

Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Farris' *Little Miss Sunshine*. The prize? A crown of lies

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Abstract

As a preamble to pop music, the movie *Little Miss Sunshine* addresses a typical North American case of the dysfunctional family, by way of the road movie genre. The characters described are central to the story of a seven-year-old girl determined to achieve her dream. The comical story critiques a society in crisis, and unconditional love is shown to be the force with which adversity may be conquered.

Key words: Road movie; Cinema; Cinematographic analysis; Comedy-drama.

When Beyoncé first sang *Pretty Hurts* (Sia, 2013), she belted out a masterful four minute, seventeen second critique of beauty pageants. In an interview with Tunes Radio, she expressed that: "I feel like, sometimes, the world is a big pageant in which we're all continually judged. I wanted to capture how humiliated and insecure they make you feel". *Pretty hurts* exemplifies the difficulty of maintaining a perfect image, maintaining winner status, and the complexity of holding one's head high when wearing a crown bedecked with accusations.

Before the pop singer reminded the world that *perfection is the national illness*, in 2006, the movie *Little Miss Sunshine*, directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, addressed not only the difficulties of winning and losing, but also the importance of family. Beauty contests have been decried in the past decade, owing to the dangerous stereotypes that they promote in a society with continually evolving concepts of beauty. It has been proposed nationally that pageant culture is perpetuated by the large families involved in these events. Similarly, critiques have been made of the way in which these spaces enable the analysis of Latin American societies with social distinction criteria and social superiority concepts, which may be overcome through pageants (Bolívar-Ramírez, 2007).

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In the film analyzed, the Hoover family is a bit quirky, and its various difficulties send it hurtling hopelessly toward failure. Richard, the father, is a lecturer attempting to monetize his nine steps to success program. During the trip, when his proposal is rejected, he completely loses hope. The mother, Sheryl, is a homemaker, and a conciliatory woman concerned about the family situation. This becomes more complex with the arrival of her brother, Frank, a homosexual teacher who specializes in Marcel Proust, and who has recently left the hospital, where he was interned owing to a suicide attempt after being left by his lover. Dwayne, the oldest child, is fifteen years old. He loves Nietzsche, and takes a vow of silence, because he purportedly “hates everyone” and wants to enroll in the Air Force Academy. Olive, the daughter, is seven years old, a bit rotund, and near-sighted. Her dream is to win a beauty contest, for which she consciously and lovingly prepares, with the help of her grandfather, Edwin, who also lives with them. The grandfather was kicked out of his nursing home for consuming and selling heroin. As something of a sex aficionado, he provides a great deal of inappropriate life advice to his grandson.

In her last pageant, Olive had taken second place, and so could not advance to the pageant of which she dreamed. The first place winner’s later mishap with weight-loss pills resulted in Olive’s invitation to participate in the competitive *Little Miss Sunshine* pageant in Redondo Beach, southern California. Onboard their uncomely, beat-up Volkswagen bus, the entire family accompanies Olive to watch her achieve her dream.

Other contemporary movies have addressed this same topic: the satirical comedy *Dumplin’* (Fletcher, 2018) tells the story of an obese girl who decides to enter a beauty contest in protest, and inspires other young women to defy both the system and its stereotypes. This brought about the cultural debate of the health of beauty pageants, and whether the type of stereotypes that these promote are questionable, not just for participants, but also for attendees.

This film, as a *road movie*, complies with the classical aspects of the genre, and follows a series of individuals, whose viewpoints, in the midst of said journey, evolve on a conflictive topic. Further, as proposed by the genre’s theorists, this permits an examination of American society (Correa, 2006). *Little Miss Sunshine* depicts a typical North American family that seems quite normal, but is typified by chaos, in the form of a suicidal uncle, addict grandfather, and rebel brother. This simultaneously reflects that which North American society portrays, outward perfection, with bubbling trauma and social problems, as plentiful as daisies in spring, within.

Little Miss Sunshine is a story told in linear fashion. The characters take a trip, the entirety of which is narrated on their way to California. A timeline is thus established, in which, initially, a new family member arrives, and finally, after the events of the trip, they return home together. They return one member short, however, as the grandfather passes away, but everyone has accepted each other as family.

The characters’ aesthetics, although they all are acutely physically defined, change personalities, without the need to transform their essences. They are dynamic. For example, Uncle Frank, who initially wishes not to be involved in any of the narratives that propose family

conflict, ends up participating in their adventures. Finally, even with his post-suicide-attempt-related sadness, he decides to get on stage and dance with Olive, support Dwayne in his efforts to remove Olive from the pageant, and keep her away from the critical, superficial looks of judges and other participants.

Another character who, studied from the standpoint of her verbal expression, becomes iconic, is Olive. She who challenges the stereotypes attributed to her body, which usually include insecurity, shyness, or even violence. This little girl has the soul of a beauty queen, is charming and sure of herself, and loves attention, but does not fit into the usual mold: small, overtly-sexualized girls, or in more colloquial terms, “juicy green peaches”.

The superficiality that beauty contests represent is not that which most interests the protagonist. She most enjoys the excitement of being on stage, showing off her talents to the world, and the approval that accompanies these (likely due to trauma caused by her father). Through this character, the movie not only exemplifies the way in which beauty pageants terrorize little girls, but also how a sense of accomplishment does not always stem from coming in first or being the prettiest, but from pride in what you’ve done...and winning, what’s that?

The feature film presents Olive’s story, that of a small, seven-year-old girl who qualifies for the *Little Miss Sunshine* pageant. Her extra pudge, round glasses, and winsome motivation (learned from her father, who tries to make a career for himself as a personal motivator), help her to show off her talents. Father and daughter both triumph when, at different times in the movie, their respective plans for success vanish before their eyes. Despite these punches, they dust themselves off and continue on. Her uncle and brother represent failure, one with his recent suicide attempt, and the other with his conflictive character and the discovery that he will be unable to attend flight school. The trip exploits these two pillar-like aspects to their maximum expressions. The movie provides a positive message about true success and failure, and how, in many cases, there are nuances to them.

For example, at a critical time in the movie, the grandfather’s sudden death. The events that occur thereafter mark the breaking point in the movie, where each character makes the decisions that define them, and unite their respective narratives. The father, determined not be brought down by the family tragedy, decides to leave with the cadaver. He is supported by his wife, who motivates the rest of the family. This exemplifies the grandfather’s role, which, although considered secondary, constitutes the glue of the family.

From this vindicating matrix, the concept of union is exemplified in a diverse family, which unites to drag the grandfather’s body to symbolically support little Olive. One scene, brimming with dark comedy, leads to the final moments: when the police detain them and almost discover the cadaver in the trunk, when Dwayne discovers that he is color-blind, and in his shock, explodes in rage because he realizes that his dream to be a pilot is impossible. Dwayne breaks his vow of silence and shouts all of his hate for his family from the rooftops. Once all is lost, the only remaining option is to get back up. He decides to do this for his sister, and continue with the trip so that at least she can accomplish her dreams.

The movie operates in the cinematographic *road movie* universe as an explicit example of gender. An early critique of a society confused about the concepts of winning and losing, together with the comical story of a diverse family, demonstrates that the root of all solutions is the strength that comes from the support system that is the unconditional love of one's family.

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