

Rocks, Grass, and Glass: Exploring Themes of Nature and Optical Lenses in the film *Boyhood*

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The film *Boyhood* (Linklater, 2014) follows Mason Jr., his family, and friends over a period of twelve years. This film is significant as it offers a unique perspective due to the extended production timeline. Mason's transition from child to adult is condensed in such a way that it mimics the notion of a fleeting childhood. This becomes a nostalgic examination that most adults and parents can relate to, yet also positions childhood as a time of quaint innocence. This view minimizes the value of children as individuals, and childhood as a distinct and critical period of time (Mayall, 2000). Mason is frequently presented as being vulnerable and in need of adult protection, yet it can be seen throughout the course of the film that he is a capable self-advocate, as he demands for his voice to be heard. The tensions of childhood are a familiar tale; however Mason's navigation of the ever-changing expectations and situations he faces brings to light children's capacity as capable and individual beings (James & James, 2001). Mason is representative of the necessity to acknowledge children as active social agents who will grow and develop according to their individual needs and contexts.

Mason deals with many important themes common to childhood throughout the film, particularly those of autonomy and adult control. For the purpose of this paper these themes will be examined through the motifs of *nature* and *optical lenses*. The use of these motifs presents an opportunity to examine how both adult-centered views and those that are influenced by colonial ideals may impact children. Drawing on significant experiences in Mason's life, the use of nature and glass lenses will provide unique insight regarding the development of his self-identity. Concepts found in the theories of the 'new' sociology of childhood and postcolonialism will provide a means to explore the ways Mason responds to issues of power and voice within this film.

Theoretical Frameworks

The 'new' sociology of childhood presents the notion that children are "active agents" (Grieshaber, 2007, p. 871), fully capable of making their own decisions about themselves and their lives. Rather than being restricted to the more traditional views that come from developmental theories, childhood is seen as being a distinct period that is socially constructed (James & Prout, 2015).

Every childhood is unique, due to the subjectivity of each child's context, the multiple variables that may exist, and the relationships between these variables (James & Prout, 2015). However, according to James (2007), while it may be expressed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) that the rights of children should be viewed as being valuable and reason alone to ensure their voices are heard, this is not always the fact. James (2007) speaks specifically in terms of research in this instance, however it appears this notion may be applicable to children's lives in general, and in particular to the life of Mason (Linklater, 2014).

Because children often find themselves under the authority of both adults and the dominant culture in which they live, postcolonialism is another theoretical framework that seems fitting for this analysis. Postcolonialism has traditionally been viewed as a response to imperialistic ideologies (Nixon et al., 2015). However, it is often understood as relating to any instance where the dominant discourse is privileged over others due to lingering historical beliefs (Nixon et al., 2015), such as children being positioned as inferior beings who are simply working towards maturity. Viruru (2005) discusses the impact of the developmental views of theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky, which see children progressing in linear and universal paths towards adulthood (p.14). These restrictive notions are both dominant and normalized within early childhood contexts and contribute to the marginalization of children. It could be said that postcolonialism provides the possibility of social change by responding to issues of control and power that are maintained by the dominant culture (Viruru, 2005). While it is impossible to ignore the fact that Mason is a white Western male, quite noticeably a member of the dominant class, it is also apparent, as a child, how little agency he has. Employing a postcolonial perspective to critique the hegemonic representation of children that exists within the film, and society in general, makes sense if we consider the notion of children as a minority social group (Mayall, 1998). Further, we are shown how Mason's continual questioning of normative societal views aids him in his ability to overcome the oppression he experiences.

Thematic Analysis

The film *Boyhood* (Linklater, 2014) takes viewers on an extended journey as a young boy, Mason Jr., grows into a young man. As these moments play out, both the significant and the mundane, elements of nature are present in a number of Mason's experiences. He also spends substantial moments of time viewing the world through pieces of glass, in the form of windows and lenses.

Calling on these motifs of nature and optical lenses, elements of *Boyhood* will be examined to better understand Mason's ability to develop a sense of agency and identity while surrounded by hegemonic norms such as adultism and patriarchy, that position children as lesser beings within society.

I. Nature

'New' Sociology of Childhood

Nature maintains an important role in children's culture and play, sometimes resulting in deep relationships that can help children manage intense emotions, adverse situations, or how they view themselves and the world (Hordyk, Dulude & Shem, 2015, p. 586). Mason is no different, as can be seen in the opening to the film where he has been lying in the grass contemplating rocks and wasps. While playing, children often gather natural elements, such as sticks, rocks and insects, which are frequently held as valued treasures to be examined and collected. Mason appears to have a compelling relationship with natural elements, through which he connects to himself and others.

As Olivia and Mason discuss her conversation with his teacher Miss Butler, it becomes apparent that the culture of his classroom does not support a child-centered view of socialization (Mayall, 2000). It appears Mason's teacher has not made attempts to gain knowledge from him, with regards to his missing homework or the reasoning behind the rocks in the pencil sharpener, prior to meeting with his mother. Speaking to Olivia, rather than Mason about these issues positions the child in a place where adults are responsible for his protection and morals (Mayall, 2000). Miss Butler, and Olivia to some degree, come from a place where developmental notions and adult perspectives contribute to the marginalization of children.

Through the lens of the 'new' sociology of childhood, we see that Mason's teacher could have learned much about his interest in rocks, arrowheads, and a desire to know how things work. This knowledge may have provided Miss Butler with information that would have better enabled her to support Mason's agency in terms of his success within the classroom (Mayall, 2000). Olivia, on the other hand, asks Mason why he has been engaging in behaviour that is not considered acceptable within the classroom. Olivia values Mason's insight and uses it as a means to advance her understanding of him and how he relates to his world (Mayall, 2000). Olivia grows quiet as she contemplates Mason's desire to determine if he can sharpen rocks into arrowheads, perhaps adding this

information to his just shared thoughts on rocks and wasps. In this sense, it can be said that Olivia views Mason, and children in general, as being capable of “theorizing in their own right” (Albanese, 2009, p. 35).

During the early periods of the film we see evidence of nature being a key feature of Mason’s life. His time outdoors is mostly unsupervised by adults, indicating Olivia trusts him to create and manage his own social relationships (Prout & James, 1997). He also maintains a collection of rocks, grass, arrowheads and other natural items, which he proudly shows to his dad during a visit (Linklater, 2014).

An interest in the outdoors is something Mason and his father have in common, indicated by the feather Mason Sr. sends him for his collection. Throughout the film they spend a great deal of their time together engaging in outdoor pursuits that appear to be enjoyed by both of them. Mason Sr. shows genuine interest in his son’s thoughts and asks him questions to find out more about his life (Linklater, 2014). In this sense it can be seen that Mason Sr. understands and respects his son’s ability to participate and contribute to their developing social relationship (Mayall, 2000). Mason is viewed and treated by his dad as a capable social agent, a key concept of the ‘new’ sociology of childhood (James & James, 2001).

The presence and absence of nature fluctuates throughout the film, which is symbolic of the degree to which Mason’s agency is being recognized. During the years spent living with Bill, Olivia’s husband, Mason’s experiences with nature are quite different than those he has with his dad. We mostly see Mason spending his outdoor time within the confines of his suburban backyard during this period, playing with his siblings or working on chores. The scenes with his father are often shot indoors during this part of the film and there is also no mention of his nature collection during this timeframe (Linklater, 2014). This absence of nature is significant as this is a period when Mason has very little voice. Bill does not demonstrate respect for the views or feelings of the children, which is a violation of their rights (UN, 1989). Mason’s comment that Bill “didn’t even ask” (Linklater, 2014) about cutting his hair indicates that although he is experiencing little opportunity to be heard, Mason is still well aware of his own individuality, identity, and rights as a child (James, 2011; UN, 1989).

Through the ‘new’ sociology of childhood we are able to see how Mason’s connection to nature provides him with opportunities to strengthen the relationships that children view as the “cornerstones of their lives” (Mayall, 2000, p. 256). He uses his interest in nature as a means to reach out to both his mother and his father. By sharing this part of his unique personal culture with

others Mason has determined a way of contributing to the society in which he lives and the relationships that exist there (Mayall, 2000). However, focusing primarily on the theoretical concepts of this framework maintains a child-centered approach to the film. This doesn't easily lend itself to examining the relationships that exist between the adults in *Boyhood* (Linklater, 2014), which are equally interesting.

Postcolonialism

Viewing Mason's relationship with nature through the lens of postcolonialism provides an opportunity to explore any issues of power and domination that may be present. Nature, in this instance, can be seen as something to be conquered and impose one's will upon. Through this lens nature becomes symbolic of the subordinate position Mason holds in many aspects of his life and his relationships with people (Linklater, 2014).

By collecting items from nature and storing them in containers, Mason attempts to exert his control over the land (Linklater, 2014), at least symbolically. This response seems to be a logical one when one considers what Viruru (2005) refers to as the "multiplicities and ambiguities" (p. 18) of postcolonial theory. Mason's struggles with the unpredictability of his life versus the expectation that he will travel a predictable and linear path of development (Viruru, 2005) are reflected by his need to define and categorize his collected mementos. According to Hordyk et al. (2015) children can find moves and life changes disruptive in terms of their personal identity. Familiar experiences with nature often trigger senses associated with the past and may bring some stability and comfort (Hordyk et al., 2015). As Mason grapples with the self-identity and social transformation of youth, his containment of personally valued natural items can be viewed as an attempt to exercise control over the many changes he is faced with (Viruru, 2005).

While living in the oppressive atmosphere at Bill's house, Mason and his siblings are positioned as the 'other' (Bhabha, 1984). Both Bill and Olivia are in places where the children are their subordinates, but the way Bill dominates conversations and talks down to others puts him in a position of advantage at their expense (Nixon et al., 2015). Bill, in his role of the colonizer, uses this position to include or exclude other family members at his will (Nixon et al., 2015). Mason's responses to these experiences vary, and he appears to enjoy it when Bill favours him over his stepbrother Randy (Linklater, 2014). The admiration of someone who is in a position of power can be flattering and while

Mason's dislike of Bill is clear, we can see the influential process of colonization at work here.

During this period Mason's attempts to dominate nature, by taming the garden weeds and perhaps most significantly learning to play golf, are directed by Bill. Golf, a sport associated with many symbols of imperialism, such as wealth and powerful white men, takes place on grass that has been painstakingly manicured. Mason does well at golf and his success earns Bill's approval. Bill, however, is not so successful and tears the turf, revealing the dirt beneath the impossibly perfect surface (Linklater, 2014).

Mason playing golf can be interpreted as a form of mimicry, as he engages in the pursuit of his dominator, an affluent white man (Bhabha, 1984). Additionally, Mason surpassing Bill on the golf course can be seen as representative of the child's attempt to decolonize (Chakrabarti, 2012). In this sense, Bill's assault on nature, tearing up the turf to reveal the dirt beneath, is emblematic of the possibility of resistance that postcolonialism offers, particularly as he stomps the grass back down to conceal the evidence (Viruru, 2005). The scarred grass is perhaps a forewarning of the increasing intensity of Bill's domination that comes in the next scenes (Linklater, 2014). Certainly, the dramatic and abusive events that lead to Olivia eventually leaving Bill echo the words of Fanon (1963), who states "decolonization is always a violent phenomenon" (p. 99).

As Mason drives towards the new phase of his life that university will bring, we see him surrounded by a rocky natural environment. The lyrics of the song 'Hero' (Keefe, 2012), which plays on his truck stereo, are reflective of struggles with the dominant discourse that have surrounded Mason's life, much like the mountains he is driving through:

Let me go
I don't wanna be your hero
I don't wanna be a big man
Just wanna fight like everyone else
Your masquerade
I don't wanna be a part of your parade
Everyone deserves a chance to
Walk with everyone else

Being challenged by the norms of the dominant culture, such as traditional families and what it means to 'be a man' have led Mason to attempt to "get as far away from home as possible" (Linklater, 2014). However, as he is about to enter

an educational institution, he may find that escaping the “legacy of colonialism” (Viruru, 2005, p. 8) that seems to permeate such environs may not be a simple feat. The final scene of *Boyhood* (Linklater, 2014) shows Mason encircled by nature and sitting on top of a rock. In this sense we can see that he will continue to come up against and question issues of control, domination, and the normative views of the hegemonic culture, as it is visible everywhere.

In analyzing the use of nature through the lens of postcolonialism we can examine the ways Mason attempts to overcome the challenges that come with a lack of autonomy. It becomes apparent that the key role that nature played in Mason’s early years seemed to wane as he aged and faced increased instances of domination. He does appear to come full circle however, as the film begins and ends with Mason ensconced in nature, contemplating current life issues (Linklater, 2014). Exploring Mason’s relationship with nature in this way seems to focus on more abstract concepts than if one was to explore a relationship based on social exchanges. However, as postcolonialism concepts seem to be rooted in philosophical and sometimes abstract thought this is somewhat fitting.

II. Optical Lenses

‘New’ Sociology of Childhood

Linklater (2014) makes use of a variety of glass lenses, in the form of binoculars, windows and cameras, as a means to symbolize the lack of agency he is afforded throughout the film. It could be said that Mason uses these lenses to create a barrier or distance himself from instances where his personal views or rights are not being given the attention they deserve. The type of lens featured most prominently in the film is that of a camera. Cameras present a singular point of view at a specific moment in time, thus presenting Mason with a means to protect and preserve his individual views.

Mason’s use of a glass barrier is first presented in the opening scenes as we hear from Olivia that Miss Butler says he is “staring out the window all day” (Linklater, 2014). Mason appears to be a child who finds traditional classrooms challenging, which may indicate that his unique interests and ways of learning are not being recognized (Christensen & Prout, 2005). It certainly seems Mason is not fully aware of the practices of Miss Butler’s classroom, such as turning in his work, which may be contributing to his inability to engage with it (Linklater,

2014). Staring out the window presents Mason with a chance to focus on his own thoughts as he makes sense of his world.

Mason's rights come into question again after a long-awaited visit from his dad. Mason watches, first through a window and then through the more intimate binoculars, as Olivia argues with his dad. Because Olivia turns her back on him, Mason Sr. seems to be left with no option but to walk away (Linklater, 2014). In this sense, we can see that Olivia's actions are restricting Mason's access to his father. She has prioritized her own prerogative over the very different rights of her children (Grieshaber, 2007). As Mason's sister gloomily responds to his question of whether their dad will spend the night, binocular lenses magnify his need for a relationship with his father.

During Mason's teen years, he narrows his focus to the singular lens of a camera. This is symbolic, when one considers Mason has become more articulate in expressing his needs, yet is still not always heard. He has intensified the direct focus of his own views, independent of the social connections of the relationships and institutions in his life (Christensen & Prout, 2005). Indeed, Dockett and Perry (2005) promote the notion that children can use photographs to present what they know about their own contexts, unrelated to the world of adults (Mayall, 2000).

It is significant that there is an absence of optical lenses during the years Mason's family has expanded to include Bill and his children, Randy and Mindy. As this is a period when Mason experiences very little autonomy, it would seem the use of lenses to represent his lack of rights would be liberal. However, this period of the film shows Mason retreating behind the more passive glass screens of computers and gaming devices (Linklater, 2014). This fact is perhaps indicative of the greater violations of his rights and agency as a child. The subordinate place that Bill positions the children in reflects the adultist notion of them simply being non-adults (Mayall, 2000). Because Mason has no voice in this timeframe, he seems to spend more time attempting to escape his reality rather than examine it.

We see his view widen, returning to the more broad perspective provided by a window as Mason drives himself to start his new life at university (Linklater, 2014). The windshield of his truck directs his gaze to the wide-open road ahead of him, as he moves towards managing his life away from the input of his parents, teacher, and boss (Prout & James, 1997). A crack in his windshield suggests Mason will soon be free to better understand and express his valuable knowledge of himself and his world (Mayall, 2000). Indeed, the final scenes of *Boyhood* (Linklater, 2014) show that Mason does not take his camera with him when

hiking with his new friends, as one would expect of a photographer. This is significant, as it indicates Mason is in a position where he will no longer have to create distance from the frustration of not being heard.

Employing the concepts of the 'new' sociology of childhood to explore the theme of optical lenses in *Boyhood* (Linklater, 2014) enables us to gain insights into how the arts can support children. Mason's need to create distance between himself and situations where his voice is stifled leads him to the art of photography as a means of self-expression. Through the lens of the 'new' sociology of childhood, we can see that while Mason's photography teacher is concerned about what he wants to 'be', Mason is more concerned about what he 'is', an artist (Linklater, 2014; Mayall, 2000). However, this analysis is mainly concerned with Mason's self-concept, which limits the ability to examine the social construct of his relationships with others.

Postcolonialism

By applying the concepts found in postcolonial theory to the theme of optical lenses one can examine Mason's responses to issues of power, control, and the ideals of the dominant culture. Mason uses these glass lenses as a way to deflect the normative beliefs that are not his own. Through the lens of the camera, Mason seems to find a way to express how he differs from mainstream society. His use of photography, as a mode of self-expression is considered socially acceptable within the confines of the normative culture, unlike body piercings or painting his nails (Linklater, 2014).

We first see Mason using his camera during a visit to Mason Sr.'s in-laws. A birthday celebration that includes the gifting of a bible, a suit, and a gun is evidence of the historical and stereotypical notions of what a young man needs to get by in this world (Chakrabarti, 2012). That Mason seems intrigued by the gun can be viewed as an act of mimicry (Bhabha, 1984). It seems Mason wants to please his father and step-grandfather, yet his reaction is quite subdued, particularly when compared to Samantha's excitement about shooting the gun (Linklater, 2014).

Bhabha (1984) describes mimicry as being "a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them" (p. 130). Mason is well aware of the differences between his beliefs and those of the dominant discourse, yet he is still negotiating how to address them. Following this afternoon filled with the still present influence of imperialism, it seems Mason is in need of some escape (Nixon et al., 2015; Viruru, 2005). We can see that his

real interest lies in taking photographs, which is how he spends much of the remainder of his visit (Linklater, 2014).

As he continues to pursue photography, examining life through the lens, Mason's identity as an artist begins to develop along with his heightened sense of self. He expresses a fear of being judged and the anger that comes from being controlled by others. By acknowledging that people are often unaware of their restricting behaviour, Mason seems to be conscious of the subtleties of colonialism that can contribute to the marginalization of himself and others (Viruru, 2005). He wants to live his life free from constraints, so as to "feel alive" (Linklater, 2014) rather than maintain an "appearance of normality" (Linklater, 2014) that is accepted by the dominant culture.

Having left the oppressive years spent under Bill's control behind him, he now states, "I just want to try and not live my life through a screen" (Linklater, 2014). Mason no longer needs to use computers or video games to escape the domination he experiences. Through his art he has gained the ability to share his thoughts and opinions, and present a reality that is not entrenched within the bounds of a static or repressive culture (Nixon et al., 2015). In this sense, Mason appears to be fully aware of the effects of colonization, utilizing postcolonialism as a means to expose and examine the limitations of one truth (Nixon et al., 2015).

Because Mason enters university as a photographer, leaving his camera in his dorm room while going hiking seems to be an unusual choice (Linklater, 2014). This decision is symbolic of him no longer needing to block the ideologies that infiltrate so many aspects of life. While Mason may not be in a position to "change the order of the world" (Fanon, 1963, p. 35) in an effort to make decolonization a reality, he is comfortable enough to now resist its control.

Postcolonialism offers insight into how Mason's character develops, both personally and that which he projects to others. He uses lenses, particularly that of a camera as a means to escape the normative views that differ from his beliefs. As Mason becomes more focused as an artist, he is better able to voice his opinions, both literally and through his work. In this sense, using postcolonialism to understand Mason's use of optical lenses allows us to explore how art may come to be used as a method of resistance. Utilizing the concepts found in postcolonialism does tend to focus on the negative aspects of Mason's relationships, thus neglecting to take note of the more positive experiences and social connections he may have.

Conclusion

Drawing on the film *Boyhood*, it is easy to see the many ways children can be marginalized in different aspects of their lives. This analysis brings to light some of the ways Mason attempted to manage the lack of agency he was experiencing and his inability to have his rights as a child recognized. While both theories deal with concepts of power and control, the children's rights perspective that is central to the 'new' sociology of childhood is more applicable to this example than postcolonialism (Prout & James, 1997; UN, 1989). That being said, many of the elements that influence how children are marginalized are remnants of imperialism, so employing both of these theories in tandem proves to be a more fluid approach to the topic (Albanese, 2009; Nixon et al., 2015). This provides a more rounded view that not only examines *how* children may be marginalized, but also *why*. In this sense, employing both of these lenses better enables one to seek possible solutions and supports going forward.

It is important to note that while Mason is subject to the domination of adult authority, most significantly white males, he is also a white male. Further, as Mason reaches adulthood he is destined to take on the characteristics of his oppressor, an educated white male. However, watching him develop and maintain a strong personal identity offers a view of what can happen when children are aware of their own voice. If children are recognized as capable beings, and listened to when they question the dominant norms of society, perhaps we can move towards greater acceptance and appreciation of all individuals.

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