

Richard Linklater's *Boyhood*: American lives over the course of a dozen years

David Walsh
19 August 2014

American filmmaker Richard Linklater has made an interesting and affecting work in *Boyhood*. The production of the film was something of an experiment, and it is a tribute to Linklater's strong feelings about human beings and the essential humaneness of the project that it succeeded.

Using the same cast (who contributed to the script as well) as they aged, the writer-director filmed sequences once a year for twelve years (2002-2013), centering on a boy, his family and their surroundings in east and central Texas. Not blessed with an abundant budget, and facing various scheduling issues, Linklater shot no more than a few days annually, for a total of 39 over the course of a dozen years.

When we first meet Mason Evans, Jr. (Ellar Coltrane), he is a somewhat dreamy six-year-old, living with his older sister, Samantha (Lorelei Linklater, the director's daughter), and his mother, Olivia (Patricia Arquette). In a typical exchange, Olivia tells her son that his teacher has mentioned he demolished her pencil sharpener:

Mason: No I didn't.

Mom: Then what did you put in it instead of pencils?

Mason: Rocks.

Mom: Why were you putting rocks in the pencil sharpener?

Mason: Because I needed them for my arrowhead collection.

It has to be said that Arquette in particular, generally an affecting performer, strikes a thoroughly convincing note in the early scenes with the children.

Olivia is struggling both financially and with the responsibility of being a mother. Young Mason's father, we learn, may be working in Alaska. After the family moves to Houston so that Olivia can attend college, Mason Sr. (Ethan Hawke) shows up and takes the children bowling. He and Olivia argue while their kids watch from an upstairs bedroom window.

The family drama unfolds. Olivia pursues a degree in psychology and eventually marries one of her professors, Bill (Marco Perella), who has two children of his own. He

turns out, however, to be an abusive drunk. Mason Sr. meanwhile continues his semi-Bohemian ways, messily living with a musician and presumably dabbling in performance and composition himself.

Olivia leaves the unhappy marriage and moves to a smaller city, where she becomes a college instructor. At a party, someone (perhaps Olivia herself?) asks a student of hers, a veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, why the "locals" thought the Americans were there. "Oil," he bluntly suggests. Unfortunately, Olivia ends up marrying this same veteran, now a prison guard, and that union doesn't end well either.

Mason Sr. is "settling down." He fathers another child with his new wife, Annie (Jenni Tooley). On Mason Jr.'s fifteenth birthday, this side of the family pays a visit to Annie's parents, who present him with a gun and a Bible. They all attend a religious service in a small country church.

Mason develops a serious interest in photography. Soulful and quiet, he begins to attract the attention of girls. At a party, which brings to mind scenes from Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* and other earlier works, the boy has a conversation with Sheena (Zoe Graham). "You're kind of weird," she tells him, which pleases him perhaps a bit too much. A relationship is born, which inevitably founders in the last year of high school.

Mason's going off to college upsets his mother. She cries, as she explains, "This is the worst day of my life. I knew this day would come, except why is it happening now? First I get married, have kids, end up with two ex-husbands, go back to school, get my degree, get my masters, send both my kids off to college. What's next? My own fucking funeral? I just thought it would have been better." Nonetheless, of course, he does leave ...

Given the years of Mason's life that *Boyhood* covers, school and teachers play a significant role, from Mrs. Butler who wishes he hadn't put rocks in her pencil sharpener, to a nameless homeroom teacher who warmly introduces him to a new town and a new school, to Mr. Turlington (Tom McTigue), his photography teacher toward the end of high

school, who lectures him at length in the school darkroom (apparently legitimately) about his work ethic and the need to “do your assignments” even if you think your artistry lifts you above the crowd.

A few political events are reference points. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as mentioned above, to which Mason Sr. strongly objects. In 2004, he campaigns for “Anybody But Bush,” and, in 2008, strenuously works (along with his two children) for Obama’s election. They encounter a gushing Obama supporter while canvassing door to door. Is her mindless enthusiasm intended to suggest a hint of criticism? It’s unclear. Even the NSA comes in for a crack.

Video games, the Harry Potter phenomena, Facebook (Mason rants against the latter: “I want to try and not lead my life through a screen”) ... each makes an appearance in *Boyhood*. Mason Sr. takes his son and daughter to watch the Houston Astros play, with the great Roger Clemens pitching. He goes camping with his son in a gorgeous setting. Elves, he grudgingly explains at one point, don’t “technically” exist.

Certain elements seem a trifle forced. Olivia may be ill-fated in choosing two ultimately alcoholic, bullying husbands, but *Boyhood* seems to be straining to make a fairly conventional point here. The trouble is, as is often the case these days, the filmmakers to a certain degree want to have their cake and eat it too. Olivia is portrayed as tough and independent, refusing to take nonsense from anyone, including her ex-husband, or a boy-friend early on in the work. All in all, in other words, she is neither economically nor psychologically oppressed and desperate enough to make her an entirely convincing victim of recurring abuse.

Likewise, Mason Sr.’s ascent, or descent, into respectability—marked by his training as an actuary, his new wife and child, his selling off his GTO (an automobile that has loomed large in his legend), his new haircut—strikes one as a little predictable and familiar.

Linklater’s *Boyhood* is at its weakest when it philosophizes about Life and Time and eternal family relations. On this score, one tends to encounter the commonplace. Fortunately, it doesn’t do too much of it. The considerable strength of the film is not so much the thematic points it wants to get across, but what it *shows* concretely and sympathetically about a particular time and place.

First of all, what’s unusual is not simply that Linklater committed himself to spending parts of twelve years on a given project, but that, unlike the vast majority of contemporary American filmmakers, he felt certain the same people, situations and problems would continue to concern him a dozen years in the future. In the dreadful, demoralizing world of Hollywood deals and careers and instant but often momentary fame (of which the director is

not a part), how many filmmakers could promise that to themselves?

Linklater’s interest in the poetry of everyday life is a strong point, and in *Boyhood* he has found a moving, fruitful means of bringing that to bear. There is an almost inevitable (and creditable) documentary element to the film: we see the houses, schools, parks, malls, bars and restaurants, dormitories and highways that actually exist in the US. We see them in passing, so to speak, as the film rapidly flows along, but the cumulative effect is palpable. That savor of life is itself so horribly rare in American films at present!

And, of course, it is fascinating, to see the two children at the center of the film grow up before our eyes. Again, Linklater has to receive full credit for making the initial choice of Ellar Coltrane. What if the adolescent Mason had simply turned out to be dull or taciturn, or generally devoid of interest?

However, that also seems to be linked to the previous issue: the director’s, and lead actors’ faith in humanity, for that matter, and their belief that people are intriguing and worthy and basically decent. It’s the warmth of that sentiment, above all, that infuses the film and makes it a positive experience. Here is a crowd of people, of Americans, of Texans ... and, with a few exceptions, they come off well as they go about their lives.

Linklater admitted to an interviewer he’d had to give up full control on *Boyhood* and acknowledge he had a major collaborator with him at all times: “And that’s the unknown, the future. You’re counting on it being there, but you don’t know what it is yet.”

The filmmaker was correct to count on it. He was well rewarded for his confidence in the future, and so is the viewer.



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