Stephen Chbosky
Screenplay: Stephen Chbosky, Steven Conrad & Jack Thorne
Based on the novel by R.J. Palacio
Producers: David Hoberman, Todd Lieberman
Cast: Julia Roberts (Isabel), Owen Wilson (Nate), Jacob Tremblay (Auggie), Izabela Vidovic (Via), Noah Jupe (Jack) Bryce Gheisar (Julian)
Companies: Lionsgate, Mandeville Films, Participant Media, Walden Media, TIK Films
Genre: coming-of-age family drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2543472/



Summary: Through the lens of Auggie Pullman

Wonder narrates the story of ten-year-old boy August Pullman, who was born with facial alterations caused by Treacher Collins syndrome. Auggie is not sure if he can manage attending school, after being homeschooled. The first day is nerve-wracking due to the stares and the unpleasant slurs from his classmates. Although he starts rough, Auggie becomes friends with Summer and Jack Will. Later, he has to endure a nasty Halloween prank. Auggie's parents complain about the bullying to the school administration, which finally leads to disciplinary action. Despite the setbacks, Auggie participates in the school play, and eventually controls his fears, delivering a moving speech. His classmates (including Jack Will) confess their wrongdoing and Auggie finds out that forgiveness and empathy make people better. In the graduation ceremony Auggie is rewarded for the amazing tenacity he has showed during his school year. He finally understands that he is bolder and more courageous than he ever thought he could be, which makes him accept his difference with even more confidence and pride.

Analysis: Unmasking the layers of self-discovery

Director Stephen Chbosky is best known as the screenwriter and director of the film adaptation (2012) of his own best-selling YA novel, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Chbosky has actually written for multiple genres; he co-wrote the script of the *Beauty and the Beast* live-action film in 2017 and of the musical *Rent* (2005), directing another

musical, *Dear Evan Hansen* in 2021. *Wonder*, released in 2017, narrates an uplifting story that celebrates the intricacies of human emotions and the importance of respecting physical difference in children. The movie is an adaptation of the popular novel by R.J. Palacio which follows the life of August Pullman, a boy born with facial deformities, in his struggle to find friends at school and fit in the world. By means of Auggie's story, the book deals with the subjects of resilience, empathy, and the importance of accepting uniqueness. The film goes in the same exact direction.

Auggie Pullman is played by Jacob Tremblay (after his role in *Room*) in a profound and sensitive way. Auggie is a personification of the problems endured by many children who do not fit the expected physical model for their age. In the case of Auggie, who was born with Treacher Collins syndrome, a genetic condition that hinders facial growth, he realizes how superficial society can be. From a young age, Auggie endures diverse surgical and healthcare procedures. Despite his physical difficulties, his inner strength remains strong. His resilience in evidence of how the human spirit can conquer challenges from early childhood. On the other hand, his brave exterior conceals an inner child who desperately seeks recognition and knowledge.

Throughout *Wonder*, Auggie must confront the brutal realities of bullying, exclusion and children's tendency to fear the unfamiliar. At school, he is the target of rude glances, snickers, and even unkind words from classmates who cannot see beyond his looks. Even though Auggie is smart, funny, and kind, he still gets excluded due to his facial difference. The movie masterfully illustrates the psychological damage that Auggies suffers once he realizes how lonely he is; also, how exasperated he becomes because he is not seen for who he is. The script emphasizes the role played by empathy and the extent to which kindness means the world to people who are looked down upon or misunderstood.

A key ingredient in Auggie's development as a person is his perseverance, linked to the limitless love and care of his family, particularly his parents, Isabel and Nate Pullman, played by Julia Roberts and Owen Wilson. Isabel's and Nate's determination to stand by their son and to be the parents he needs show how children benefit from their parents' support. Halim & Syamsudin claim that "a child who is expected to grow and develop properly needs support and affection from the family and the school" (59). The parents' unconditional acceptance of Auggie and their conviction about his fortitude and potential give Auggie strength against so many serious obstacles, consequently reinforcing our understanding of the deep role that family ties play in one's personality development and identity.

Amid these difficulties, Auggie also finds comfort in the relationships which look past surface appearances. Auggie's closest childhood companions, Jack Will and Summer Dawson, embody this philosophy with their loyalty and compassion, becoming witness to his struggles and transformations. Here the movie shows how empathy can improve our lives and the significance of the deep relations spread through time and space. It is thanks to his relationships of friendship that Auggie realizes he is something more than his skin surface and that the essence of his value runs far deeper than the features of his face.

Auggie's journey is, as noted, marked by bullying, which draws attention to the harsh living conditions of children who are judged negatively by their peers because of

their difference. All throughout the movie, Auggie has to deal with hurtful comment, denial, and mean acts coming from classmates who are plain unsympathetic and blind to the boy's nature. Their taunts reveal the devastating impact of prejudice and the damage that the words and actions of bullying make to the self-esteem and sense of belonging of a child. On the back of Auggie's hardship, the viewers may take a proper look at the hurtful aftereffects of prejudice and the very crucial role of kindness and appreciation for nurturing a more understanding environment.

In fact, Auggie not only experiences bullying from his peers at school, but also, as he explains, from society at large. As Silviana explains, "People tend to be afraid of something they don't understand. No matter how calm and sweet Auggie is, people are avoiding him like he is some kind of plague" (38). Initially, his community does not bother to have significant conversations with him, instead they forms beliefs and judgments based on his appearance only. However, his community eventually realizes that Auggie's value does not depend on his physical deformity but on more than that. *Wonder* succinctly conveys the message that we need to be vigilant against bullying and do everything possible to make our public spaces inclusive places of kindness, compassion, and understanding. Rananda explains that "even all the actions and forms of social discrimination became the process of forming [Auggie's] social identity" (14). Because of that *Wonder* suggests that bullying needs to be tackled straightaway, and also invites the viewers to reflect on their own behaviors, the attitudes and the culture of empathy and respect with the purpose of creating positive change.

The decision to portray Auggie Pullman as a child is an essential factor in the plot, for numerous reasons. Primarily, this is a period of innocence and vulnerability for those who are in the process of creating their own self-concept and identity. Through the character of Auggie, the story brings out his purity and the blamelessness which further underscores the injustice of the bullying and discrimination he is experiencing. This vulnerability humanizes the audience and stresses the importance of guarding and empowering the marginalized young who are either misunderstood or misinterpreted. Besides, childhood is the age of some of the most essential developmental stages such as socialization, self-discovery, and emotional maturity.

Auggie's school and family life offer various perspectives to understand such issues. Classmates, teachers, and family members, all of whom contribute to his self-discovery and understanding of the world, play integral roles in character development and the formation of diverse emotions. Through the story, the characters, and the perspective of the child protagonist, audiences appreciate that the narrative is accessible and easy to relate to. According to Casalme, "*Wonder* can spark dialogue and debate among children on its complex themes. Children are more than capable of going beyond identifying the themes of the novel" (39), which the film shares. The discussion about empathy, bullying, and tolerance is thus facilitated. Augie's adventures push child spectators to think and act about social and emotional learning, teaching them to have a positive impact on their communities. According to Wheeler, the story ""offers insight into new forms of community (…) [where] middle school serves as a microcosm of a changing society" (335). In essence, the focus on Auggie as a child adds plenty to the narrative's emotional magnitude, thematic congruity, and educational potency, and therefore positions *Wonder* as a gripping tale for all ages.

While Auggie's story comes to life in *Wonder*, the significance of his childhood years intensively extend beyond the screen. The telling of Auggie's story of self-discovery, resilience, and the search for belonging and understanding is also universal. Through the story of Auggie as a child, the movie grasps both the child's innocence and vulnerability, and it shows the power of empathy, compassion, and inclusion. In addition to the lives portrayed on the screen, millions of people were able to view the film and be reminded that kindness and empathy can overcome any type of discrimination or bias. Auggie's story reflects the power of the human spirit to grow and change for the better, even in the most difficult situations. Along with Auggie, we as spectators embark on a journey that calls us to examine ourselves and the way we treat others. At every turn, we are inspired to cultivate empathy, kindness and acceptance in our dealings. Offering the lesson from Auggie to accept differences and to respect individuality will generate a better place where future generations could live in a world with compassion and inclusiveness.

Wonder is a heart-warming story of human triumph, a testimony to the significance of compassion, acceptance, and resilience in overcoming various tribulations in life. The movie uses Auggie's experience to portray the need for kindness and compassion in creating a more accepting and loving society. Indeed, *Wonder* is more than just a film; it is a powerful call to action that encourages us to see beyond the superficial and discover the incredible value of every person we meet. In Auggie's story, we realize true strength lies in being different and not in conformity. This is demonstrated in Auggie's ability to stand tall in the face of adversity. He does this with courage and resilience.

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Bird Box: The Absence of Child Identity

CRISTINA FRANCO ROSILLO

Release date: 21 November 2018
Director: Susanne Bier
Screenwriter: Eric Heisserer
Based on the novel by Josh Malerman
Producers: Dylan Clark, Chris Morgan, Clayton Townsend
Cast: Vivien Lyra Blair (Girl), Sandra Bullock (Malorie), Julien Edwards (Boy), Trevante Rhodes (Tom), Danielle Macdonald (Olympia), Rosa Salazar (Lucy), Sarah Paulson (Jessica), Jacki Weaver (Cheryl), John Malkovich (Douglas)
Companies: Bluegrass Films, Chris Morgan Production
Genre: horror
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2737304/

Summary: Invisible menaces

Malorie Hayes is a solitary artist whose life turns upside down due to a seemingly unwanted pregnancy. Amidst these troubled times, a wave of mass suicides strikes the United States. Strange entities make people suicidal after they are shown their deepest fears. Malorie loses her sister to this phenomenon, and she joins a small community who take refuge in the home of one of its members. Although they roam freely in the streets, the creatures cannot penetrate buildings. Malorie and her new colleagues soon discover that these ethereal beings can cause damage even when seen through cameras. Also, there are people who are fascinated by these phantoms and hunt others to make them look at them, thus dying. Indeed, the community falls victim to one of these men, Gary, who manages to kill everyone but Malorie and Tom. After this, their mission becomes to raise the surviving children and reach a safe community located beside the river, which they have found after communicating with its leader through a radio.

Analysis: Dystopian childhood

Susanne Bier (b. 1960) is a Danish film director whose productions usually deal with the intimate, "carefully exploring the explosive emotions and complexities of familial bonds" ("Susanne Bier: Biography"). Certainly, her films seem to be fueled both by anxiety and hope. Due to her Jewish background, Bier argues, "there is a kind of intrinsic awareness that everything can end, that everybody can turn upside down (…) that has

to an extreme degree influenced everything I've done" (in Molloy et al. 264). Bier's most renowned films are *In A Better World* (2010), which was awarded the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, and *The Wedding* (2006), which was a nominee in the same category. Nonetheless, *Bird Box* (2018), based on the novel by Josh Malerman, is probably her most popular work, being one of the most streamed titles on Netflix (Sheppard). Its success translated into the release of its poorly-received sequel *Bird Box: Barcelona* in 2023.

Despite *Bird Box*'s commercial success, its critical reception was marked by very dissimilar opinions. For instance, Hadadi comments that the story "compares the desire to destroy oneself with the constantly challenging, selfhood-sapping nature of being a parent." Indeed, the movie centers on the complexities of parenthood rather than on childhood itself. Bier acknowledged that she was "describing a woman, describing a mother from a different point of view than the conventional point of view" (in Patches). Nonetheless, this vindicative message surrounding motherhood is partly silenced by the misrepresentation of mental illness. Thus, Corrall criticizes that mental illness and suicide "are mechanics to scare and entertain audiences and nothing more—making people with mental illness seem inhuman, nothing more than the worst characteristics of their illnesses." Therefore, it seems that the complexities and nuances of a troubled motherhood are eclipsed by the superficial and detrimental portrayal of individuals who are struggling with mental health, which is used as a mere horror device.

If the use of psychological struggles is conventional, the notions of femininity and masculinity might not seem much more complex. Although the main characters (Malorie and Tom) seem to defy the traditional notions of gender roles and attitudes, the rest of characters are rather normative. The female characters seem to focus typically on the well-being of the community and their behavior is marked by empathy and the will to help as many people as possible. However, this might seem to be a rather reckless movement in a post-apocalyptic world in which people who are immune to the creatures are hunting down others to induce their suicide.

Thus, pregnant Olympia lets Gary in out of mercy, when he asks the inhabitants of the home she has formed with other survivors for shelter, claiming that he is being chased by one of these groups forcing people to look at the entities. Douglas, who refuses to welcome Gary, and is seemingly the embodiment of traditional toxic masculinity, resents pregnant women like Olympia as a burden and understands empathy as a weakness. The narrative seems to favor Douglas's ethos when Gary turns out to be immune to the effects of the creatures that haunt the world and attacks the community. As a result of Olympia's 'weakness', everyone is murdered while they are busy with Olympia's and Malorie's labor. Only Malorie, Tom and the two babies survive this brutal attack. The arrival of the babies into this dystopic world is in this way marked by the complete loss of innocence and by death.

Malorie and Tom have different approaches to gender roles which mark the upbringing of the children in the following five years. While Malorie is a very harsh and emotionally distant mother, Tom is a caring and loving father (though neither child is his biologically). He wants to grant these children affection and tell them fairy tales, which might help them to survive in the outer world. Malorie angrily interrupts the scene on the grounds that feeding their imagination with happy prospects about life is not helpful

because “now they think they’re gonna go outside and climb trees with all these new kids and see butterflies and flowers” and that “it’s not a story; it’s a lie.” As Baccolini and Xausa indicate, even “if the film shows interesting and unconventional examples of parental care, the impression remains that this is a mere reversal of traditional gender roles, which are not entirely questioned” (406). It seems besides that the opposing gender roles are compensated throughout the movie, especially at the end.

When, once Tom sacrifices himself, Malorie embarks on the journey of finding the community across the river with the children, she realizes that Tom’s soft method is useful. During this dangerous trip, Malorie needs to get into the woods and find some resources for the children and herself after their boat capsizes and all their belongings are lost in the river. Although she warns the children not to leave the sunk boat under any circumstances, because the children have never been without supervision and are not aware of the outside dangers, Girl decides to try to go after Malorie tired of waiting. When Malorie finds her, she tells Girl off, but never explains the reasoning behind her decisions. These children are physically and psychologically blindfolded, they cannot see the outside world nor its dangers, which puts them at a higher risk. As Clifton and Meindl observe,

> Studies show that many parents seek to teach negative primals to their kids, associating negative primals with better life outcomes, but these associations do not hold. Across samples, work professions, and outcomes, negative primals were nearly always correlated with net negative outcomes, often strongly. Those with more negative primals were less healthy, suffered more frequent negative emotion states, were more likely depressed, were more likely to have attempted suicide, were much less satisfied with their lives, and enjoyed dramatically less psychological flourishing. (14)

Malorie’s strict but often unjustified negative inputs might have a fatal outcome. I suggest that this is explored in one of the last scenes of the film, in which Malorie loses Boy and Girl after she slides down a hill. The entities also cause auditory hallucinations, which almost trick the children into taking off their blindfolds by mimicking Malorie’s voice. Since Malorie never justifies her decisions to the children, simply claiming that the outside world is dangerous, for them it is logical that she suddenly asks them to take their blindfolds off. It is in that critical moment that Malorie realizes the power of storytelling. She takes Tom’s fairy tale and finishes it to prevent the children from uncovering their eyes and becoming thus victims of the invisible creatures. The strict rejection of childhood elements in a postapocalyptic world, therefore, endangers the children, who need hope and fantasy to survive in a world whose reality might kill them at any time.

Arguably, Malorie’s unconventional femininity or, rather, her embodiment of traditional masculine values erases the children’s identity. Throughout the film, the children speak in monosyllables and always in reply to the adults’ interventions. Even though Malorie is the distant parent in the family (her emotional detachment goes to the extreme of refusing to see herself as their mother or Tom as their father), she is the one who has the last word in regard to children’s upbringing perhaps because one (the boy) is her own biological child, while Tom has no genetic connection to the children. Indeed, Tom complains that Malorie has not even given them proper names: “You need to love them knowing that you may lose them at any second. They deserve dreams. They

deserve love. They deserve hope. They deserve a mother. You haven't given them names, Mal. Their names are Boy and Girl!" Malorie argues that "every single decision [she] has made has been for them," yet the refusal to give them names and Tom's implicit consent, despite his outburst, is a product of their selfishness, as the lack of names is supposed to act as a detaching mechanism. Since they live in a world where death might occur at any second, love could be very limiting and might put survival at risk.

Indeed, love and identity are withheld until Malorie and the children reach the shelter across the river, which is a former school for the blind. This sightless have a biological advantage against the mysterious menace that is killing the sighted. Since Malorie and the children are, in the new context, disabled, in this exceptional place and under these exceptional circumstances Malorie finally breaks down and allows herself to become vulnerable, claiming the lost feminine values again. She finally decides to grant the children a personal identity by giving them names. Malorie renames Girl as Olympia after her biological mother; and gives Boy Tom's name, confessing to him that she is his biological mother. For the first time, Malorie hugs and kisses her children; it is only in a safe space, then, that the children can develop an identity, at least under the approval of the adults. The children also become then beacons of hope. Their recently granted agency suggests that a more hopeful world might await, in which they can peacefully live regardless of the outside menace. As Ateşci Koçak notes, many postapocalyptic films after 9/11 "center on the child as the symbol of hope"; in them, "the child becomes a mighty and an indispensable figure for the adults at times of great despair and hopelessness" (124).

In a nutshell, *Bird Box* employs children as catalyzers for adults' psychological healing. Their characters are devoid of agency or personality, revolving around the decisions and ideals of the adults surrounding them. Henceforth, rather than being a film that opposes gender roles and stereotypes, the survivalist premise reinforces the projection of restrictive values onto the children. Because children are conceived to be a blank canvas, it is possible for adults to project their perspectives of the world onto them. This is a deeply dehumanizing portrayal of children, as it prevents adults from seeing them as complete human beings, reducing them to being persons still in development lacking a voice of their own, even in the direst circumstances.

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Tell It to the Bees: Buzzling Over the Threats of Masculinity

MARÍA SÁNCHEZ SOUTO

Release date: 9 September 2018
Director: Annabel Jankel
Screenwriters: Henrietta Ashworth, Jessica Ashworth
Based on the novel by Fiona Shaw
Producers: Daisy Allsop, Nick Hill, Annabel Jankel, Nik Bower, Laure Vaysse.
Cast: Anna Paquin (Jean Markham), Holliday Grainger (Lydia Weekes), Gregor Selkirk (Charlie Weekes), Emun Elliott (Robert Weekes), Kate Dickie (Pam Stock).
Companies: Motion Picture Capital, Motion Picture Capital, Archface Films, Film Constellation, Reliance Entertainment, Riverstone Pictures, BFI Film Fund.
Genre: drama
Nationality: UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7241926/

Summary : A difficult lesbian relationship in 1950's Scotland

Scotland, 1952. When the father of Dr. Jean Markham (Anna Paquin) dies, she returns to her hometown to take over his surgery. There, Jean meets young Charlie (Gregor Selkirk), who is interested in the bee hives of the Markham family. Lydia—Charlie's mother—, who has been recently left by her husband Robert, finds it strange that a doctor would invite a child to their home; hence she pays a visit to Dr. Markham to ask for explanations assuming that the new doctor is a man. After the embarrassing moment of discovering that Jean is indeed a woman, she and Lydia become friends. As the days go by and the economic circumstances of Charlie and his mother get worse, Jean lets them stay at their house and the friendship between the two women turns into love. Soon, they become victims of gossip from the entire town. Lydia's and Jean's world begins to break apart when Charlie discovers them together and tells his father, who threatens both women and takes his son away from them.

Analysis: A son's betrayal and the bittersweet ending

Annabel Jankel (b. London 1955) is a film director and producer known for the following titles: *Max Headroom* (1985), *Super Mario Bros* (1993), *Skelling* (2009) and *Tell It to the Bees* (2018). Jankel's career began with music videos for iconic artists such as Talking Heads, Elvis Costello, Miles Davis and George Harrison. She has also founded

two successful production companies: Cucumber Studios in London and MJZ (Morton Jankel Zander) in Los Angeles, London and New York. Before *Tell It to the Bees*, she had never directed a film on her own, except for commercials for Coca Cola, Greenpeace and Speedo. Therefore, this presented a new challenge, as she was accustomed to working in science fiction and often co-directing her projects. Jankel, along with the screenwriters, embraced the opportunity to adapt Fiona Shaw's 2009 novel into a period drama for the big screen. Feeling engaged with the plot of the novel, Jankel asserted that "Fiona Shaw's compelling love story was hugely inspirational to me for an unholy mash-up of 1950's social and magical realism; " she felt "Totally thrilled to be working with our wonderful cast, that includes Anna Paquin, Holliday Grainger, Kate Dickie, Emun Elliott and the young Gregor Selkirk… and of course, the bees" (in Clarke).

Although Annabel Jankel along with twin sisters Henrietta and Jessica Ashworth, the authors of the script (also known for being the screenwriters of the second season of *Killing Eve*), are proud of the film adaptation of *Tell It to the Bees*, novelist Fiona Shaw complains in *The Conversation* that

> The screenwriters for *Tell it to the Bees* wanted to give the film a 'sweeping romantic ending', like *Brief Encounter* or *Dr Zhivago*. But they wanted them to have a divided happiness—one of them can have the happiness of staying in the town to have a fulfilling career; and the other can have the future happiness of finding love in a more tolerant place. But they can't have those two things in the same place and with each other. (Shaw)

Indeed, it is crucial to acknowledge that this ending does not respect Shaw's intention when writing *Tell It to the Bees*. In fact, the writer believes that creating a happy ending for a queer couple is a political statement, that is, she wanted "for once: a fully romantic, fully happy, and therefore—in the context of lesbian fiction—a more radical ending" (Shaw). In contrast, the film's conclusion, while maintaining the themes of prejudice and ignorance prevalent in Shaw's novel, ultimately neglects the radical and fully romantic ending that she envisioned. As a result, Shaw has criticized the movie stating that "This bittersweetness is a straight person's finale" (Shaw)

Concerning the cast, the participation of Gregor Selkirk, the ten-year-old actor playing the role of Charlie, also made the direction more captivating, as he is the narrator of the story and his presence, in contrast to the majority of films in which children perform, is determinant to the development of the story. Selkirk himself asserted that he "loved working with Anna and the rest of the cast, they were amazing, and so kind and helpful to me. They encouraged me all the time and would even listen when I suggested some things during the filming" (in Caven). In this regard, it must be taken into consideration that Anna Paquin herself was not only a child actor as well, but also that she won an Oscar at the age of 11 for her performance in *The Piano* (1993); therefore, Paquin's background must have helped Gregor perform his role as Charlie Weekes. Nevertheless, Selkirk was not allowed to watch *Tell It to the Bees* when it was released, as—according to his mother—"Gregor is, after all, only 11 years old and the classification says the film is 15-plus. As parents, we are responsible for what he watches and have to be protective of him, just like any other parent would be" (in Caven). Given the sensitive content of the film, including sex scenes, violence, and a clandestine abortion, it is

understandable that Gregor was not allowed to watch the movie. However, the remaining doubt is to what degree he was aware of the whole plot as shooting progressed.

As mentioned, *Tell It to the Bees* is narrated from the child's perspective, albeit merged with an adult version, as the old Charlie recalls his memories of his mother and Jean Markham when he was ten years old. The story is a flashback, focalized through Charlie's way of perceiving the world. Nonetheless, this focalization is in part diffuse. According to Ledesma, "in an external focalization approach the perspective of one character is established through occasional POV shots and by following the character around" (152), though following just Charlie cannot work. For instance, the scenes in which Dr. Markham struggles to be accepted in the village as a woman doctor are not witnessed by Charlie; he is also absent when she starts to be romantically involved with his mother Lydia, and the story is mainly focused on the two women. This echoes Carolina Rocha's words when asserting that

> Children are the object of the spectatorial gaze: they move the stories forward and communicate within the parameters set by demands of the films' scripts, yet their 'voices' remain muffled by the conditions of commercial cinema, in which adults not only control the plots, but also the production, shooting, editing, and distribution of films. (4)

It seems that such is the case of *Tell It to the Bees*. In fact, Charlie's point of view takes on very negative connotations when he finally intervenes directly in the love story at the end of the film. He sees Lydia and Jean resting together in bed and, outraged, he betrays his mother by reporting the scene to his father, possibly out of jealousy rather than fully understanding the lesbian connection. Additionally, this scene is one of the key events that differentiate the movie from the novel. In the latter, "Charlie innocently tells his cousin about it [finding his mother in bed with Jean] and is overheard by his aunt, Robert's sister. She immediately understands the significance of the event and plots to shame and humiliate Lydia" (Wakley 149). Originally, then, Charlie bears no responsibility for the exposure of the relationship between his mother and Jean, but the screenwriters intentionally changed the plot and used him to dramatize the ending. In this manner, although Charlie's character has an interesting narrative arc, his intervention, aimed at adding tension to the plot, turns him into the homophobic betrayer of his own mother.

From the beginning of the movie, Charlie's relationship with the bees allegorically represents his feminine side and hence his connection with nature. He is gentle with them, and he is asked by Jean to tell them his secrets. By telling his concerns to the bees, Charlie opens up to nature and by verbalizing his worries and allowing himself to cry in front of them he reassures the connection between the natural world and the feminine. Charlie's preoccupations concern his desire to aid his mother: "my mum is sad. I don't know what to do," he tells the bees. In this manner, he seeks guidance from nature, whether it be through moments of venting his emotions or in the pursuit of finding answers to help Lydia. Although nature is usually associated with women, Charlie's behavior can be read from an ecofeminist perspective: the dualism of the movie which divides the feminine environment represented by Jean, Lydia and Charlie is threatened by the oppressive presence of Robert, which embodies the "masculine way of thinking that threatens women and nature" (Sujinah et al. 63) and childhood itself. In this manner,

Charlie is encouraged by Jean to explore that side of himself, which according to his father is damaging his masculinity. This is why the final twist is so out of character.

Charlie's connection with nature is also related to the sense of Otherness that both Lydia and he feels, that is, they are seen as strangers in Robert's town when they are abandoned by him. This feeling of alienation is heightened when they face eviction, symbolizing how society neglects and marginalizes them, which even gets worst when Lydia starts a romantic relationship with Jean. It seems then that "By depicting children who are often trapped in spaces of abjection, and confined by the claustrophobic poverty of the urban or suburban slums that surround them, these films attempt a social critique of the status quo" (Ledesma 152). This may have been both Fiona Shaw's and Jankel's intention when writing and adapting the novel; in other words—from a child's perspective—they attempt to criticize the prejudices, the ignorance and the marginalization that father abandonment and the consequent lesbian relationship may have cause in 1950s Scotland.

Furthermore, in the moment in which Robert abandons Lydia and Charlie, it is evident that he does not care about his son's development. Curiously, when he discovers that Lydia is dating Jean, he seems completely disturbed about Charlie's masculinity. Although Naomi Sokoloff asserts that children "are often the objects on whom adults foist their highest hopes and deepest fears and insecurities" (239), it appears that in the case of Robert his concern about Charlie's masculinity and separating him from his mother is simply to hurt Lydia. Additionally, Lydia's dating a woman is conceived as a menace to Robert's masculinity since the town's discovery of this relationship would damage his public image as well. As it is frequently seen, fathers in these situations tend to hurt or to fight for the custody of their children in order to hurt the mother and such is the case in *Tell It to the Bees*. Again, children are reified and used by their parents for reasons that they do not comprehend. It is not surprising then that Gill Wakley describes Charlie as "a child baffled and distressed by adult behavior" (149), as he suffers the abandonment of his father, the consequent sadness of his mother and the violence exerted against Lydia and Jean because of him telling Robert about this relationship.

Finally, it should also be highlighted that the sexual innocence depicted in the novel when Charlie sees that his mother's empty room is quite ambiguous in its cinematographic representation. Indeed, Shaw's perspective echoes Sokoloff words when asserting that "Children, in addition, by their very nature live an accelerated process of growth and change, and their changes constantly defy and challenge any fixed ideas their elders may adopt toward them" (239) and Charlie's desire, as secretly told to the bees, is to see his mother happy no matter who she is sleeping with. Throughout the eyes of the boy, Shaw attempts to normalize this lesbian relationship and to celebrate the healthy environment that both women create for Charlie's development as a boy and a man. Thus, this atmosphere is opposed to the hostile environment of the heteronormative family ruled by Robert at the beginning of the plot. Jankel joins Shaw in opposing heteronormativity but, quite incongruously, she sides with it by allowing the boy in her film to betray his mother and become the very reason why she cannot have a happy and healthy relationship with Jean, thus undermining novelist Fiona Shaw's achievement.

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Jojo Rabbit: Love and Tenderness Defeating Nazism

MARÍA SÁNCHEZ SOUTO

Release date: 18 October 2019
Director: Taika Waititi
Screenwriter: Taika Waititi
Based on the children's book *Caging Skies* by Christine Leunens
Producers: Carthew Neal, Taika Waititi, Chelsea Winstanley.
Cast: Roman Griffin Davis (Jojo Betzler), Thomasin McKenzie (Elsa), Taika Waititi (Adolf Hitler), Scarlett Johansson (Rosie Betzler), Sam Rockwell (Captain Klenzendorf), Stephen Merchant (Captain Deertz)
Companies: Fox Searchlight Pictures, TSG Entertainment, Defender Films, Piki Films.
Genre: dark comedy
Nationality: New Zealand
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2584384/

Summary: Childhood in the times of Nazism

1944 Germany. Johannes Betzler (played by Roman Griffin Davis), more commonly called Jojo, is a ten-year-old child obsessed with the Nazi regime. His father is away fighting in Italy, while he is under the care of his mother Rosie, who secretly collaborates with the allies. Jojo and his best friend Yorki (Archie Yates) attend a Hitler Youth training camp, but Jojo cannot finish his training because he cannot kill a rabbit. After being humiliated by older Hitler Youth members, Jojo returns and throws a Stielhandgranate without permission, encouraged by his imaginary friend Adolf Hitler (Taika Waititi). Alone at home one day, Jojo discovers Elsa Korr (Thomasin McKenzie), a teenage Hebrew girl hiding upstairs. Jojo threatens to turn her over to the Gestapo, but Elsa warns that his mother would be killed for hiding her. Against all odds, Elsa and Jojo become friends. One day after the Gestapo enters Jojo's house asking for his mother, he finds Rosie hanged in the town's square. This dramatic event is emphasized by the ending of the war and the consequent suicide of Hitler, which leads Jojo to realize how mistaken he was about the Nazis.

Analysis: Satirizing the Third Reich through the eyes of children

Taika Waititi (b. Wellington, New Zealand, 1975) is a famous actor, director, comedian and scriptwriter. He firstly became famous for *Boy* (2010), *What We Do in the Shadows* (2014) and *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (2016; see the essay in this volume). The

three films merge comedy with drama and horror, a mixture also perceived in *Jojo Rabbit* with its touch of dark humor. Waititi has has worked in many Marvel movies both as an actor and director. In fact, he directed *Thor Ragnarök* (2017) *and Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022) and has performed the role of the alien Korg in the aforementioned movies and in the *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Additionally, the New Zealander has also worked directing television shows such as *The Mandalorian* in 2019, *Reservation Dogs* (2021) and *Our Flags Mean Death* (2022-2023), among other titles.

His extensive cinematographic career evinces how multifaceted Waititi is, a feature easily perceived in *Jojo Rabbit* as well. Waititi adapted Christine Leunens' novel *Caging Skies* (2004) and converted it into *Jojo Rabbit*, adding personal elements in order to emphasize the humor of this satire. Leunens' narrative explores the perspective of Johannes Betzler, a ten-year-old boy who is a member of the Hitler Youth. This was what attracted Waititi to make the film, as he states that he "was initially drawn to the story's German point of view" because he had "never really seen that before and never seen it done in my style or my sensibility" (in Rose). Although *Caging Skies* is similar to Waititi's film, Leunens' Jojo lacks the boy's imaginary friend who is none other than Adolf Hitler (played by Waititi himself).

Regarding this bizarre choice, Waititi has strongly defended the idea of mocking Hitler through the naïve perspective of Jojo. In fact, in an interview for *The Guardian*, the New Zealand director stated that "It's a 10-year-old boy's idea of what Hitler is. He can only know what a 10-year-old knows" (in Rose). Therefore, this "buffoonish, immature Hitler" (Rose) appears to emphasize the satirical component of the movie. This involves the innocence and the ignorance of the children brainwashed by the Nazi's government, as they idolize their leader, adapting him to their imagination as a hero while demonizing the Jewish community by representing them as monsters. Additionally, Waititi's performance as Hitler should also be regarded as a personal satirical act since he is "the son of a Polynesian painter and farmer named Tiger and a schoolteacher named Robin, who is of Russian-Jewish heritage" (Sintumuang). Waititi's roots cannot be overlooked, as they represent the ethnicity that the Nazi's regime most intensely despised, tortured and exterminated. Waititi was aware of the sensitive content that he was creating, as it also affected his own origins. In this manner, he stated for *NPR* the following:

> I didn't want to make some crappy saccharine film, something that just was set in World War II and just had jokes at the expense of the experiences of millions of people. You have a big responsibility when you come to making a film set in that time. I feel like if people don't get the point of using humor to dismantle these regimes built on intolerance and hate, I'm wasting my time with the person I'm explaining it to. (in King).

Waititi's declarations raise questions concerning the boundaries of humor since its subjectivity may create controversies as described above. Nevertheless, he achieves his purpose as *Jojo Rabbit* satirizes and ridicules both the Nazi's regime and the elements that are attached to it, without being cruel to children.

Concerning the cast, Jojo Rabbit is played by Roman Griffin Davis, whose parents—Ben Davis and Camille Griffin—also belong to the film industry: the former is a cinematographer while the latter is a writer and a director. In fact, Roman's next performance on the big screen was in his mother's film *Silent Night* (2021). In an

interview with *Los Angeles Times* the young actor asserted that the film industry has always been present in his life and his decision concerning his acting career "was influenced by my [his] parents" (in Ordoña). Regarding his role as Jojo Rabbit, Griffin was informed about the horrors of the Holocaust and the manipulation of children during this period of History, and so was Thomasin McKensie. The young actress, who played the role of Elsa, a sixteen-year-old Jewish girl, explained that her research on the matter helped her perform her part (in Mitchell). It is evident that, although *Jojo Rabbit* is presented in terms of humor, the young actors were aware that they were representing a crude reality covered with layers of comedy. McKensie and Griffin also stated that—although at the beginning they felt starstruck due to the involvement of Scarlett Johansson, Rebel Wilson, Sam Rockwell, Alfie Allen, etc. in the film—they felt comfortable during the shooting, especially with Johansson, because, according to Roman, "Scarlet is also a mother and she was also a child actor so she kind of knew what it felt to be new in this industry" (in HeyUGuys).

Waititi continues the legacy of satirical pieces about the Third Reich. Similarly to Charles Chaplin in *The Great Dictator* (1939), *Jojo Rabbit*'s director uses humor to mock the Nazi regime. In fact, as he has stated, "Comedy has always, for thousands and thousands of years, been a way of connecting audiences and delivering more profound messages by disarming them and opening them up to receive those messages" (in Rose). In this manner, Waititi takes a step further in this dark comedy when using fanatic Nazi children to emphasize the satirical component of the movie. Through the lenses of childhood, Waititi presents the way in which children integrate the politics of hatred into their lives, which is evidently characterized by their innocence and ignorance. Children do not question the values taught to them in the Nazi brigades, and, in this way, by incorporating messages of hate as absolute truths, Waititi manages to ridicule their fanaticism through the character of Jojo.

For this reason, the choice to depict Hitler as Jojo's imaginary friend—albeit criticized—constitutes a powerful element in his narrative, as it highlights the imagination of a ten-year-old when reconstructing an idolized figure. Hitler is truly a fictional character because Jojo only knows about him from the stories which he has heard; his perception of the man's reality is completely distorted. As Kalloli and Tyagi state concerning the representation of children's gullibility in *Jojo Rabbit*, "Their innocence can also be considered a metaphor for their ignorance, and the same ignorance most Germans gave as the reason for their inaction" (196). It seems that—through the development of the protagonist—Waititi seeks to represent the dangers of ignorance and to give a final message of hope, though this is brought on by Jojo's tragic loss of his mother.

Additionally, the audience feels sympathy for Jojo because he "is too young to differentiate the binaries of good and bad;" therefore, he "easily gets wooed to the glorified recognition that he could get by joining the dominating force of the nation"[12] (Joseph 7). Nevertheless, the moment when he meets Elsa Jojo starts questioning the Third Reich; he realizes that nothing that he has been taught about the Jewish community

[12] In fact, this is a matter still perceived in today's society, as the recent rise of Neo-Nazism demonstrates how easy individuals are manipulated by discourses of hatred and fear related to patriotism.

is actually true. From this moment Jojo is portrayed as a caring character; according to Joseph Jince,

> It is this positive attitude that he had inherited from his mother, which helps him to regain his scattered and ambivalent self and fall in love with humanity, irrespective of their cultural differences, because he has learned that humanism does not function on the grounds of human-hatred/ethnographic divisions or gender discrimination; blurring this separation and living with oneness is the biggest achievement of humanity. (7)

Since the beginning of the movie, Jojo struggles with his attributed feminine characteristics, but they are indeed the features that make him critical and mature. Hence, Jojo's progression from fanaticism to skepticism, embracing values related to love and care, frees him from the Nazi regime and its politics of terror. In this manner, there is a clear binary opposition that links the Third Reich with a hegemonic portrayal of masculinity. However, Jojo cannot yet manage to project a convincing masculine performance, which results in his being targeted by bullies and not being taken seriously (Lippert 18). The protagonist's incapability to perform this role also helps the audience to sympathize with him as he does not embody the values of masculinist, patriarchal Nazism, present in the bullies.

Jojo's performance of masculinity fails again when he finds Elsa hidden in the attic. The boy shows his fear concerning the presence of an outsider, who turns out to be a Jewish teenager, at his home, but he is also aware that he should prove his masculinity. After analyzing this encounter, Lippert affirmed that

> This scene reveals the ironic fragility of hegemonic masculinity, particularly when threatened by a female. It also illustrates how attempts to protect and defend masculinity include the blatant denial of contradictory information, meaning that efforts to persuade individuals to reconsider hegemonic gender beliefs need to do more than simply address factual inaccuracies. (27)

In other words, Jojo's interaction with the more mature Elsa challenges the ideas that the Reich imparted among boys and reaffirms Jojo's failure when trying to embody hegemonic masculinity.

Additionally, in contrast to Jojo, his best friends Yorkie performs a healthy masculinity, as he is not afraid to assert that he needs a cuddle or that he "cried for ages" when he was told about Rosie's death. The masculinist Nazi values are not as important for Yorkie as they are for Jojo, and so the former speaks openly of his feelings and his thoughts about the times they are living. In the beginning, Jojo and Yorkie represent two different types of contrasted masculinities opposed to each other, but they come together by the end of the movie. Waititi shows in this way that for Jojo growing up means accepting himself, recognizing both his feminine and masculine qualities and abandoning the Nazi dogma.

The parental figures of the movie should also be taken into account. Jojo's father is absent, presumed to be fighting in Italy for the Nazi regime. However, as the movie unfolds, it is hinted that he is very probably a deserter, and this is the reason why Jojo is taunted about the cowardice of his father. Richard Brody—writing for *The New Yorker*—understands the absence of Jojo's father as a way to display "a sort of wan humanism in which Jojo's fanatical Nazism seems excusable" (Brody), given the lack of his father's

guidance. However, Waititi mainly wished to highlight the challenges and difficulties of married mothers in wartimes. As the director himself explained (see Waititi), he wanted to write a love letter to all mothers in the home front who, like Rosie, must assume the role of mother and father. Rosie even risks her life by adopting an authoritarian attitude to stop Jojo from delivering messages of hatred and behaving accordingly to the regime, as he could report her (many Hitler Youth children spied on their parents and even betrayed them). She ardently tries to raise a good child in the difficult times of Nazism and, as it is seen at the end of the movie, she succeeds. After Rosie's death, Jojo vindicates the memory of his mother by showing kindness and by bonding with the enemy, which automatically dismantles all the prejudices inculcated by Nazism, about gender, race and ethnicity. It's sad indeed that his awakening requires her sacrifice.

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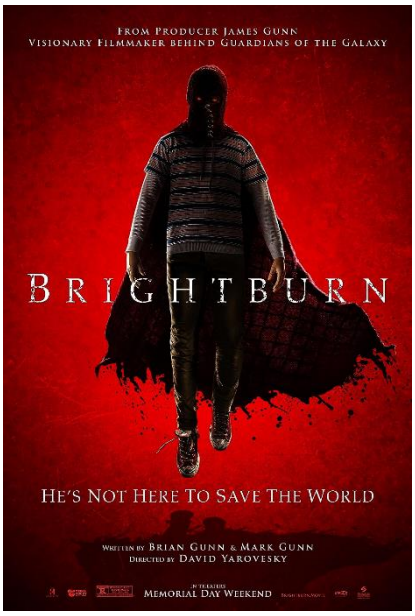
Brightburn: The Obscure Origins of the Adopted Child

CRISTINA FRANCO ROSILLO

Release date: 9 May 2019
Director: David Yarovesky
Screenwriters: Brian Gunn, Mark Gunn
Producers: James Gunn, Kenneth Huang
Cast: Elizabeth Banks (Tori Breyer), David Denman (Kyle Breyer), Jackson A. Dunn (Brandon Breyer), Matt Jones (Noah McNichol), and Meredith Hagner (Marilee McNichol)
Companies: Screen Gems, Stage 6 Films, The H Collective, and Troll Court Entertainment
Genre: horror
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7752126/



Summary: Deceitful miracles

Tori and Kyle Breyer are a young couple who are struggling with infertility. Miraculously, a crib-like spaceship containing a baby boy lands in their backyard. Instead of calling the authorities, they decide to adopt the mysterious child and raise him. The little boy, Brandon, grows up to be a clever and polite 11-year-old child who is bullied at school for his soft masculinity. Only Caitlyn, his classmate, comforts and supports him. However, as soon as he turns 12, Brandon starts behaving more aggressively due to the influence of the aircraft he came in. Finally, he is fully brainwashed by the machine, which instils in him the idea of taking the world over. After that, Brandon starts his prolific serial killer career by murdering with impunity Caitlyn's mother, his uncle Noah, and his parents, along with two hundred people on a plane. This seems to be just the beginning.

Analysis: Villainous masculinity

David Yarovesky is an editor, producer, and film director, who is best known for his work on the direction of the motion pictures *The Hive* (2014), *Brightburn* (2019), and *Nightbooks* (2021). These two latter productions focus on children and their connection with horror. While *Nightbooks* features a fantasy-horror story aimed at all audiences that portrays children as heroes, *Brightburn* offers a darker version of what children could become, especially when one does not know their origins. Yarovesky claims that he intended to subvert the classical tales on heroism and its origins, warning that "if an alien lands, and looks like a baby, do not raise it. Run for your life" (in Franciso). Therefore, Yarovesky has tried to challenge the positive traditional tales about heroism, portraying

how horrifying it could be that someone with superpowers might actually use them following their own agenda. Yarovesky emphasizes the horror component of the film, which he considers revolutionary: "It certainly felt like we were breaking new barriers and opening people's minds in a new way. (…) People are always going to remember a hopeful superhero icon all of a sudden just violently ravaging innocent people" (in Zachary). Indeed, the plot plays with the classical Superman story and twists it, answering the frightening question of what might happen if a great power was granted to someone who might not act according to the responsibility it comes with.

Nevertheless, it seems that the film raises a more worrying anxiety about the nature of adopted children. Because Western culture envisions children as completely dependent on adults, grown-ups usually believe that the children they raise will become a mirror image of what they project. As Balanzategui observes, the Romantic understanding of children as beings who lack reason "remains central to the contemporary assumptions about the child, it ultimately serves to position the child as an empty and somewhat unknowable vessel, within which anxieties and ambivalence constellate" (10). Therefore, children may become the embodiment of adults' deepest ideals or fears. If children are always available subjects to absorb the adults' moral scheme, they are also accessible to other entities and their values, which may be completely opposed to our ideals of morality; hence, children may become the representation of what we most despise or fear.

This fear of the unknown origins of adopted children has been repeatedly portrayed in cinema such as *The Ring* (2002), *The Orphanage* (2008), and *Orphan* (2009, see the essay in this volume). In these films, as well as in *Brightburn,* the mysterious origins of the children are part of their uncanniness. Although many films have explored the vision of children as beacons of evil, the adopted child brings up the question of inherited evil, which we may not control, and serves as an excellent horror device. Also, the trope of the murderous adopted child could be aligned with the horror narratives that emerged after 9/11, in which "entire gangs mutilate and kill innocent victims" and "death awaits those who venture into forbidden territory or travel to lonely places" (Pollard 38). In other words, the unknown became a strong horror device, which distorted the portrayal of daily life. From this moment onwards, terror could infiltrate the most unsuspected places, like the ideal nuclear family.

Brandon Breyer is a human-looking alien baby who lands in the backyard of his adoptive parents, who interpret his arrival as a miracle instead of a menace. One might think that his origins are somewhat frightening, and his inhuman nature could be dangerous at some point in time. However, Tori and Kyle manage to raise their alien boy as a normal child and become the epitome of a happy family. Reljic wonders how "could Tory and Kyle really have passed off their alien son as a routine adoption for 12 whole years?" Still, Brandon grows up to be an 11-year-old boy whose intelligence and good manners make him stand out from the rest of his classmates. In fact, he is bullied for being a kind boy. Only Caitlyn, the girl who sits in front of him, assures him that "smart guys end up ruling the planet."

These words become almost a curse. As soon as Brandon turns 12, puberty hits him in the most vicious way. Brandon becomes more violent and breaks Caitlyn's hand; her mom, Erica, blames his obscure origins and asks Tori about them: "Do you even

know who his real mother is? (…) whatever in-bread psycho gave birth to him." Rather than having a problem with the values that his parents have instilled in him, Erica quickly links the reason for Brandon's sudden evil to his mysterious origins. It is worth noting that Erica does not know about the alien nature of the child; still, she knows that he was adopted and links his violent nature to his unknown biological background. This seems to be a generalized problem for adopted children since "most Western societies generally privilege family membership through birth over adoptive family membership" (French in Brodzinsky and Palacios 36). Brodzinsky and Palacios expand on the potential effects of this discriminatory bias, which "can lead to feelings of stigma, difference, and not belonging among adoptees" (36).

Still, Brandon's unusual violent behavior is justified by his family, since it is understood as something related to his incipient adolescence, and not his adoption. Even though Tori worries about him, her sister (the school's counsellor) assures her that his sudden change in attitude "is called puberty." It seems that the angry feelings he is experiencing are to be expected in a boy as soon as he starts his transition to manhood. This quickly escalates into misogynistic violence towards women. His first two victims are Caitlyn and Erica. The young Breyer sneaks into their house and starts harassing Caitlyn, spying on her during her sleep. When the girl realizes what is happening, her fond feelings for Brandon turn into pure disgust. During a P.E. class, the teacher encourages the children to do a trust exercise, which consists of letting oneself lean onto the rest to be held. When Caitlyn's turn comes, she lets Brandon falls on the floor; hesitantly, Caitlyn offers Brandon her hand to lift him up and, as a response to her 'treason', he breaks it.

Although the Breyers feel overwhelmed by Brandon's attitude, they remain passive and, especially Tori, justify his behavior. This makes the situation more dangerous for Caitlyn, for them, and for everyone around them. As Turunç and Kisbu-Sakaraya acknowledge, "tolerating attitudes toward DV [Domestic Violence] represents the subordination of women and men's power over women. Such a power discrepancy in households is likely to create tension and interfere with parental functioning and child development" (21479). Indeed, Tori and Kyle completely lose control of their child, who starts his serial killer career by murdering Erica. Apparently, Brandon Breyer becomes a Richard Ramírez impersonator: his *modus operandi* consists also of sneaking into women's houses and killing them in the most brutal ways, while he gets rid of the men whenever they mean an inconvenience to his evil plans. Thus, Brandon murders his uncle Noah because he finds him hidden in their walk-in closet, where he was preparing to murder his aunt Marilee in her sleep.

The stereotypical approach does not cease there; the female characters seem to be deeply emotional whereas the male characters instill some sense of rationality to the situation. For instance, Tori becomes completely oblivious to her son's evil nature. Like any real-life serial killer, Brandon begins his psychopathic career by killing animals to practice his morbid skills. With his supernatural powers, Brandon kills his parents' chickens. Rapidly, Kyle recognizes that is his son's doing, while Tori tricks herself into believing that a wolf has destroyed a metal fence:

> TORI: So, the wolf is back.
> KYLE: No… no, baby… I… This isn't a wolf, I mean… This isn't an animal, I think… I think this might be Brandon. He was out here, early tonight, just staring at them…

> and the chickens… they were all fucking going crazy. Babe, a wolf can't do this! It can't rip a freaking door open and break a lock!
> TORI: And your 12-year-old son can?

Women, especially Tori, try to be understanding with Brandon's strange behavior. In contrast, men are aware that his behavior is not part of a (healthy) masculine puberty. Kyle warns Tori: "I never did shit like that, breaking a girl's hand? Goddamnit." This difficult family moment affects Tori and Kyle's relationship. While Kyle quickly spots there is something wrong with their child, Tori ignores all the red flags:

> TORI: I will never turn against our son.
> KYLE: He is not our son! He is something we found in the woods.
> TORI: How fucking dare you say that to me? How dare you fucking say that to me!
> KYLE: Babe come on, he is killing us!

Brandon's monstrous actions alter the view that his father has of him. It seems that the absence of a genetic bond is a sufficient excuse to stop considering the child that you have raised as your son, but simply as a stranger who crashed in the forest. Despite Kyle's cold-hearted attitude, the narrative favors his logical view and punishes Tori. Brandon's mother tries to protect him until the last consequences but when she realizes that her husband was right about their child, it is too late. In a twist of tragic irony, Tori intends to hide from the Sheriff all the evidence that could incriminate Brandon in the crimes. She realizes then that Kyle, Noah, and the Sheriff's suspicions were right: her son is a monster who has been killing all their acquaintances. When she reaches for her phone to call her husband, it is too late. Although Kyle has tried to kill Brandon before he could do any more damage, Brandon cannot be wounded with earthly weapons. Brandon murders his father and picks up her mum's call, knowing that she will be his next victim.

Despite the efforts to avoid the triumph of evil, the film ends in a sour tone: Brandon manages to kill everyone who gets in his way. Parallelling John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), the ending of the film portrays the child as an untouchable villain, whose identity is not clearly defined, as it happens with Michael Myers. On the one hand, their physical appearance is that of the regular children, they seem to be innocent; on the other hand, their actions are too gruesome, and they do not correspond to the traditional values of innocence and helplessness of childhood. As Lennard notes, "the sudden shift in perspective serves not only to finally (and cooly) identify the villain, but also to demonstrate how troublingly autonomous his point of view has truly been" (58). The values of their upbringing do not seem to have successfully penetrated Michael and Brandon's psyche. On the contrary, Brandon's evil nature seems to have triumphed over the psychosocial factors that would have made him a kind-hearted boy. This poses the question of the limits of affection and seems to grant to genetics a bigger influence on personality development.

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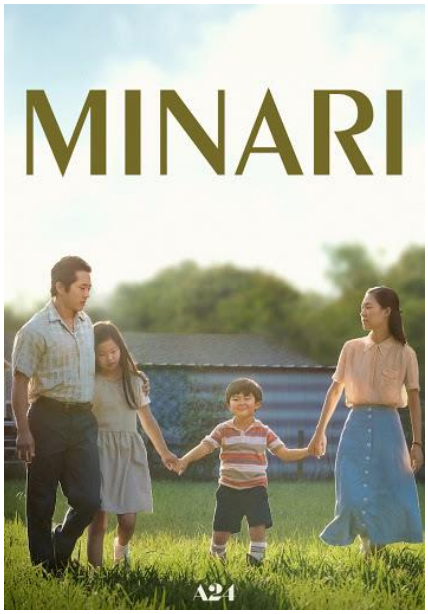
Minari: The Dual Life of Immigrants

YASAMAN PARASTOOK

Release date: 26 Jan 2020
Director: Lee Isaac Chung
Screenwriter: Lee Isaac Chung
Producers: Dede Gardner, Jeremy Kleiner, Christina Oh
Cast: Steven Yeun (Jacob), Han Ye-Ri (Monica), Youn Yuh-Jung (Soonja), Noel Cho (Anee), Alan Kim (David), Will Patton (Paul)
Companies: Plan B Entertainment, A24
Genre: drama
Nationality: USA
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10633456/



Summary: Blossoming identity or growing pains?

Yi's family leaves California to start a farm in rural Arkansas in the 1980s. The family's patriarch, Jacob, dreams of having a big orchard and plant Korean vegetables but his wife Monica is not happy about his decision, as she is concerned about the challenges they will face in an unknown community and far away from life amenities. David is the young son who is caught between his family's traditional Korean values and the American way of life he is exposed to at school. David's relationship with his grandmother Soonja, who comes to live with the family, is particularly troubled. Soonja's non-American behavior, traditional Korean cooking, and the way she talks often embarrass David, who longs to fit in with his American peers. However, he begins to love and respect his grandmother after she shares stories of her life in Korea that fascinate him. As the family navigates the challenges of their new life, they face setbacks, including a devastating flood that destroys their farm. Despite these obstacles, the family perseveres, and David begins to appreciate the beauty of his Korean heritage. While the father's dream threatens to break the family apart, the farm catches fire and the only Korean vegetable left is the minari planted by the grandmother.

Analysis: The challenges of immigrants' children

There are many barriers to the success of an immigrant family, as migrating is the beginning of a new life. When entering the immigration journey, individuals are constantly trying to cope with new challenges; economic status, societal roles, and merging into the new culture (see Tran-Nguyen and Nguyen). Accordingly, the various cultural

interactions that affect people's behavior can cause confusion and an incoherent treatment of children, which can lead to social and behavioral issues. In a study of Iranian youth living in the UK, it was observed that second-generation immigrants struggle to merge into society and be a part of the Western culture they are experiencing while having doubts about their roots and native cultural values (see Jafari and Goulding). This issue is not only of significance for the fragile life that immigrant children lead but also an obvious sign of generational problems that are lead to a generational gap. This gap is formed due to the different opinions and outlooks of the two generations that might relate to the language, beliefs, politics, work, and values and can cause misunderstandings in communication. When it comes to immigration issues, the generational gap is one of the main barriers that can confuse all members of a family. The children's new nationality and original culture affect this gap, while the new environment and culture also may confuse the older generation. Accordingly, immigrant families with children in sensitive age groups may struggle to build a friendly and uniform environment within the family itself (see Protzko and Schooler).

In *Minari*, an autobiographical film written by director Lee Isaac Chung (b. 1978 Denver), a child of Korean immigrants, seven-year-old David faces this duality, specifically when he has to spend time with his grandmother, whose language he does not speak. David is caught between two cultures: the traditional Korean values and customs of his family, and the American way of life that he is exposed to at school and in his interactions with other children in his rural Arkansas community. This is the reason for some challenging scenes between him, his grandmother and his mother when they are taking care of him and trying to keep a friendly, loving relationship. "She smells like Korea," David states in his awkward encounter with his grandma Soonja. He is often embarrassed by his grandmother's strange behavior and the traditional Korean food that she cooks, and he longs to be accepted by the other children in his class. However, David also loves his grandmother deeply and is fascinated by the stories she tells him about her life in Korea.

Film producer Christina Oh, a Korean-American woman, explains her own experience as an immigrant child like David and Anne:

> "Being a Korean American, being born here but being fluent in Korean while growing up with Korean-speaking parents and *halmonis* (grandma), made it a bizarre existence for me. To live in this dual space, one foot in Korea and one foot in America so to speak. Not feeling American enough and at times not Korean enough. I realized through this that I hadn't given much space to it in my own life." (in FTW Staff)

This duality is captured in quite a different way in Anne, David's older sister (her age is not mentioned but she appears to be about ten). As it can be seen, she has experienced more aspects of Korean life and has maintained more parts of this Korean identity within herself. Despite her Western clothing and compatibility with the American lifestyle, she acts as a mature individual and even takes care of her little brother, which is to some extent an Asian attitude. Fong mentions that, in the Asian hierarchal system, female individuals are usually expected to be caring and at the family's service. Apart from Anne's viewpoint, this gender stereotype is also depicted through Monica, the mother. When her husband chooses to sacrifice the family's comfort for his dream, all she does is cope with the situation despite her dissatisfaction. According to Fujitomi and Wong,

writing in the 1970s when the film is set, the father is the core of an Asian family. He plays the main role in deciding for the family and his wife is expected to support him and to provide the opportunity for his development.

One of the other major issues that child immigrants face in the new country is the issue of self-identification. As director Chung himself mentions, immigrants have to deal with the judgmental views of the native dwellers besides their difficulties: "There's just been so much conversation and labels and categories that have been set up (…), so many other people saying things about who immigrants are or who people from the South are, or who people of faith are like" (in Zhou). These negative opinions about the immigrants can exacerbate the situation, specifically for children who are struggling to fit into the new community and gain an identity to get accepted. Hence, Azzahra has asserted that the first generation of immigrants (David and Monica in this film) have maintained their Korean identity more than their children; as we see in the film, despite their Westernized living, they are loyal to Asian culture and language. However, the second generation's identity is not as stable. This is because the experiences and knowledge about the home country's culture, traditions, and living conditions are not similar for the children. Although identity is by nature subjected to changes for all immigrants regardless of their age, Walzer explains that when immigrants move into a foreign land, they carry their traditional values within themselves; those values, however, are not fixed enough to determine their true identity. Immigrants can obtain a new identity by combining their old roots and what they choose from the new environment, which is what the children David and Anne are doing, and what the director himself did.

Chung has observed all these struggles as has experienced a taste of them himself. He points out the obstacles immigrants face and their constant efforts to achieve a new life:

> "I made the film with the conviction and hope that we share much in common as human beings. Sometimes Korean Americans can feel alienation in their communities due to race, and they can feel further alienation in their own families while navigating cultural and language barriers with older generations. My desire was to go beyond these apparent divisions and look for the human story within this film's setting and people" (in Park).

In his film, therefore, Chung made sure that the children are a central part of the 'human story', as they are in the stories of all migrant families, who leave home precisely to secure a better future for them.

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‘For the Ones Who Left’: Childhood and The Troubles in Kenneth Branagh's *Belfast*

MARÍA SÁNCHEZ SOUTO

Release date: 2 September 2021
Director: Kenneth Branagh
Screenwriter: Kenneth Branagh
Producers: Laura Berwick, Kenneth Branagh, Becca Kovacik, Tamar Thomas
Cast: Jude Hill (Buddy), Caitríona Balfe (Ma), Judi Dench (Granny), Jamie Dornan (Pa), Ciarán Hinds (Pop), Colin Morgan
Companies: Fox Searchlight Pictures, TSG Entertainment, Defender Films, Piki Films
Companies: Northern Ireland Screen, TKBC
Genre: coming-of-age drama
Nationality: UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12789558/

Summary: An ode to childhood

Belfast, 1969. Buddy is a nine-year-old child living in a mixed Protestant and Catholic neighborhood. The film starts when a group of Protestant loyalists attack the homes and businesses of the Catholics on Buddy’s street. The residents set up a barricade to prevent further conflict and Buddy’s father Pa (Jamie Dornan) returns home from England, where he works, to check on the family’s well-being. Pa is asked by the Protestants to fight against the Catholics, but he refuses and receives several threats. Buddy spends plenty of time with his grandparents, who help him with his homework and give him useful advice. Pa and Ma (Caitríona Balfe) struggle economically and, due to the high unemployment in Belfast, he accepts a new job in England. Pa intends to take his family with him, but Buddy refuses to move as he does not want to leave his grandparents. After Pop’s sudden death and a dangerous riot in which Buddy participates, Ma decides they must go with Pa to England, leaving Granny alone in Belfast.

Analysis: Normalizing violence through Buddy’s eyes

Kenneth Branagh (b. 1960 Belfast) is a famous actor, director and filmmaker. He studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, graduating in 1981. This academic background helped him join the Royal Shakespeare Company and perform in numerous plays. Apart from his theatrical career, he started in the film industry by adapting several plays by Shakespeare, such as *Henry V* (1989), *Much Ado About*

Nothing (1993), *Othello* (1995), *Hamlet* (1996) or *As You Like It* (2006). His performances as Prince Hamlet, Iago or King Henry V, earned Branagh much respect in the film industry. His strong reputation as Shakespearian actor and director enabled him to explore other genres successfully. Thus Branagh has directed, for instance, superhero movie *Thor* (2011) and the live-action fairy tale *Cinderella* (2015). Also, he has recently directed and adapted some of Agatha Christie's famous books: *Murder in the Orient Express* (2017), *Death on the Nile* (2022) and *A Haunting in Venice* (2023).

Belfast is the most personal film that Branagh has made so far since it is inspired by his own childhood as a nine-year old boy growing up in Belfast during The Troubles. Branagh explores his parents' decision to leave Belfast and move to London. Although "At one stage I thought there was maybe a story about my grandparents when they were young" (in BBC), Branagh decided to approach the film from his own perspective when he was a child. Besides, he also wanted to go back to those moments in order "to understand my parents' process" concerning the tumultuous times in which they were living while raising two children.

Branagh has proudly defended his Irish roots and his childhood despite the conflict that Northern Ireland suffered during the last four decades of the 20thcentury because of the Troubles and IRA terrorism. Indeed, *Belfast* is an ode to childhood and to the city of Belfast as well since, despite being surrounded by fear, violence and uncertainty, the director has stated that his "Belfast childhood was characterised by freedom" (Meredith). This evinces children's capacity to evade themselves from any difficult reality in order to enjoy their own childhood. Furthermore, Branagh's return to Belfast and to his own memories of the city appears to be a celebration of all those people who happened to endure the conflict and had to decide whether to stay or to leave, a case in which there is not a right choice.

Approaching the film through a nine-year-old child, characterized as the representation of the director's childhood, is a strategy shared by other autobiographical films. It is inevitable to think of director Salvatore de Vita in Giuseppe Tornatore's *Cinema Paradiso* (1988); indeed, Kenneth's Buddy has indeed a lot in common with young Totó. In this regard, as Luke Goodsell states, "There's a point in certain filmmakers' careers when they're drawn to autobiographical reverie, the chance to revisit their childhood through the wisdom of adult eyes" and such is the case of *Belfast*. Nonetheless, most of the films that belong to this autobiographical genre are about the lives of male directors perhaps due to the relative lack of acknowledged female directors in the industry. Except for Charlotte Wells's *Aftersun* (2023, see the essay in this volume), there is a tendency to depict the remembrance of childhood from the perspective of boys. In this manner, according to Becky Perry, "Acknowledging the role of adults in the film industry is critical to understanding the ways in which boyhood has dominated accounts of childhood in children's films and to imagining how girlhood can be imagined anew" (568). Therefore, although it seems that this paradigm is changing, it is fundamental also to address childhood from the perspective of girls as well.

Concerning the cast, *Belfast* is performed by actors recognized worldwide. This aspect has also drawn the attention of spectators, since Judi Dench and Ciarán Hinds play Branagh's grandparents, while Jamie Dornan and Caitríona Balfe play his parents. Buddy is played by Jude Hill, a ten-year-old—at the time when they were filming the

movie—and, like Branagh, a Northern Irish actor. *Belfast* was his debut in the film industry and, despite being overwhelmed by the cast at the beginning, he stated in an interview that he did not expect "how nice the entire cast was and the crew. We all just bonded like a family to be honest and they just became my friends and they are really, really nice people. That was probably what I'm surprised about" (in Weintraub). Also, Hill recognized that his parents were even more thrilled than him about his debut because of the stellar cast: "My mum and dad were really like excited because they're like 'whoa, this person is in it, this person's worked with this people before" (in Weintraub). Although Hill appears to be decided to continue his film career, he was encouraged to start it by his parents as it is habitual with a myriad of child actors.

In this regard, Wendy Ide writes in *Screen Daily* that Hill "had earned the role through a rigorous process of interviews and auditions. Having initially sent an audition tape recorded by his speech and drama coach, who is now his agent, Hill then cruised through a series of virtual conversations and callbacks." The young actor described the process as "very intense," as he had also to get plenty of preparation in order to understand the circumstances that surrounded the life of Buddy. Therefore,

> To prepare for the role, Hill shared that his parents sat him down to talk about what happened in Northern Ireland in the 1960s, all the way through to 1998 (…) He also revealed he watched many YouTube videos and films with his family, to "get to know the role" the best he could. (Mitchell)

It is remarkable how much effort Jude Hill had to invest, especially considering his lack of prior acting experience. Although Branagh sought the naturalness and spontaneity of a child unacquainted with the dynamics of the film industry, the significant pressure and the work that Hill undertook at such a young age are undeniable. In this regard, "As you'd expect from Branagh, the performances are generally solid, though he's no Spielberg when it comes to working magic with child actors—he has a tendency to shove the camera in Hill's face to evoke wonder and awe; it's a performance that's both forced and naturalistic" (Meredith).

Kenneth Branagh decision to address his childhood and the Troubles from Buddy's perspective appears to be a useful strategy in order to delicately reflect the reality of numerous Irish families. As Kirsten Sandrock states, "Buddy's childhood symbolically embodies the experience of a collective Irish diaspora, one that thinks back to its own or its family's migrant experiences and turns it into a source of emotional belonging" (70). By exploring the complexities of displacement, Branagh also emphasizes the importance of having a loving family like Buddy's and his own. Although the Troubles are not the main focus of the film, "every episode of violence gets progressively closer to Buddy and his family, finally culminating in Buddy himself being roped into a riot and looting" (Symington). Both the grandparents and the parents are concerned about Buddy's well-being and spend time with him; their eventual separation highlights the reality faced by many families forced to be divided due to a conflict that was beyond their control but threatened their safety. This feeling is further dramatized through Buddy's eyes, as he suffers without fully understanding the reason behind all the violence surrounding him.

In this sense, according to Sandrock, "As in other childhood narrative, Buddy's perspective is linked to concepts of innocence and innate virtue. There is nothing corrupt,

nothing shady or immoral about Buddy" (67). As a result of this innocence, Branagh depicts the otherwise corrupted environment in which Buddy and his family live along with the unfairness of leaving a place and its people behind due to the risks of a political conflict. It is evident also that the "Emotional impact and identification are (…) sharper on screen when there is a child protagonist in play" (Donald et al. 3) and in the case of *Belfast* the audience sympathizes even more because the child protagonist is experiencing an extremely violent reality while simultaneously enjoying his childhood. As Jude Hill explained,

> I think [Buddy] doesn't really know what's going on with the world behind him, all about the Troubles and how it could impact his personal life. He's just focused on getting up to the top desk [in class]. He's a very innocent, funny little kid, but he's being dragged into all this conflict by his cousin, Moira. (in Ide)

Buddy attempts to live the typical childhood experiences, but Moira's intervention also reflects the ease with which children can be included in riots without fully understanding what is happening around them. In fact, Buddy ends up looting a store and stealing laundry detergent with complete innocence because he is instigated by his cousin, which—according to Branagh—"did occur" in real life (in Crowdus 13). Despite the comical nature of the scene—Ma takes Buddy back to return the detergent in the midst of the riot—, Buddy's behavior highlights how children normalize violence and adapt to it without trying to understand it.

Additionally, the role of grandparents must be highlighted as the importance that they have in the development of a child is not usually depicted in the film industry. The numerous scenes regarding Buddy's relationship with his grandparents and their encouragement to explore his own imagination provide a powerful sense of relief and tenderness despite the conflict (Symington). It is also remarkable that the audience does not know the names either of Buddy's grandparents or of his parents, which evinces Branagh's attempt to focus only on the protagonist's perspective. Buddy's close relationship with his grandparents is threatened by Ma's and Pa's decision concerning fleeing Belfast; their bond intensifies when Pop, aware that he will pass away soon due to a lung disease, tells Buddy that "I'm going nowhere you won't find me." Pop's death is another crucial element to consider, as it is the first time Buddy faces the death of someone so close to him. In this manner, Branagh successfully portrays the pain mixed with a lack of understanding through Buddy's perspective. The riots and Pop's death "add a layer of humanity and connectedness to a family who are split because of work patterns" (Brereton 304) and because the Troubles make staying in Belfast untenable.

Finally, as Sandrock affirms, since most of the scenes are focalized through the eyes of Buddy, he necessarily offers a limited socio-political and domestic perspective (68). However, his point of view is enough for the audience to understand that, although Pa is the one who works, it is indeed Ma who "remains the moral compass of the family, eventually deciding their fate, while making the huge decision to abandon a protective and supportive community where their core identity was shaped and solidified" (Brereton 303). In *Belfast*, the family dynamics are influenced by gender roles due to the historical period in which the film is set, but decisions are not made by a single family member; rather, everyone has a say. Buddy's and his brother's opinions are also taken into account, even though the family ultimately decides to leave Belfast for good.

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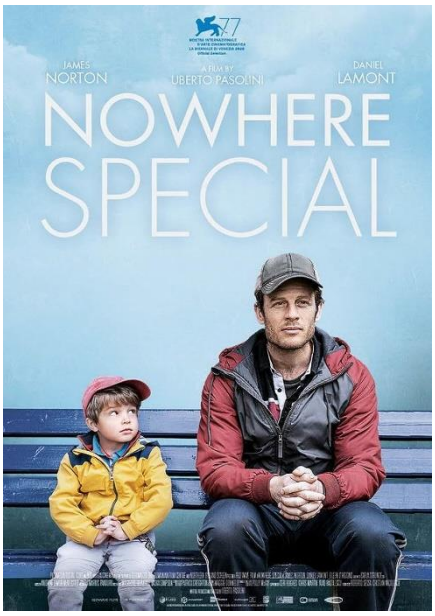
Nowhere Special: The Worst Possible Challenge of Single Fatherhood

SARA MARTÍN

Release date: 16 July 2021
Director: Uberto Pasolini
Screenwriter: Uberto Pasolini
Producers: Cristian Nicolescu, Uberto Pasolini, Roberto Sessa
Cast: James Norton (John), Daniel Lamont (Michael), Eileen O'Higgins (Shona), Stella McCusker (Mrs. McDonagh), Valerie O'Connor (Ella), Laura Dorothy Hughes (Mrs. Parkes)
Companies: Picomedia, Digital Cube, RAI Cinema, Eurimages, Romanian National Center for Cinematography, Northern Ireland Screen
Genre: drama
Nationality: UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11286640/



Summary: Extreme circumstances

John, a 34-year-old window cleaner from Belfast, in Northern Ireland, is a single father in charge of Michael, his four-year-old son. The mother, a Russian migrant, returned home when the boy was just a baby, leaving no contact address. Diagnosed with an unnamed terminal illness, supposed to be cancer, John has just a few months to live, a situation Michael is apparently unaware of. This distressed father needs to decide as soon as possible which of the potential foster parents he visits with his son (and Social Services case worker Shona) is the best candidate to adopt Michael when he passes away. As father and son get to meet the diverse persons, whom Michael believes to be just 'new friends', John wonders whether he knows his cute little boy well enough to make the best possible choice. Meanwhile Shona and her supervisor, Mrs. Parkes, struggle to convince John that, although he wishes his son to forget he ever existed, he needs to leave some kind of material legacy for Michael to remember him by.

Analysis: The choices of a working-class single father

Uberto Pasolini (b. Rome 1957), an aristocrat and a nephew of reputed Italian filmmaker Luchino Visconti, was until the 1970s an investment banker in London. He started a career in cinema as producer David Puttnam's assistant in *The Killing Fields* (1984), eventually producing the hit film *Full Monty* (1997) (see Byrne). As a director, Pasolini only has two other films to his name, *Machan* (2008) and *Still Life* (2013). This

film connects with *Nowhere Special* since it deals with a Town Council employee in charge of finding the next of kin of recently deceased persons who appear to have been alone. The story which director and also screenwriter Pasolini narrates in *Nowhere Special* was inspired by a real-life story first reported by the *Daily Mail* in 2017. Pasolini came across it quite by chance and after contacting with the Social Services workers involved in the case, decided to preserve the privacy of the real father[13] and imagine a new story based on the same premise (see Wilson).

Byrnes speculates that in *Nowhere Special* "The Northern Irish setting may be to do with funding," but the fact is that the film was shot and is set in Belfast, representing thus Northern Irish working-class masculinity through John and Michael. James Norton, who plays John, is a London-born actor raised in North Yorkshire who made a peculiar choice in accepting the role. Byrnes comments that the actor "employs a subtle Northern Irish accent, enough to convince." Yet, most comments regarding his excellent performance show, above all, surprise that Norton, a good-looking man on the shortlist to replace Daniel Craig as James Bond, performs so accurately a role very different from those who have made him famous, mostly on TV, such as Prince Andréi Bolkonsky in mini-series *War and Peace*, Anglican priest Sidney Chamber in *Grantchester* or rapist and murderer Tommy Lee Royce in *Happy Valley*. Freer, who notes that *Nowhere Special* is "a rare film that gives an uneducated, poor, white, tattooed man not only a voice, but also a sensitive one at that" praises Norton for his "quietly modulated performance." Cunliffe also highlights Norton's acting, calling it "compelling and underplayed." All the reviewers, in any case, marvel that five-year-old Daniel Lamont as Michael with his "silent, wide-eyed register" (Cunliffe) and his "super cute (but never cloying)" looks (Freer) offers such astonishingly nuanced performance.

Pasolini himself has commented that both casting choices were fortunate albeit strong elements of his own gender discourse. "My intention," he has noted, "was (…) to stay away from melodrama," which is implicitly coded feminine, to focus on "how to handle the situation" as John "tries to keep the worst or the more obviously emotional aspects of the situation away from his child" (in Wilson). The film reproduces, therefore, John's own position, avoiding overtly emotional situations despite being no doubt an efficient tear-jerker. Pasolini chose Norton, whose career he had been following, for his "ability to disappear into characters" but also (or mostly) because John is apparently

> "a strong and in a way quite macho man (…) whose life isn't at all that of a macho man—he's completely focused on his child. So I wanted an actor who was very masculine and very strong on the surface and, at the same time, able to make us feel enormous emotional pain" (in Wilson).

Daniel Lamont attracted the director's attention among the more than 100 boys contacted by casting director Carla Stronge because he was "very easy to look at, very friendly to the camera, completely unaffected by it, and very playful. Very charming, very sweet" (in Wilson). Interestingly, although reviewers comment on Pasolini's and Norton's

[13] The original *Daily Mail* article is no longer available, but it is easy to find online reports of the tragic passing of English working-class, single father Nick Rose, who died aged 40 after providing four-year-old Logan with a new home. See for instance Smith. Rose's search lasted for nine months.

decision to play down the actor's good looks (he plays, anyway, a sick, dying man) and, as I have noted, Freer calls Lamont super cute, the issue of the little boy's appeal is not extensively commented on. Instead, O'Sullivan, who struggles to understand how Pasolini could direct the boy so effectively ("Maybe Lamont is preternaturally intelligent. Maybe his astoundingly complex facial expressions were a happy accident," she observes) connects his unique performance to "that nebulous, yolk-y state between toddler-hood and childhood" also seen in classics such as Réné Clément's *Forbidden Games*, Isao Takahata's *Grave of the Fireflies* or Jacques Doillon's *Ponette*.

As Avilés notes in her review of a high number of sociological studies of single fathers across several decades, "el interés científico y social que despiertan las familias monoparentales masculinas es cada vez mayor" ["the scientific and social interest elicited by father-led monoparental families is increasing"] (155). This should not be surprising since in recent decades, Avilés adds, men themselves have dramatically changed the way they approach fatherhood. The category 'single father' is, in any case, a composite, since it lumps together divorced or separated men whose ex partners play no major role in their children's lives (this is John's case), widowers, or single men who becomes fathers employing surrogacy. A common trait they seem to share, Shorey and Pereira claim in another extensive review article, is "a transformation in values and performance and changing perspectives of fatherhood and masculinity. Single parenthood created a situation where single fathers become more self-aware of their parenting abilities and many developed the realization that they could no longer think in terms of 'I', but 'We'" (1108).

This agrees well with John's intimate bonding with his son, emphasized by the radical absence of the mother. Little Michael asks his father where his mummy is in the scene when he watches other children being taken to school by their mothers, but he seems satisfied when John reminds him that "I've told you, Michael, she had to go away." In a scene at the Social Services office, John discusses with Shona whether Michael's mother could be found, but she dismisses this possibility because "it really is too late." In the real-life case that inspired Pasolini the mother was also absent, but it is somehow problematic that this type of intense bonding between father and son is represented in audiovisual productions mainly *because* the mother is absent. This narrative was popularized by *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), the popular film with Dustin Hoffman, and has essentially changed little since then.

In a very complete article on the representation of single fathers on the film and TV screen, "Single Dads in the Entertainment Arena: Hegemonic Hierarchies and Happy Endings," Feasy contends that although "the single dad has been a staple of the situation comedy schedules" (113) and he has been present in drama series as diverse as *Bones* (2005-17), *Castle* (2009-16), *24* (2001-10) or *The Walking Dead*, 2010-22), "the lone paternal role is under-represented in the media" (116). She notes that "widowers rather than divorced dads" (120) dominate the panorama, with hardly any single father by choice, because this is a figure that challenges hegemonic masculinity. Even worse, the lone fathers are "routinely positioned in romantic situations" often leading to re-marriage "so as to alleviate the potential challenge of single fatherhood to more traditional depictions of family life" (123-4). From this point of view, John and Michael's story is absolutely exceptional, since the father has apparently never dated other women,

perhaps disappointed with himself for the mother's abandonment ("Well, it wasn't her fault. I just couldn't give her what she wanted," she tells Shona). Pasolini, besides, chooses not to involve him in any romance, either with Shona, or with any other woman, which makes perfect sense since he is close to death.

Clarke notes that

> On the page John is ever-so-slightly cliched; he fits the stereotype of the saintly working-class character whose own difficult childhood seems to have left him virtually baggage-free, a heroic selflessly good parent. And yet in spite of myself I invested totally in Norton's spine-tingling, intimate performance; and, in spite of myself, the end had me in floods of tears.

The flood of tears has, logically, much to do with the tragic situation but also, as Clarke hints, with John's social class. He and Michael live in a modest flat in a Council-built high-rise, and the adoption presents itself as a chance to provide the boy with better social circumstances. Two scenes stand out in that sense. In the first one, John and Michael visit an upper-middle-class couple who own a rather large property. The husband brags about being able to "afford the best education for our son. I mean, your son" a clumsy comment that alienates John, who mumbles that Michael would be happy to continue in the same school with his friends. This seems to contradict his own previous assertion to this man that Michael "deserves a normal family, two parents, a loving family home and all the opportunities I never had as a child. I want him to be able to do all the things I never could. Never even thought of." In the case of Trevor and Lorraine, the totally inappropriate foster parents who won't even allow Michael to take away a toy he fancies, their middle-class background is subordinated to their sheer inadequacy. Yet, John also fails to bond with Gerry, the postman who offers to Michael being "part of a big family. All good people, real people. You wanna stick to your own, people that respect you, not people who talk down to you. You know what I mean, John?" He does, but, tellingly John decides to leave Michael with no other man. He chooses instead Ella, a working-class divorced woman who had to give up a baby in adoption when she was sixteen and, unable to be a mother again, abandoned her husband when he refused to adopt. Ella sees the chance to adopt Michael "like the light at the end of the tunnel" and "like winning the cup." Her warmth and candid questions even elicit from John the revelation that he was himself raised by his lorry-driving father for the first four years: "Kept the cot in the back of the cab. And then after that, it was foster homes."

In those foster homes, John tells kind Mrs. McDonagh, an elderly widow, he was taught to avoid feeling, which is why he is facing his own death so stoically: "Never show weakness is how I grew up. You showed weakness in one of those places, you were screwed. That's how I lived my whole life." With Michael, however, he cannot help shedding tears, which he hides not wanting anyone to help or pity him. Sympathetic Mrs. McDonagh teaches John that this is love, and together with the teachings provided by other two women, Shona and Mrs. Parkes, John learns to overcome his tough-man wish to disappear from Michael's life. He thinks that when he is adopted "He won't even have to remember how useless his parents were. His mother leaves him and then his father dies." John forgets in this way two important issues: at age four Michael is old enough to retain memories of his father and although John sees himself as just a window cleaner, "Pasolini shows that John has made a meaningful impact on the world around him. It is

telling of his character that everyone he interacts with—from an auto mechanic to the agency workers to a fellow parent—is eager to support him" (Marceau). This support is no doubt a major reason why John finally fills in the memory box with an assortment of objects including a stack of cards he writes for Michael to open in the key events of his future life.

A tantalizing question is how much Michael understands about the situation and whether the spectator might overinterpret his quiet, observant demeanor as a sign that he knows much more than he shows. John describes his boy as "very popular at school. I'm always being told what a great kid he is. He's loving... caring. He... he's a happy wee boy." Yet, Michael appears to have misbehaved during a playdate with a little girl, and throws a subdued but intense tantrum because of a pair of new pajamas which he refuses to wear. John teaches him about death thanks to a chance discovery of a dead beetle and by finally reading with Michael a recommended children's story about the death of a dinosaur. He also explains to the little boy, borrowing words from Mrs. McDonagh, that he is to pass away soon but will remain always available. It is hard to say, however, whether Michael truly grasps what will soon happen, though his watchful gaze, little caring touches towards John, and his sudden question about what 'adopt' means suggest that he is beginning to understand. Indeed, Pasolini ends his film with Michael, holding his father's hand before Ella's door, looking up at him, seemingly validating his choice.

Since Michael is shown imitating his father when they walk down the street together, or when he copies on his tiny arm the swirling tattoos in John's muscled forearm, Pasolini hints that the boy will very much miss his dad. This very masculine melodrama, then, may avoid the pitfalls of afternoon TV-films and any excessive sentimentality, but its whole gender discourse seems aimed at making the little boy tough enough to endure the loss of a beloved father while adapting to the new life he has chosen for him. As spectators, we need to believe that Michael will navigate well the sadness which John's loss will bring because, we assume, his father has prepared him adequately. It is at the same time perplexing that the tears that would be naturally shed in a similar real-life situation are avoided at all costs, whether for the sake of softening the trauma of orphanhood trapping the boy and his father or for the sake of making the film as hard-edged as possible.

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Aftersun: The Nostalgic Journey of Love and Loss

MARÍA NAVARRO GARCÍA

Release Date: 21 October 2022
Director: Charlotte Wells
Screenwriter: Charlotte Wells
Producers: Adele Romanski, Barry Jenkins
Cast: Paul Mescal (Calum), Frankie Corio (Sophie), Celia Rowlson-Hall (Adult Sophie)
Companies: BBC Films, British Film Institute
Genre: drama
Nationality: UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt19770238

Summary: An 'idyllic' family vacation

An adult woman is watching old videos of a young girl on her TV. Eleven-year-old Sophie and her 31-year-old dad, Calum, are seen in them spending the summer holidays in Turkey. They have a close relationship, despite Sophie being completely unaware of Calum's depression and mental health issues. During the holidays Sophie lives new experiences, such as her first kiss, a fight with her dad, some loneliness, and the feeling of loss. After they say goodbye at the airport, we understand that the woman rewatching these tapes is an adult Sophie, who is looking back on his father, and how she was not able to see his mental health issues, which ultimately caused his suicide.

Analysis: Girlhood, Mental Health and Queerness

Charlotte Wells (b. 1978) is a Scottish director and screenwriter who debuted with *Aftersun* (2022) whose script she penned. This film is considered to be autobiographical, as it is inspired by Wells's relationship with her late father. During an interview with *Deadline Hollywood* the director stated that she was:

> "First inspired by honestly just slipping through old family photographs (…) just being struck by how young my dad looked in those pictures, my parents were fairly young when I was born and I was approaching the age that he was on them and so that was the seed that it began from, this young father and daughter who could be mistaken for siblings abroad together."

Wells's films is an "understated tale of love and loss" (Kermode) which focuses on childhood memories, being constantly replayed in Sophie's head to ascribe them new meanings which previously she was not able to see. In addition, *Aftersun* centers on girlhood and gender issues, demonstrating how "it is clear that involving women in the filmmaking process more would continue to set precedents in terms of how girl's stories are told" (Parry 582). Hence, Wells' narrative is proof of the positive impact a female director can have on telling stories which depict not only girlhood, but also gender, queerness (as Sophie grows up to be a lesbian), and parental dynamics.

Aftersun is narrated and interpretated from the perspective of 11-year-old Sophie. The emphasis on the child's view is used by Wells for the audience to mirror Sophie's lack of awareness of Calum's mental illness. Although spectators might be able to perceive something is 'wrong', they are not able to fully understand what, as this is hidden from them as well as from Sophie. It is "Calum's conscious effort to not pass on his trauma to Sophie by giving her a safe environment where all her needs are met" (Duggal). Therefore, the audience, perceives this holiday as idyllic and trouble-free while just noticing the subtle dramas affecting the father and daughter relationship. The dynamics between Sophie and Calum are based on instability and the feeling of the 'unknown'. Nevertheless, Sophie is very fond of her dad. As she says in the film, in reference to the fact that they don't leave together:

> "I think it's nice that we share the same sky. Sometimes at playtime, I look up to the sky and if I can see the sun, then, I think about the fact that we can both see the sun so, even though we're not actually in the same place and we're not actually together, we kind of are in a way, you know, like we're both underneath the same sky, so we're kind of together."

Despite their disconnection emotionally and physically during the years, she feels connected with him.

Furthermore, through Sophie's perspective the audience is presented with the feeling of nostalgia. This sentiment is defined as "a feeling of pleasure and also slight sadness when you think about the things that happened in the past." Nostalgia is introduced since the beginning of the film, as the audience sees the departure for their holiday of a girl and her dad filmed in a 90's video camera. Nostalgia is enhanced during adolescence, as young tweens like Sophie experience "conflicting emotions" (MacNeill) during their transition to adulthood. According to Katcho "adolescence involves the desire to hold on to the ideal world of childhood, the time when we were carefree, secure, and loved unconditionally" (in MacNeill). Thus, Sophie is experiencing nostalgia because she is growing up, and she is aware due to her father's complicated economic situation, that this holiday's might not be repeated.

The emphasis on Sophie is also used to depict the subversion of established gender stereotypes associated with girlhood and femininity. Through Sophie's outfits and personality Wells aims at "shift[ing] away from the overly stereotypical constructions of femininity narrowly associate with pink, dolls, princesses, make-up, and being annoying or needing to be rescued" (Parry 571). Thus, Sophie could be described as a 'tomboyish' character, which serves as a way for women, and especially young girls, to express independence though it ultimately and inevitably evolves into a form of femininity that society recognizes and accepts (Smith 122). Moreover, through the depiction of Sophie's

untraditional expression of girlhood, Wells also introduces the issue of queerness. This holiday also marks Sophie's queer discovery and journey. Although she shares her first kiss with a boy named Michael, she does not seem to enjoy it nor to have any romantic interest with boys. Therefore, Sophie is "seek[ing] to discover the possibilities of her own mobility through personal transition and engagement with issues of sexuality and identity" (Smith 122). Later, the audience sees an adult Sophie sharing her bed with another woman, assumed to be her partner, waking up in the middle of the night as their baby is crying. Thus, the trip also depicts how Sophie "understands her own queerness" (McEntee).

On another note, *Aftersun* discusses the issue of mental health, especially in men, to subvert how it is prototypically silenced. Wells "breaks with stereotypes associated with depression, suicide and mental illness" (Duggal). To put it another way, mental health issues have typically been described as breaking out in dark rooms, but depression can manifest in sunny beaches, as seen with Calum. Since the beginning of the film he is presented as a character with a 'strange' behavior. He illustrates how depression can be shown through "impromptu Tai Chi moves, self-help anxiety books, and a disingenuous smile plastered for the sake of one's child" (Duggal). As Paul Mescal states in the *Deadline Hollywood* interview, "Calum is battling his own demons," being constantly overwhelmed with sadness, guilt and anger whilst hiding those emotions to protect his daughter. Although the words *depression* or *suicide* never appear in the film, they are constantly hinted at by Calum himself: "I can't see myself at 40, to be honest. Surprised I made it to 30." Calum's insistence on teaching Sophie self-defense and on having open conversations are the secret father's attempt to prepare his daughter for a future without him. In fact, the video recording within the film, is the father's attempt for her daughter to have happy memories of him in the future. *Aftersun* depicts how "parents hide their flaws and failures from their young children" (Warren). Thus, Calum's feelings when he is not acting as a parent are left to the viewer's imagination.

The marginalization of Calum's mental health issues corresponds to the notion of hegemonic masculinity. Men do not cry, and they must keep their feelings to themselves, this has been the patriarchal and sexist discourse on masculinity which has been and continues to be perpetuated. Calum's mental health struggles might have started during his childhood and continued to be perpetuated until young adulthood. When Sophie asks what he thought he would be doing at 30 when he was 11, this triggers hidden emotions within Calum, which bring back to the surface his traumatic childhood, as he explains how when he was 11 nobody remembered it was his birthday. Therefore, although Calum wants to protect his daughter from the painful experiences he lived during his childhood, his suicide will inevitably cause "unhealed generational trauma" (Duggal). In other words, although Calum sees suicide as an end to his suffering, he will pass his pain onto his loved ones, so that "Sophie becomes a container for Calum's unprocessed pain and trauma" (Duggal). This is seen when she describes her sensations to her dad: "Don't you ever feel like you've just done a whole amazing day and then you come home and feel tired and down and it feels like your organs don't work, they're just tired, and everything is tired. Like you're sinking. I don't know, it's weird." Calum realizes trauma is passed down unconsciously, and that he is passing his demons to his daughter (Duggal). While

he is looking at himself at the mirror, he angrily spits toothpaste onto it, realizing his failure to protect her daughter from suffering.

Moreover, the score and soundtrack clearly reflect Calum's internal struggle. With R.E.M's "Losing My Religion" Wells aims at depicting the sentiment of being frustrated or desperate. This song is father and daughter's go-to karaoke song, which they perform together every vacation. However, this time Calum refuses to accompany Sophie, and she alone sings the poignant lyrics: "That's me in the corner / That's me in the spot-light / Losing my religion / Trying to keep up with you / And I don't know if I can do it." The song describes Calum's feeling of alienation, loneliness and his suicidal thoughts, so it could be argued that his refusal to sing along with Sophie is because he feels reflected in it. Queen and David Bowie's "Under Pressure" also features in the film alluding to "the pressure and anxiety that can come from all the difficulties and effort it takes to be alive" (Uitti). The song is played during Calum and Sophie's 'last dance'. The use of this song for the ending of the film is not casual, for "with each passing day, it seems as if life can get harder and harder" (Uitti). That is why Calum is surprised he has made it to 30. As David Bowie and Freddy Mercury sing, "Can't we give ourselves one more chance? Why can't we give love that one more chance? Why can't we give love, give love…" Thus, the film's music also helps the audience to understand that Calum is "wading through the wells of quiet anguish" (Kermode) which is depression, and how this is often overlooked in men despite having much higher rates of suicide than women.

In conclusion, through Sophie's naïve and innocent perspective, Wells presents how Calum is constantly performing in front of his daughter, how his "outward calm seems to cover the demons of denial" (Kermode). Although *Aftersun*'s main theme is mental health issues, it also explores the subversion of gender roles and the promotion of queerness from a very young age, proposing new and more feminist ways to discuss girlhood.

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The Wonder: Creating a Child Martyr

MERITXELL LANCIS TRIBÓ

Release date: 2 September 2022
Director: Sebastian Lelio
Screenwriters: Alice Birch, Sebastian Lelio, Emma Donoghue
Based on the novel by Emma Donoghue
Producers: Ed Guiney, Juliette Howell, Andrew Lowe, Tessa Ross
Cast: Niamh Algar (Kitty O'Donnell), Florence Pugh (Lib Wright), Kília Lord Cassidy (Anna), Tom Burke (Will Byrne), Ciarán Hinds (Father Thaddeus), Toby Jones (Dr. McBrearty), Elaine Cassidy (Rosaleen)
Companies: Element Pictures, Element, Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland, LSG Productions, House
Genre: historical drama
Nationality: Ireland, UK
IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9288822/

Summary: The fasting girl

Lib Wright, an English nurse, is sent to a rural village in Ireland to watch a girl, Anna Donnell, who claims that she lives without eating; a council of local men orders her to watch 11-year-old Anna for 15 days. During her watch, Lib learns that Anna claims she is nourished by "manna from heaven" and that her brother has died. At the hostel she stays in, Anna meets William Byrne, a journalist who wants to expose Anna's story. At one point, Lib forbids Anna's family from being near the girl to prevent any interference. After a few days, Anna's health decays drastically. Later, Lib realizes that Anna's mother feeds her, passing her daughter chewed food when they kiss. Lib confronts Anna and she discloses that her brother abused her but could not repent from his sins; Anna fasts in order to save his soul. Lib begs the council and the parents to stop, but they do not believe her. Seeing that Anna is about to die, Lib drugs her, making the girl believe that she is dying. Once Anna falls unconscious, Lib burns the house, claiming to the council that Anna died in the fire. After the investigation, Lib escapes to Australia with William and the 'reborn' Anna as a family.

Analysis: A child's belief and a lie

The film rendering of the novel *The Wonder* (2016) by Emma Donoghue originated once the Chilean writer and director finished reading the book and became mesmerized with the "delicate themes" of the novel, as well as feeling a sense of

identification with the two main protagonists and their challenge of "confronting the community" (in De Querol). Despite being born and raised in Chile, Lelio connected with the oppression and the power dynamics presented in the story; as he pointed out in the same interview, "Beyond the local specificity, the dynamics at a human level, I knew them by heart" (in De Querol). The project came at the right time, as Lelio had finished his first English language production, *Disobedience* (2017), following his string of films with strong female portrayals. According to Lelio, the film project was proposed by producer Ed Guiney, who had already adapted the critically acclaimed *Room*, also based on a book by Emma Donoghue. To transform the story for the screen, Lelio teamed up with British screenwriter Alice Birch and Donoghue herself; in order to heighten the film's experience, Lelio decided to depart from the book and use a framing device for the movie, which helped to remark it was all a fictional story. By locating the first scenes in a recording studio, the director interacts with the audience; the framing device becomes his way to state that he "does not just want you to passively watch the story of what is to come" (Tallerico).

The plot revolves around Lib, who represents the voice of science in the conflict and in the relationship she develops with Anna. When preproduction started, Lelio already had Florence Pugh in mind for Lib, as he remarks about her acting that "You feel invited into a film because of her magnetism and strength" (in Kohn). Pugh's portrayal of Lib not only gains the sympathy of the audience, but also manages to "fluidly project compassion tinged with the faintest hint of menace" (Lawson), as Lib challanges the strict beliefs of the town and the harrowing truth of Anna's case. Pugh's performance is balanced with that of newcomer Kíla Lord Cassidy, who plays Anna, and with whom Pugh maintains an "electric artistic fight" (De Querol). This is fueled by Pugh's performance, as she "simultaneously plays and inhabits [her] character, being part colly observant and part emotionally all-in" (Fear). The casting of Anna's role was a complicated process; as Lelio remarked, "the characters of the nurse and the girl are the two beating hearts of the film. That relationship had to be electric and convincing" (in Clarke), which meant that they had to find a young actress that could act at Pugh's level. Kíla Lord Cassidy's performance was also aided by her real-life mother, Elaine Cassidy, who plays her mother in the film and helped with "Kila's process in terms of her understanding up to the level that she required" (De Querol).

Although the story is fiction, Donoghue based it on the real-life phenomenon of the "fasting girls" in Victorian times, a phenomenon known as anorexia mirabilis, by which girls claimed that they could survive without eating, following the example of saints like Catherine of Siena. Donoghue became "intrigued by these cases, which seemed to echo medieval saints starving as an act of penance, and also modern anorexics" (Donoghue). In fact, the story treats Anna's case as a bridge between the two types of anorexia. According to the Mayo Clinic, anorexia nervosa is not a physical problem, but instead it manifests as "an extremely unhealthy and sometimes life-threatening way to try to cope with emotional problems;" this closely relates to Anna's case as her refusal to eat is motivated by her family to cleanse her brother's abuse of her and his death. As Ferguson notes, "because of the negative consequences of Anna speaking about her incest, she chooses to use her body to encode her story, a story motivated and sustained by gendered shame" (96). Thus, she appears to fast as a way to expiate her brother's sins

and to cope with her abuse, for "she has instinctively intuited everyone's agony and ecstatically embraced her vocation as a human sacrifice" (Bradshaw). It is not until Lib takes her out of the village that Anna allows herself to eat.

Anna's condition is also affected by the environment that surrounds her. The Irish town where she lives, which is "scarred by famine," is full of people who "see faith as a tool for survival" (Loughrey). The town is controlled by a council of powerful men who want to benefit from Anna's condition, as this fasting girl "became a locus of attention for the Church (claiming a religious miracle) and medicine" (Petterson 6). Thus, Anna is lured to believe that her condition is "a kind of divine corrective to the hunger that has so ravaged Ireland, particularly its children" (Lawson). The film succeeds in showcasing how the "religious hypocrisy—and particular carelessness with which lives are supplanted by agendas" (Loughrey) through Lib's interactions with the town's council. As Anna's "miracle" becomes subjected to the town's interests there is even more pressure instilled in the little girl to survive the two weeks of surveillance, since her 'wonder' appears to bring prosperity to her family and the village. Anna represents all the real-life girls and women whose "bodies become canvases for projecting shame experienced by the community while silencing woman's own histories" (Ferguson 93). This is evident at the end of the movie when the town conveniently accepts that Anna is dead, and they erect a sanctuary to her name, manifesting thus that Anna's presence and story was a symbol of the town's resilience, rather than part of a real girl beloved by the community. As Richard Lawson remarks, the story is focused on the "community ethos than with the ailing child at the center of this collective delusion."

Against the town's fanatism there emerges the figure of Lib, who is invited to town as the voice of science; trained by nursing pioneer Florence Nightingale, Lib is the only English character in the narrative. Her character opposes the village with her "unshakable confidence in science and an attitude of clinical detachment" (Dargis). Lib's character contrasts directly with Rosaleen, Anna's mother, who firmly believes in the Church's power, leaving Anna with two mother figures (Lib and the nun) who exemplify this "collision between systems of belief" (Kohn), namely fanatic Catholicism and rational science. Rosaleen is blamed for Anna's situation, not only because she "was aware of Pat's sexual violence yet demanded her silence" (Ferguson 102) but also because she has been secretly feeding Anna through her goodnight kisses and convincing the girl that it was "manna from heaven," thus prolonging "her daughter's fast" (102). Rosaleen fails to see Anna's suffering and is instead fixated in her son's death, as we can see through her painting his eyes on the mortuary pictures. Even though she knows that Anna is not receiving any nourishment because Lib won't allow her to approach the girl, Rosaleen insists on continuing with the watch: "she fails to nurture her child and, even more disturbing, she allows Anna to starve" (Petterson 11).

On the other hand, Lib has trouble assuming her position as an observing nurse also for personal reasons. Rosaleen is exposed as a neglectful mother, whereas Lib, who is grief-stricken by the loss of her baby, appears as a good mother figure who can connect with Anna and uncover her secrets. She "assumes the mantle of motherhood gradually and with complexity" (Dargis), even sacrificing her "objective" scientific beliefs to help Anna, as we can see in the final scenes when she fakes Anna's death. The story ends up rewarding Lib, the sacrificial good mother, with becoming Anna's mother. As for

Anna herself, her character is always associated with "fragility, pain and innocence" (Smith). In fact, because she is pious Anna is never angry with her family or ambivalent in her choices; instead, Anna is portrayed as "a victim" that is "also a reminder of her vulnerability as a child" (Escudero-Alías 58). Despite the neglect and mistreatment she endures, Anna is entirely dominated by the men in the village and the figure of her dead brother Pat for most of the story; together they "attempt to convert a sexual trauma into a religious miracle" (Escudero-Alías 61).

The film's ending, however, makes Anna more complicit in her own story. She decides to believe in Lib's convenient fantasy of her own death as her way out of her village and her imminent martyrdom. Anna's belief in Lib's story (that she died but was somehow resuscitated) and her acceptance of her new condition as Lib's daughter, without regrets or rebellion, showcases her preference for being alive and her braveness for stepping out of her restrictive community and leaving her family behind. Ultimately, the story resumes the initial framing by reminding viewers that we are made of stories. This ending directly relates to Anna's story, as she manages to survive and find a new family through believing in these fictional stories. As Lelio notes, "Lib finds a way to save her that uses Anna's own imaginary and conceptual tools" (in Smith). As Robbie Collins sums it up in his review, "Isn't life more bearable when we step into the lie and play along too?" With this final framing device, Lelio transforms Anna's story into another symbol, this time to stress the importance of fiction in our lives, and of children in both.

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