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Nikki Martin

Grand Valley State University

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Little Miss America: An Ideological Analysis of Little Miss Sunshine

*Little Miss Sunshine* (Dayton and Faris, 2006) presents a Cinderella story about an average little girl who wants to be a beauty queen. The glamour, wholesomeness and charm of pageantry have become as American as apple pie—much like the audience rooting for an underdog. These ideals have been built up from the underlying culture of American society. An analysis of *Little Miss Sunshine* demonstrates how the film criticizes American dominant ideology in regards to the “ideal” family, success and gender roles.

Ideology can be defined as the assumed cultural norms of a society, structuring how individuals see themselves and interact with others. Some primary American values include heteronormative gender roles and self-entitlement. Self-entitlement refers to the right to one’s property and wealth based on the institution of capitalism, a key influence in the development of American dominant ideology. The ideological system also shapes the function of the film industry, thus films either reinforce or criticize dominant values.

Film theorists Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni recognize the relationship between ideology and cinema, stating that “because every film is part of the economic system it is also a part of the ideological system, for ‘cinema’ and ‘art’ are branches of ideology,” (688). Comolli and Narboni determined seven different categories of films based on their relationship to dominant values in regards to the film’s form and content. These categories range from films that conform to the dominant ideology to films that attack and refute it. Of Comolli and Narboni’s film categories, *Little Miss Sunshine* falls into Category E. Category E films are described as:

Films which seem at first sight to belong firmly within the ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turn out to be so only in an ambiguous manner. For though they start from a nonprogressive standpoint, ranging from the frankly reactionary through the conciliatory to the mildly critical, they have been worked upon, and work, in such a real way that there is a noticeable gap, a dislocation, between the starting point and the finished product. […] The films we are talking about throw
up obstacles in the way of the ideology, causing it to swerve off course. (Comolli and Narboni, 691)

On the surface, Little Miss Sunshine appears to be what Comolli and Narboni consider a Category A film, which is a film that reinforces the dominant ideology. However, as the story continues, American dominant ideology is criticized. For example, when Olive Hoover (Abigail Breslin) is introduced, she is watching old tapes of Miss America pageants and mimicking the contestants’ reactions. From the beginning, it is clear that Olive wants to be a beauty queen because this is an aspiration sanctioned by popular culture. Olive isn’t “stage pretty” like a Barbie Doll; she’s a pale, plump, utterly average little girl with dreams of glamour and fame. Following the pattern of narrative conventions, which reinforce dominant ideology, Olive is thus introduced as an underdog, and in American films it is not unusual for the underdog to win in the end. For example, a quirky protagonist (or a mismatched group that doesn’t get along) sets out to achieve a seemingly unattainable goal and through a series of ups and downs (ranging from coincidental to completely unexpected), attains that goal in the end. Sure enough, Olive is given a chance to compete in the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant on a fluke, reinforcing her underdog status.

As her journey progresses, Olive begins to doubt herself and her ability to win, at one point questioning her body image. In a key instance, Olive disappointedly refuses her ice cream because her father Richard (Greg Kinnear) warns her that ice cream will make her fat, and Miss America is never fat. The rest of her family then convinces her to dig in and she eats her ice cream with a satisfied smile. In this moment, Olive chooses happiness over conventional beauty. By choosing the ice cream she reestablishes her underdog status, allowing the audience to hope that she’ll win because she has pure
motives and she just wants to be happy. At the same time, when Olive chooses happiness over conventional beauty, the film creates an ideological gap between individual choices and the choices society expects one to make.

This concept of choices appears again in the climax of the film: both Richard and Dwayne (Paul Dano) realize that Olive is out of her league, but despite their protests, her mother Sheryl (Toni Collette) says “We’ve gotta let Olive be Olive.” This concept of individuality is another construct of the idealized underdog. In the end, Olive does not win, but she does what makes her happy and went home believing she was a winner. Rather than taking the predictable route and having Olive win in typical feel-good Hollywood style, or perhaps refuse to perform because she’s “already a winner,” Olive does what makes her happy, performing her strip-tease to Rick James’ “Super Freak,” despite protests from the pageant coordinators (as allowed by the conventions of comedy films). Her unorthodox performance creates a gap between her family and the audience, once more reflecting the choices of individuals versus the choice of society – in this case an unforgettable, unorthodox dance number (with the addition of her family supporting her) against the pampered and polished spectacle of the other pageant contestants.

Delving deeper into the concept of societal norms, theorist Robin Wood described the relationship between film and the values and assumptions of dominant ideology. In his article, “Ideology, Genre, Auteur,” Wood comprises a list of concepts which “is not intended to be exhaustive or profound, but simply to make conscious . . . concepts with which we are all perfectly familiar” (Wood, 593). Of Wood’s twelve concepts, Little Miss Sunshine portrays at least five of them: marriage, the ideal male, settled man, the ideal female, and the concept of America as the place where everyone can be happy. Little Miss Sunshine’s portrayal of these concepts fractures and bends ideological expectations.
Wood’s definition of marriage is legalized heterosexual monogamy existing in a male-dominated society; the woman keeps to the home and tends to the children and the man owns the home, extending a capitalist ownership principle to personal relationships (593). From here stems Wood’s two definitions for male roles: the ideal male and the settled man. The ideal male is a virile adventurer, an untrammeled man of action and his shadow, the settled man, husband/father, is dull and dependable (594). On the other hand, the ideal female is a “wife and mother, perfect companion, the endlessly dependable mainstay of hearth and home,” (Wood, 594). Informing these perceived notions of societal behavior, Wood describes the ideal America represented in classical Hollywood cinema:

America is a land where everyone is or can be happy; hence the land where all problems are solvable within the existing system (which may need a bit of reform here and there but no radical change). Subversive systems are assimilated wherever possible to serve the dominant ideology. […] Above all, this assumption gives us that most striking and persistent of all classical Hollywood phenomena, the happy ending: often a mere “emergency exit” (Sirk’s phrase) for the spectator, a barely plausible pretense that the problems the film has raised are now resolved. (Wood, 594)

This ideal of America sets a stage on which these gendered figures play a part. In the case of Little Miss Sunshine, the roles play out in a manner that is far from expected.

When the audience is introduced to the Hoovers, they meet an average family by current societal standards. Sheryl is an over-stressed mother who has been divorced at least once already. Her husband, Richard is a motivational speaker struggling to get his business off the ground. Much to his family’s dismay, he practices his motivational techniques on them almost constantly. Though it may seem as if their marriage suits Wood’s description at first, digging deeper it is clear that Sheryl is running the family and provides the main income while Richard is struggling with his role as a settled man as he tries to get his family out of financial ruin. Again, by Wood’s standards this marriage
appears to fit the bill (though arguably more female dominated), but the fact remains that
the Hoovers are a dysfunctional couple, yet this is something expected in today’s
portrayal of a marriage. Sheryl fulfills the role of the ideal female, but there’s a catch: she
loves and cares for her family to the point where she is their support-structure, however,
she sometimes has a hard time hiding how much they drive her absolutely crazy (as
implied in her many arguments with Richard).

Meanwhile, the Hoovers give home to three arguably “ideal males.” There’s
Frank (Steve Carell) who is a virile adventurer, having studied abroad and shared many
intimate escapades. Then there’s Dwayne, a man of action, young and disciplined, who
won’t let anything get in his way to the Air Force. Finally there’s
Edwin, though a geriatric he raves about his youth when he was an adventurer and still remains a man of action, having been kicked out of his retirement home for heroin possession. The irony is that though these men could be considered “ideal” by
Wood’s standards, the fact of the matter is, they are anything but ideal: Frank is terribly depressed to the point of suicide, Dwayne is an angst-ridden youth who could snap at any moment (and does), and Edwin is a foul-mouthed old man who never seems to be satisfied until he dies of an overdose.

Undermining the idea of “America is a land where everyone is or can be happy”
(Wood, 594), the Hoovers are fairly miserable, except for little Olive. Olive Hoover is
their beacon of hope—she is the one that makes the family take this journey, and together they overcome challenges and experience renewed optimism and commitment to family.
Beauty pageants represent a staple of American glamour and perfection—the beautiful ideal woman. *Little Miss Sunshine* gives audiences the more distorted variant, child beauty pageants. Somehow, child beauty pageants have become an acceptable part of American culture. *Little Miss Sunshine* exposes the unnaturalness of these pageants without having to speak a word: Olive is a healthy, normal little girl who suddenly becomes laughable when set beside the other pageant contestants. She is automatically labeled as an outcast despite the fact that she was simply acting on her dream and loving every second of it.

*Little Miss Sunshine* presents an unrestrained view of modern American life. The perfect institution of marriage doesn’t exist and what society and classic cinema defined as an ideal man over the years has become an irresponsible ordeal. The only concept that remains true is that America can be a land of happiness, if one ignores the ever-judging eye of society. Thus, the film gratifies the American dominant ideology as presented in an honest manner, creating an ideological gap between what is expected by society and what can be accepted, either by oneself, or in this case, one’s family.
Works Cited

