"Little Miss Sunshine" and its Basis in Reality

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Little Miss Sunshine and its Basis in Reality

Olive wakes up in excitement on the morning of her pageant only to find her heroin-addicted grandfather in a permanent sleep. As she is faced with the death of a loved one for the first time, the audience is reminded that even for these characters, death is inevitable. This knowledge, according to André Bazin, has caused humans to have an obsession with realism and a desire to be immortalized by the arts. We understand that life is fleeting and mortality is inevitable and we fear that. From that fear stems the desire to “conquer” mortality by creating something that will outlast us. The film *Little Miss Sunshine* (Jonathan Dayton & Valerie Faris, 2006) exemplifies Bazin’s theory of realism by forcing the audience to face the fleeting nature of human life while using the formal elements Bazin believes allow the greatest amount of realism.

In his essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” Bazin discusses the human obsession with reality and explains why he believes it should be the goal of filmmakers to create work that is as close to reality as possible. Because humans have knowledge of mortality, we have looked to the arts to preserve our memory and we strive for realism because it provides the most accurate preservation. Bazin argues that of the visual arts, photography and motion pictures are the media that stay truest to reality because of their mechanical nature. He recognizes that the camera is operated and in is some degree manipulated by an artist, but argues that since the rendered image is a creation of the machine rather than of the artist, it is accepted as closer to reality. Bazin
states that this aspect of photography and cinema make them “…discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism” (161) and even in a fictional setting, as an audience, we understand that the object in the image we are shown exists in reality. Bazin’s theory of realism relies on the spatial and perceptual rather than conceptual reality. The camera lens mimics the human eye and shows the audience a unity and depth of space, which allows us to believe in the reality of the space and satisfies our desire to capture time.

In Bazin’s discussion of the human obsession with reality he refers to what he calls the “mummy complex” (159). He explains that in ancient Egypt the religious practice of mummification was a means of achieving immortality. Since death is “the victory of time” (159), by preserving the physical body, the Egyptians were able to stop the effects of time and thereby save a body from death. This attempt to freeze time and preserve life is connected to what Bazin calls the human obsession with realism. In Little Miss Sunshine the audience witnesses the “mummy complex” firsthand. When the grandfather dies, the audience is confronted with the reality that even though these characters are fictional, their lives are just as fleeting. The story causes viewers to face mortality as they relate to the characters’ desire to preserve the memory of the grandfather. In the sense, the audience finds a different appreciation for the scenes leading up to the grandfather’s death because now those scenes preserve aspects of his life. They are moments in time that have been captured. They serve the audience in a way that a home video would, allowing them to relive moments in someone’s past. In the story, the family preserves the
grandfather’s memory with Olive’s dance routine. At her performance she dedicates the
dance to her grandfather because it is her way of having him live on. While his
immortality is not achieved through any of the plastic arts per se, for the family, his
memory is preserved because the dance acts a sort of legacy. The family is able to
remember him through this action and when they join in the dance, they are celebrating
his life and preserving his memory.

In terms of the editing, camera movement, and composition of the film, Little
Miss Sunshine employs the formal elements that Bazin believes allows films to
foreground their basis in reality. In his essay “The Virtues and Limitations of Montage,”
Bazin discusses the stylistic choices of a filmmaker and how they affect the realism of a
film. He discourages filmmakers from relying on montage to create the meaning of an
action because it is clear that there is an illusion performed by the editor. By adding that
human element of manipulation, the realism of the piece is reduced because the action
that is seen cannot be taken at face value. He argues that a filmmaker should focus on the
formal elements of film to show the audience the whole of the action as it unfolds so that
its basis in reality is clear. He maintains that the “…essential cinema, seen for once in its
pure state, …is to be found in straightforward photographic respect for the unity of
space” (46). The respect for the unity of space, he claims, can be achieved through what
he refers to as the mise-en-scène aesthetic, an approach to film form that includes takes of
long duration, camera movement, minimal cuts, and deep focus.

In Little Miss Sunshine, shots of long duration, which allow the audience to see
the action in full, are prevalent in the hospital sequence following the grandfather’s death.
While there are a number of cuts and the editing is not necessarily minimal, the action is
all shown in wide shots whereas close-ups and medium shots are employed during
dialogue. One action in particular that exemplifies Bazin’s mise-en-scène aesthetic is
when Olive hugs her mother. The scene cuts from a close-up of Dwayne’s notepad to a
wide shot of the whole room and as the action of the hug plays out, the shot stays wide
until the moment is interrupted by the hospital employee. This sequence is an example of
Bazin’s ideal style because it shows the action in full and allows the audience to decide
how they feel rather than cutting various shots together to create a montage that is
designed to evoke a specific emotion in the viewer. Bazin supports this style because he
believes it has a stronger basis in reality. The audience is able to find their own meaning
rather than have the meaning forced on them by the filmmaker as in the case of montage.
The viewer’s individual perception allows them to form a unique interpretation.

Another element Bazin discusses in his mise-en-scène aesthetic is camera
movement, for example reframing so there are fewer cuts and the unity of space is
maintained. This technique can be seen in the same hospital sequence. For instance, when
the family is taken back to see the grandfather’s remains, the camera moves with them to
give the audience the feeling that they are right there in the action. Shortly thereafter,
camera movement is used when the family is discussing whether or not they are going to
sneak the body out of the hospital.

Rather than cutting frequently from one person to
another, the camera appears to be in
between them and moves back and
forth from face to face, much like
how a person in the room would
view the situation. Finally in the same sequence the camera follows the family as they run
with the body through the parking lot and to the van. The camera follows them from
another row of cars. It acts as an onlooker, so while the audience is no longer directly in
the action, they still have a strong sense of the reality of the situation.

Bazin understood that it is human nature to want to capture reality because of our
desire to be immortalized and he argued that film was the best medium to achieve this
goal. Though his concept of realism differed from other theorists’, Bazin believed that it
was the purpose of film to be as true to reality as possible. His theory focused on
perceptual and spatial reality rather than the reality of content. Bazin argued that since the
image or action was captured by film, it has its basis in reality because it existed in time.
In *Little Miss Sunshine*, the audience accepts the actions of this eccentric family because,
thanks to film, we moved with them for an hour and a half and witnessed their reality. The audience becomes invested in the story and the characters because its realism is created by the formal elements and the story’s source in reality. We understand that even though the events that unfolded were staged, they still happened at some point in order to be captured on film and that helps us accept the film’s basis in reality.
Works Cited
