

QUEERING THE CHILD IN POST-MILLENNIAL AMERICAN INDEPENDENT CINEMA

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of childhood in American independent cinema, focusing on how films portray its complexities through themes of innocence, sexuality, agency, and criminality. By analysing *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), *The Florida Project* (2017), *Mysterious Skin* (2004), *We the Animals* (2018), *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), and *Elephant* (2003), this research explores how the figure of the child challenges normative ideas about time, identity, and adult-child power dynamics. The study begins by analysing how films with child protagonists, like *Little Miss Sunshine* and *The Florida Project*, use innocence to create a gateway into adult crises such as addiction, poverty, and suicide. These children are often depicted as deprived of agency, but their presence, paradoxically, deepens the cinematic world by offering a more ‘colourful’ perspective on adult issues. Through visual techniques such as framing and mise en scène, these films position the child as an observer or ‘looking glass’ often softening difficult subjects and shifting the focus to the adult characters’ vulnerabilities. For instance, *The Florida Project* uses child-centred framing that relegates adult figures to the periphery, reinforcing the idea of childhood as a lens through which to view a fractured world. This innocence, however, is not just a phase to be ‘grown out of’; these films suggest alternative temporalities by engaging with queer time, a non-linear temporal experience where boundaries between childhood and adulthood are blurred. In spaces like Disney World or child beauty pageants, childhood and adulthood merge, creating ‘time capsules’ that challenge traditional expectations of temporal progression. The study then shifts to films that explore the sexualized child, such as *Mysterious Skin* and *We the Animals*, where children are shown as sexually active agents with desires and experiences that defy typical portrayals of innocence. In these films, the child’s sexual agency is central to the narrative, complicating the traditional binary between innocent childhood and mature adulthood. *Mysterious Skin* follows two boys whose traumatic experiences shape their sexual identities, while *We the Animals* portrays a boy’s coming-of-age story tied to physical and emotional exploration. Drawing on Elizabeth Freeman’s concept of *erotohistoriography*, the study examines how these films explore time through the embodied experiences of pain, pleasure, and desire, offering a queer temporality where childhood and sexuality intersect in non-normative ways. Finally, the study explores the figure of the criminal child, as seen in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *Elephant*,

where adolescents commit acts of violence. These films depict adolescents who occupy a liminal space between childhood and adulthood, revealing the contradictory nature of adolescence as both a continuation of childhood innocence and a potential site for deviance and violence. By focusing on the impact of death and criminality on the temporality of these films, the study examines how adolescence is represented as a turbulent, destabilized phase, wherein the future is marked by uncertainty and crisis. These films challenge the traditional view of the child as the embodiment of “reproductive futurity,” as discussed by Lee Edelman, and instead frame adolescence as a space for resistance against normative societal structures.

In conclusion, this study highlights how American independent cinema uses the child to interrogate social, temporal, and identity norms. By exploring the intersections of innocence, sexuality, and criminality through a queer temporal lens, these films offer a complex portrayal of childhood as a site of both potential and transgression, challenging normative understandings of childhood as a singular, linear phase of life.

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	10
CHAPTER 1: INNOCENT CHILDREN.....	36
1.1. Children as the looking glass: deconstructing family dysfunctionality.....	38
1.1.1. <i>Little Miss Sunshine</i>	40
1.1.2. <i>The Florida Project</i>	48
1.2. Queer Temporalities	61
1.2.1. Queer Temporalities of Child Pageantry and Disney World.....	62
1.2.1.1. Pageants.....	62
1.2.1.2. Disney World.....	68
1.2.2. Permanent Temporary Accommodation and Road Trip with a Broken Car	73
1.2.2.1. Temporality of Impasse.....	73
1.2.2.2. Child as the seer.....	77
1.3. Conclusion	86
CHAPTER 2: SEXUAL CHILDREN	89
2.1. The Sexualised Image of the Child: Neil and Jeremiah as Sexual Children with Queer Desires	90
2.1.1. The Body and Voice of the Sexual Child in Independent Cinema’s Narration Styles	102
2.1.2. Adult Gaze: Camera Movements and Cinematography in Scenes that Eroticize Children.....	105
2.1.3. Whisper in My Ear: Child’s Voice-over and the Curious Case of the Missing Body	115
2.2. Queer Temporalities: Time Binds and the Wayward-Growing Sexual Child...122	
2.2.1. Time Binds of <i>Mysterious Skin</i> :.....	126
2.2.2. Time Binds of <i>We the Animals</i> :	138
2.3. Conclusion	150
CHAPTER 3: CRIMINAL ADOLESCENTS	154
4.1. Not a Child, not an Adult: The Adolescent as the Emerging Third Pole of the Child-Adult Binary.....	155
4.2. Criminally Queer: Wayward Adolescents and Wilful Violence	158
4.2.1. Growing up out of line.....	158
4.2.2. Wilful Child without Futurity	171
4.3 Wayward Temporality: Death and Time.....	180
4.4. Conclusion	204
CONCLUSION.....	207
BIBLIOGRAPHY	214

List of Figures

Figure 1: Olive comforting Dwayne, <i>Little Miss Sunshine</i>	45
Figure 2: Halley beats Ashley in the face, as Scooty is watching, <i>The Florida Project</i>	57
Figure 3: Moonee eating at a resort's open buffet, <i>The Florida Project</i>	57
Figure 4: Halley screaming, "Fuck you", <i>The Florida Project</i>	58
Figure 5: Moonee crying, unable to say what happened, <i>The Florida Project</i>	59
Figure 6: Moonee and Jancey, hand in hand running away in Disney World, <i>The Florida Project</i>	60
Figure 7: The yellow van which they travel with, <i>Little Miss Sunshine</i>	80
Figure 8: Richard, Frank and Dwayne dancing on the stage to support Olive, <i>Little Miss Sunshine</i>	81
Figure 9: A shot from children's height following them as they are running around, <i>The Florida Project</i>	83
Figure 10: Peanut framing, leaving adult body parts out of the frame, <i>The Florida Project</i>	83
Figure 11: Moonee and Halley sharing the frame on the same level, <i>The Florida Project</i>	84
Figure 12: Children walking from one end of the frame to the other in a static shot, <i>The Florida Project</i>	85
Figure 13: Halley and Moonee in a static wide shot, <i>The Florida Project</i>	85
Figure 14: Cross-cutting of Alfred, Neil and Coach, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	94
Figure 15: Neil upon seeing Coach "Desire sledgehammered me". <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	95
Figure 16: Jonah looking at Dustin for the first time, <i>We the Animals</i>	96
Figure 17: Dustin looking at Jonah, <i>We the Animals</i>	97
Figure 18: Jonah and Dustin together, <i>We the Animals</i>	98
Figure 19: Mosquito bite on Jonah's arm, <i>We the Animals</i>	98
Figure 20: Dustin cutting Jonah's arm, <i>We the Animals</i>	99
Figure 21: Dustin and the brothers watching porn, <i>We the Animals</i>	100
Figure 22: Jonah watching gay porn, <i>We the Animals</i>	100
Figure 23: Polaroid camera on coach's face and his finger in Neil's mouth, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	108
Figure 24: Dustin and Jonah sitting together right before their first kiss, <i>We the Animals</i>	112
Figure 25: Coach's face blurring as he leans in to kiss Neil, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	113
Figure 26: Child Brian at Coach's house having a nose bleed, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	127
Figure 27: Brian crying on Neil's lap with a nose-bleed after remembering, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	128
Figure 28: Neil's recollection and POV in the flashback dominantly yellow, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	129
Figure 29: Brian's revived memory in dominantly blue, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	129
Figure 30: Juxtaposition of the yellow and blue dominance in colour coding, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	129
Figure 31: Brian's fantasy-like memories about alien abduction, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	130
Figure 32: Brian's nose-bleed before passing out with his hand in the cow.....	130
Figure 33: Neil places firecrackers in another boy's mouth, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	132

Figure 34: The boy is hurt and bleeding around the mouth, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	132
Figure 35: Neil takes the boy's pants off to give him a blowjob, <i>Mysterious Skin</i> .	132
Figure 36: The middle-aged john taking off Neil's pants in the motel, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	133
Figure 37: Neil puts the middle-aged john's fingers in his mouth as he's receiving oral sex, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	134
Figure 38: The abusive john directing Neil to take a bump of cocaine, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	135
Figure 39: Neil forced onto his knees and forced to perform oral sex, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	135
Figure 40: The baby shampoo bottle, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	136
Figure 41: Neil bleeding as he is being physically abused and raped, <i>Mysterious Skin</i>	136
Figure 42: Jonah and Ma sitting by the lake in their red swimsuits, <i>We the Animals</i>	139
Figure 43: Jonah underwater for the first time in panic, <i>We the Animals</i>	140
Figure 44: Jonah sinking peacefully, seconds after the initial shock, <i>We the Animals</i>	140
Figure 45: Pops coming out of the water and Pops smoking and an animated drawing of Pops smoking, <i>We the Animals</i>	143
Figure 46: Jonah's drawing growing wings in animation, <i>We the Animals</i>	143
Figure 47: The animated drawing depicts two men having sex, <i>We the Animals</i>	143
Figure 48: Jonah underwater at the lake in his fantasy/memory, <i>We the Animals</i> ...	144
Figure 49: Brothers hiding in the bathtub, <i>We the Animals</i>	146
Figure 50: Tickling game with Pops laying on Ma, before it turns sour, <i>We the Animals</i>	147
Figure 51: Close-up of slap on Pops' back, <i>We the Animals</i>	147
Figure 52: The viewer positioned as the receiver of the slaps after the change in camera angle, <i>We the Animals</i>	147
Figure 53: Jonah laying in the hole in the yard, <i>We the Animals</i>	149
Figure 54: Close-up on Jonah's feet and small creatures fidgeting in the mud, <i>We the Animals</i>	149
Figure 55: Jonah ascending, <i>We the Animals</i>	149
Figure 56. One of the intersecting moments in which the temporality of the film draws a full circle; all three students in the frame have been followed in their story line separately to arrive at this "present moment" in the hallway, which repeats with each story, in <i>Elephant</i>	162
Figure 57. John's drunk father driving in zigzags, out of a straight line, seen in a top angle, <i>Elephant</i>	164
Figure 58. John taking the wheel, <i>Elephant</i>	164
Figure 59. Eric and Alex looking down at the map while planning the shooting, <i>Elephant</i>	165
Figure 60. Eric and Alex together in Alex's room, hanging out, <i>Elephant</i>	166
Figure 61. Eric and Alex in the shower, <i>Elephant</i>	167
Figure 62. Eric and Alex kiss, <i>Elephant</i>	168
Figure 63. Kevin with a broken arm in the car with Eva, returns from the hospital, <i>We Need to Talk about Kevin</i>	176
Figure 64. Kevin scratching scar tissue from broken arm while manipulating Eva, <i>We Need to Talk about Kevin</i>	176

Figure 65. Kevin masturbating as Eva opens the door to the bathroom, <i>We Need to Talk about Kevin</i>	176
Figure 66. Kevin looking directly at Eva while masturbating, <i>We Need to Talk about Kevin</i>	177
Figure 67. First-person shooter video game Eric and Alex play, <i>Elephant</i>	183
Figure 68. Tracking shots of students before they are shot by Eric and Alex, <i>Elephant</i>	184
Figure 69. Killer's point of view during the shooting, <i>Elephant</i>	184
Figure 70. Curtain shot in <i>We Need to Talk about Kevin</i>	187
Figure 71. Curtains and Eva in shadows as she's walking away from them, <i>We Need to Talk about Kevin</i>	187
Figure 72. Criminal adolescents Eric and Alex loading the car, <i>Elephant</i>	191
Figure 73. Eric and Alex in the loaded car driving, <i>Elephant</i>	192
Figure 74. Eric and Alex driving; only the devil in the centre of the frame is clearly visible, <i>Elephant</i>	192
Figure 75. Alex in the freezer with the high school sweethearts on the point of killing them, <i>Elephant</i>	195
Figure 76. Kevin lit by the police vehicle lights right after raiding the school with a bow and arrow, <i>We Need to Talk about Kevin</i>	195
Figure 77. A shot of cloudy sky from the opening credits of <i>Elephant</i>	198
Figure 78. Another shot of the cloudy sky, <i>Elephant</i>	198
Figure 79. One of the students looking at the sky and clouds before being killed in the library later on, <i>Elephant</i>	199

INTRODUCTION

The child, even before being born and existing fully as an individual, has a tremendous impact on the lives of others. The heated debates around abortion, and most of the tacit norms that are welcomed as ‘rules of nature’ and ‘family values’ are often assumed to be for the benefit and protection of the child. Even though the mother or the person who is pregnant is sometimes a child themselves. These rules and values, however, protect a certain type of child, whose phantasmatic image also reinforces social constructions of childhood and adulthood that privilege the nuclear family and capitalist production. These constructions exclude identities which fall outside the normative, and function to eliminate or marginalise them. This status quo becomes more apparent when the child and the adult are juxtaposed to consolidate a binary opposition.

The decision to have children, compared to the decision not to have them, is a choice that requires more planning, calculation and responsibility when we take into account societal expectations around the traditional child. Human reproduction is not simply driven by instincts and societal pressures, but shaped by an ethically loaded, ideologically complex set of affirmations and decisions. The only certainty about the child a parent brings to the world is the fact that this child will eventually die. All other presumptions are mere possibilities. Yet, death is the notion that is least connected with having children. This logic, partially, comes from the widespread conceptualisation of the child, which separates the reality of the child from the mythical vitality, hope and futurity attached to it. In the same manner, concepts like motherhood, fatherhood, and family are also in need of redefinition, considering the technologization and commodification of reproduction. Assuming that there is a fundamental and ‘natural’ right to have children, who is and should be granted this right is still a controversial yet crucial question. A comprehensive and inclusive answer should involve surrogate mothers, single parents, chosen families, people who choose fostering or adopting, and so forth. Moreover, these debates inevitably involve the state and the wider political sphere – e.g. the involvement of governmental bodies responsible for the protection of children. As Naomi Morgenstern (2018) asserts, there is a need for “new ways of thinking about parental responsibility and social

reproduction” and notes that “these transformations will have material as well as philosophical effects on what constitutes a child or what defines childhood” (Morgenstern, 2018, p. 11). Sentiments around children are going through a transformation and consequently affecting the normative configurations of childhood. These shifts can also be tracked in cultural representations of childhood and children.

Throughout cinematic history, many child characters have been designed for the watching pleasures of the adult audiences e.g. Barbara “Ching-Ching” Stewart from *Stowaway* (William E. Seiter, 1936), Mary from *The Children’s Hour* (William Wyler, 1961), Dorothy Gale from *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), Marty McFly from *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985), and Wednesday Addams from *The Addams Family*, which was originally a cartoon strip published in *The New Yorker*, and later made for the screen by different directors. Today, children who were previously ‘better seen, but not heard’ are taking the main stage and gaining more agency and voice – politically (e.g. in response to the global environmental crisis) or representationally (e.g. through works of art). When compared with traditional representations of childhood, some of these children are exceptional examples, reflecting the shifts in discourse, and revising the norms associated with children and childhood. More specifically, these non-normative representations of childhood bear the potential to expose the performative functions of what we consider to be ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ distinctions between childhood and adulthood. This thesis centres such child characters and focuses on their waywardness in an attempt to investigate how cultural depictions of childhood are affected by the zeitgeist.

The changing perceptions of childhood have a consequential effect on the conceptualisation of adulthood. While childhood and adulthood operate as identities informed by a binary opposition (like ‘woman’ and ‘man’), they also hold a temporal connection between them. Every adult was once a child and every child will become an adult, in biological terms. The transformation from “woman” to “man” or vice versa may require physical intervention and can occur in both directions. The transformation from “child” to “adult” only requires time and can happen in only one direction. This project does not only confront the biologically based articulations of childhood and adulthood, but also attempt to critically engage with cultural portrayals of these identities and question how these portrayals contribute to ideological constructions of childhood. I also ask what it means to lose one’s childhood too soon, and who may be

seen as a ‘developmentally arrested grown up’. Therefore, one of the formative questions in this thesis is how time functions between these relational identities.

American independent cinema presented me with many wayward, uncontrollable, deviant children and questionable adults. It is also a gold mine for playful narrational techniques that challenge normative perceptions of temporality. The six films that make up the corpus of this project are chosen to critically reflect on the differences between the muted child and the ferocious child, queered by agency. My key objectives are to analyse how these films present the relationships these children have with the adults around them and how these films align wayward filmic temporalities with the on-screen children.

Literature Review

Childhood

Although both the child and childhood are strongly linked to biological and cognitive capacities in modern perception, they are nonetheless elusive conceptualisations. It is hard to place a definitive starting and ending point to childhood, separating it from infancy, adolescence or adulthood. The cognitive and emotional framing of childhood is also not defined with clear boundaries. The developmental stages of childhood, which set milestones in terms of growing up and maturing, are considered measurable, but they also incorporate individual differences, based on several factors such as brain chemistry, genetic heritage, and environmental factors. Although childhood is considered to be a ‘natural’ state, and children were always around, what a child is and what childhood consists of are debatable questions, that show variations between different cultures and historical eras. Probably one of the easiest ways to delve into these discussions is to look for the emergence of childhood in culture as historian Philippe Aries did for his well-known work *Centuries of Childhood* (1962). His research is one of the most referenced sources regarding the history of the child. He explains that the child as we perceive today did not exist before the eighteenth century

in Europe and in the Anglo-Saxon world. Family emerged concomitantly, as the protector and creator of this vulnerable, innocent child, and the man or the father became the leading figure of the newly emerging family. Aries proposes that the formation of this “modern child” changed society by establishing the family as a core unit, in a way which designated home and institutions of education and safeguarding as fundamental units of collective life. Hence, life is located indoors instead of in communal, shared outdoor experiences. Consequentially the relationships between the individual, life and death are affected. Investigating paintings, works of literature, personal letters, medical records, and church archives, Aries’ extensive research is limited to European cultures. His proposition that the child’s conceptualisation and differentiation from the adult affected society and culture immensely is shared by other scholars that contribute to the booming field of childhood studies (e.g. James, Allison, Jenks and Prout 1998; Jackson and Scott 1999; James 1999; Zornado 2001; James and James 2004; Qvortrup 2005; Prout 2005).

In *Childhood* (2005), Chris Jenks builds on Aries’ formulation of the relationship between the child and the adult and emphasises the relationality by defining it as “locked within the binary reasoning” (Jenks, 2005a, p. 4). Jenks suggests that it is not possible to delineate the child without initially defining the adult, and vice versa: both identities rely on each other. He reminds us that this binary reasoning contains and constrains “critical thought in relation to issues of gender and ethnicity” (Jenks, 2005a, p. 3). Jenks suggests that studying the interconnection that defines the child and the adult enables us to deconstruct other binary formulations. He builds similarities between the child and the savage, in terms of otherness, being less developed and requiring explanation for matters that are considered common knowledge. These claims are formulated from the perspective of the “civilised person”, of course. He considers childhood to be a social construct which “makes reference to a social status delineated by boundaries that vary through time and from society to society, but ... are incorporated within the social structure and thus manifested through and formative of certain typical forms of conduct” (Jenks, 2005a, pp. 6-7). Jenks concludes that childhood is always dependent on a particular cultural setting. The cultural variations of childhood are not widely discussed. The western construct of childhood is accepted as the dominant conceptualization of what a child is. While the globalisation of the western child is mainly supported by works of culture, there are alternative depictions

from around the world, as well as from within the western register, such as the ones covered in this thesis. For example, Joe Boyden (2015) points to the absence of different (non-western) childhoods in global formulations of childhood, in his article about street children. Boyden stresses the fact that (non-western) street children have high intelligence and problem-solving skills. The street child's independence excludes them from the globally accepted construct of the child. He points to the fact that it is not only cultural differences but also economic factors that play a role in the conceptualisation of the child. Ironically, actual children do not participate in constructing the concept of the child. Jens Qvortrup (2005) summarises the status of children as an identity group by stating that "children are arguably the last remaining group which has not yet been recognized as having a claim on current political and societal resources" (Qvortrup, 2005, p.10). The child, locked in a binary reasoning with the adult, is unified and delineated by the adult, deemed incapable and vulnerable, and excluded from decision-making mechanisms regarding themselves.

The child is excluded from building and structuring systems including economic systems as an active participant. Meanwhile, the child is ironically positioned as a passive consumer, for whom there are various large markets, such as children's clothing, hygiene, education and entertainment. In *Pricing the Priceless Child* (1985), Viviana Zelizer discusses the role of the child in capitalist economic systems. Nearly two centuries after the emergence of the innocent, vulnerable child, American practices, Zelizer argues, shifted toward "rejections of children's paid employment, increasing emphasis on children's unpaid work as moral training, adoption of insurance on children's lives as an educational investment rather than a practical necessity, growing awards [insurance payments] for children's wrongful death, and proliferating restrictions on payments for adopted babies" (Zelizer, 2005, p. 196). The child became invaluable and idle by the twentieth century. Zelizer also notes the work children produce outside the wage-mediated markets, such as second-generation immigrant children taking on the responsibility of a translator for elders. She proposes that the value added by an informal economy and household productions challenges market work doctrines. Children and childhoods that stand outside the traditional perceptions constitute a risk to normativity. Therefore, although children constantly exceed limits, in a way considered part of the maturational process, when they transgress borders without being of the expected age "they are deemed no longer to be

children” (Jenks, 2005b, p. 122) as Jenks (*Studies in Modern Childhood*, 2005) formulates. The relational constructs of childhood and adulthood exclude minors who take part in sexual acts, commit crimes and generate income from the category of child, as these actions are reserved for adults. The transgressive child “exposes the fragility of adult power” (Jenks, 2005b, p. 122). The child protagonists of the films which constitute the corpus of this thesis transgress the borders of ‘safe’ childhood by possessing knowledge and revenue, participating in crime and sexual acts, and demanding knowledge. Their transgressions threaten adult authority as well as the conceptualization of adulthood, and therefore place both relational identities in crisis. The adult characters surrounding the child protagonists from the corpus are also examined through the lens that focuses on this relational identity crisis.

The most agreed upon trait of childhood is vulnerability, which corresponds to a lack of knowledge, incapacity, and separation from sexuality, all of which culminate in the notion of innocence associated with the child. The definition of the child as ‘lack’ is rooted in Enlightenment values. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile, or On Education* (1763) is considered as the key work which initiated the conceptualisation of the child as tabula rasa. This child is defined by lack (i.e. lack of reason, rationality, knowledge, sexuality etc.) and also considered to be “highly charged with dispositions to love and to learn” (Jenks, 2005b, p. 104) and “imbued with a natural altruism and kindness” (Jenks, 2005b, p. 104). The strongest capacity of this child is ‘becoming’; some of the actions directly related to childhood are ‘growing, maturing, evolving’. Progression is fundamentally encapsulated in the concept of the child. The movement from a state of lack to a state of accomplishment entails a temporal aspect. The child is the past of the adult, in the sense that every adult was once a child. The idea of the child carries a sense of futurity in itself, as in the widely used saying ‘today’s children will be tomorrow’s individuals’. The binary opposition structured between these identities is temporal in its essence. Although the adult and the child are oppositional categories, the boundaries between them are semi-permeable due to the elusive nature of childhood as a category the limits of which is difficult to define. This project takes this proposition as its pillar. While placing the transgressive child protagonists in the spotlight, I pay particular attention to the temporal structures of the selected films in order to trace the ‘becoming’ of non-normative children.

The immediate association of vulnerable childhood with innocence is substantially informed by its negation of the child's sexuality: childhood and sexuality are "understood as inimical to each other - in particular, sexuality is seen as antithetical to the state of 'innocence' which has emerged as a defining characteristic of the 'normal' child" (Jackson & Scott, 1999, p. 87). The child is perceived to be asexual and heterosexual simultaneously, and despite being deprived of sexual impulse, is expected to obtain socially acceptable, normative sexuality during the progression to adulthood. Freud's "polymorphously perverse" (Freud, 1962, p. 57) child was one of the most ambitious attempts to introduce libidinal desires into the conceptualisation of infancy in the early nineteenth century, while it also proposed that sexuality is not completely established until the end of adolescence. The separation of sexuality and the child persists, to the extent that "the moral quality of the discourse of innocence works in conjunction with the sacred status of the child, to produce childhood as a moral rhetoric" (Meyer, 2007, p. 85). Anneke Meyer highlights that the consequential role of children and childhood is to "legitimize any practice or opinion as right while removing the necessity to provide reasons: children are the reason" (2007, p. 85). Innocence, on the one hand, sacralises the child; it becomes a sexual commodity on the other. Jenny Kitzinger (2015) stresses this paradox: "If defiling the pure and deflowering the virgin is supposed to be erotic, then focusing on children's presumed innocence only reinforces their desirability as sexual objects" (2015, p.164). James Kincaid stresses the role erotization of innocence plays by stating that there are different kinds of abuse which children endure, but the one that attracts most "adult" attention is sexual abuse, to the extent that it becomes a spectacle: "attacks on life interest us far less than attacks on innocence" (Kincaid, 1998, p. 81).

Because the classical perception of the child is deprived of sexuality, any occasion that facilitates the child's introduction to sexuality is considered to happen forcefully, by adult intervention. With the introduction of sexuality, both innocence and childhood are assumed to be lost; child survivors of sexual abuse are usually defined as individuals who "lost their innocence and childhood too soon". Harry Hendrick stresses the parallels between exiting childhood and the loss of paradise, describing how "the influential Wordsworthian perception of childhood was of a special (genderless) time of life" (2015, p. 36). In contrast, the genderless and "polymorphously perverse" child became a fertile conceptual ground for queer theory,

as the child was now sexual in a way, yet definitely not in a normative way. More recently, by the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, depictions of children with sexual agency started to emerge in various cultural practices. The scholarly world directed its attention to these emerging depictions of childhood and produced more works on the ethos of the child with respect to sexuality.¹

Kathryn Bond Stockton's book *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009) is an important reference in this context. It proposed another way of growing (i.e. other than growing 'up') by suggesting a "sideways growth", which is not shaped by progression "toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction and the loss of childishness" (Bond Stockton, 2009, p. 4). Bond Stockton thereby developed an alternative to the vertically linear scheme informing the adult-child binary. Bond Stockton takes the brain's developmental practice that builds connections through networks and extensions, and suggests that a "sideways growth" is how "the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing "adults" and "children" into lateral contact of surprising sorts" (Bond Stockton, 2009, p. 11). Her queer critical approach to the binary which establishes the child and the adult, influenced this project immensely.

Queer Time

This thesis investigates western representations of the child, as crystallised by institutions and the adult in relation to this child. The dominant western conceptualisation of the child is challenged in the films under discussion by the emergence of different childhoods, including those of queer children. Because temporality is a defining element in the construction of the child as an identity, queer approaches to time and temporality operate as illustrative and interpretative tools in my analysis. The notion of queer time, shared by different scholars, is relational in its

¹ *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (2004) edited by Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley is a collection of essays on non-conforming sexual identities of children, which collects many prominent names in the field such as Laurent Berlant, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Kathryn Bond Stockton, Richard Mohr, Jack Halberstam, Kevin Ohi, Paul Kelleher.

essence: it is opposed to normative/straight time. The metric, linearly flowing, progressive nature of time is the normative, generalised perception of time, which is also established by western thinking and industrial life, taking productivity as its focus. A queer articulation of temporality constitutes an approach to time, that proposes its flow could be “wayward” rather than linear. This queered time has the capacity to have repetitions, jump back and forth on the timeline, and make connections that are impossible in a sequential ordering of events. Moreover, it suggests that the perception of time varies between individuals depending on their personal experiences. There are various conceptualisations of queer temporality, some of which I will summarise below.

Jack Halberstam (2005) lists birth, marriage, reproduction and death as “pragmatic markers of life experience” (2005, p. 2) and states that queer subcultures allow their participants to believe their futures can be imagined outside the logic of reproductive and “familial time as well as on the edges of logics of labour and production” (p. 10). He underlines the impact of AIDS and how it burdened the horizons of possibility for gay communities at the end of the twentieth century. Halberstam frames the normative approach to time within the western register, which considers adulthood as a targeted destination that emerges from the “dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation” (p. 4) and “pathologize[s] modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity” (p. 10). According to Halberstam, queer time is a specific mode of temporality “that emerge[s] within postmodernism, once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk-safety, and inheritance” (p.6). Charlotta Carlström and Catrine Andersson point out that Halberstam’s perspective of normative time and life stages is surrounded by “class bound rituals” (2019, p.1323). Queer time and queer practices carry an anti-capitalist stance and embody not only sexual and gendered acts but also include non-normative monetary practices and ways of living, such as being homeless and drug dealing. Halberstam traces the possibilities of queer temporalities and queer spaces in film, music, and other subcultural practices in *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005). His later work *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020) also builds on his perspective of non-progressive growth, queer temporality, and wayward connections.

Ellen Lee McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen consider life as a “fundamental becoming” (2011, p. 6) relying on Deleuzian thought. Their framing of queerness is strongly associated with the youth who do not rush into becoming fruitful by producing offspring. They condense their idea of queer time and queer becoming by noting that “as they refuse “becoming” these youth become queer” (Tuhkanen & McCallum, 2011, p. 6). Using Judith Butler’s assertion that gender identity is a reiterative, performative act, they consider becoming not as a self-development or completion, but “a constant challenge to the limits, norms, and constraints on intelligibility that hem in and define a subject” (Tuhkanen & McCallum, 2011, p. 10). Their formulation of queer existence is a becoming that transgresses constantly. Both their and Halberstam’s notions of queer time designate youth and adolescence as powerful, structuring phases to be revisited instead of left behind. In their formulations of queer perception and experience of temporality, transgression in an untimely manner or rejecting to ‘grow out of’ or ‘up’ in an appropriate way are deemed essential values.²

Whereas Halberstam, McCallum and Tuhkanen take childhood, adolescence and adulthood as milestones in constructing their ideas on normative vs queer notions of time, Elisabeth Freeman does not consider stages of life defined by growth as defining markers. Her proposition on queer temporality is more layered in a sense that connects all stages of life, while she constructs a binary opposition between normative and non-normative perceptions of time, similarly to Halberstam. Freeman, in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010), names normative time “chrononormativity”. She suggests that “chrononormativity” is a “technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts” (p. 3) or “forms of temporal experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege” (p. 3). Freeman proposes that the value and meaning of time is decided in an asymmetry of power. Individual bodies are properly temporalized and brought into harmony with one another by the

² McCallum and Tuhkanen edited a collection of essays on queer temporality titled *Queer Times, Queer Becomings* (2011), which critically examines various themes and issues, including queer time and becomings in earlier works by queer scholars such as E. K. Sedgwick (Jane Gallop, 2011), barebacking practices under effects of HIV (Tim Dean, 2011), remnants of nostalgia in works of art and cinema (Dana Luciano, 2011), post-future’s optimistic possibilities (Sara Ahmed, 2011), horrors of the present (Lloyd Pratt, 2011), choreography and dance (Steven Bruhm, 2011), lesbians on ecstasy (Jack Halberstam, 2011), or rhythm as a temporal concept (Kathryn Bond Stockton, 2011).

state and other institutions, into narratives of “marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals” (p. 4). Her conceptualization of queer time is antithetical to chrononormativity: she claims that the pain and pleasure experienced and contained by individual bodies, even and specifically in the most peculiar ways, can “produce forms of time consciousness—even historical consciousness—that can intervene into the material damage done in the name of development, civilization, and so on” (p. 120). Freeman conceptualises this embodied complexity of queer temporality as “erotohistoriography”. Her meditations on the connection of corporeal pleasure and pain to time extend beyond sexual acts and explore the capacity of drag to act as a temporal vehicle, and even connections of sadomasochism to the Atlantic slave trade. Her ideas on queer time are frequently visited throughout this project. In a similar vein to Freeman, Jaclyn I. Pryor, in their book *Time Slips: Queer Temporalities, Contemporary Performance, and the Hole of History* (2017), meditates on the ways performance can change how trauma and memory are stored. They specifically examine “moments in performance when linear time is momentarily queered; history is disordered and disturbed; memory slips; ghosts linger; spectres appear; trauma repeats—with a difference—and past, present, and future are given permission to touch one another” (p. 3). Pryor’s work centres performance and theatre studies and each chapter of their book examines performances by different queer artists, like Freeman’s book does.

Lee Edelman, although he does not directly contribute to the debates on queer time and temporality, has made a substantial contribution to the notion of future in relation to politics and the conceptualisation of the child in his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). He asserts that “the image of the Child, not to be confused with the lived experiences of any historical children, serves to regulate political discourse—to prescribe what will count as political discourse” (2004, p. 11). Edelman positions the queer as anti-Child because queer sex has no reproductive capacity: it is only for pleasure. Michael James Cobb simplifies how queer people are positioned against the child and the future: “they are a threat to children—either because they are accused of recruitment tactics, sexual abuse, or not being able to have children” (2005, p.123). Edelman applies Lacanian thought and connects queer sex’s jouissance to the death drive. By following this logic, he frees queerness and the child (without the

capital c) from the fixed identities required by “politics of [reproductive] futurism” (Cobb, 2005, p.123).

Finally, two important figures in queer studies also contribute to the conceptualization of time. José Muñoz, in a sense contradicting Edelman’s doomed future, conveys an optimistic view of the/a future shaped by queerness in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). Muñoz agrees with Edelman’s perspective that the dominant culture casts queer individuals as problematic and denies them a ‘happy future’. He stresses that this dominant normative culture “makes queers think that both the past and future do not belong to them” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 112). In his opinion, what is left for queer people is barely surviving the present. Muñoz takes on the “ecstatic” nature of queerness and proposes that it is “an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (2009, p.19). His proposition transforms the queer future into a utopia.

Sara Ahmed’s approach to the future is neither as pessimistic as Edelman’s nor as optimistic as Muñoz’s. I consider Ahmed to have a cautionary realism. In *The Promise of Happiness*, she argues for a relationship with the future in terms of expecting happiness or allowing a promise of future happiness to shape present decisions. She investigates how “happiness scripts” (2010, p. 90) drive individuals towards heterosexuality, i.e. “for girls, you must become a woman by finding your happiness in the happiness of a good man” (p. 90). Queerness can deter a future happiness if that happiness lies within heteronormative schemes. Ahmed suggests that the unhappiness proposed in queer ways of living may be factual but it does not equate to misery. Like other queer scholars, Ahmed affirms the possibility of a future that does not hold a spouse, children and domestic life as goals.

These are only some of the prominent names that have focused on queer temporality in the academic canon. The ideas and theories of these scholars are incorporated into my analysis along with other scholars who have produced works on queer theory and cinema. Halberstam’s and Freeman’s conceptualisations of queer temporality are frequently mentioned throughout the project; their shared view about the role of capitalist systems in shaping a normative, standardised understanding of time is visited initially in the first chapter, which will briefly tackle neoliberal policies in the post-millennial United States and the monetary value of the child. Halberstam is later

revisited in the third chapter, when criminal adolescents are in the spotlight. Ahmed and Edelman's ideas are important components of the third chapter as well, in examining how adolescents take control of death. Freeman's erotohistoriography is a pillar for the second chapter, which thematises sexual children, corporeal pleasure and pain. Overall, different scholars and theorists' ideas on queer ways of living, queer practices and how the understanding of time and temporality is affected by such practices assist my film analyses. I have adopted wayward, queer temporal approaches because these complement the unordinary perception of time that children experience. Also, a non-normative or alternative understanding of temporality is apt for analysing intricate uses of time in the playful structure of American independent cinema. Before moving onto the connections that I aim to build between American independent cinema, childhood and queer temporality, I would like to mention some of the film scholars who study childhood and wayward temporality in cinema. Some delve directly into queer theory and its implementation of queer temporality in film, while some start their discussion from the entry point of the child protagonist in film and broaden the discussion to the wayward temporal schemes with which the children are usually depicted.

Whitney Monaghan's *Queer Girls, Temporality and Screen Media* examines queer girlhood in media, TV, film, and digital media platforms and analyses "the centrality of a heteronormative temporal logic in representations of queer girls and girlhood" (Monaghan, 2016, p. 4-5). She argues that temporality plays an important role in the construction of queer girlhood, starting with "girlhood" itself being a temporally limited identity. She reminds us that the narrative differs for queer girls and boys: the former is considered to be a phase to grow out of, while the latter is seen as a traumatic form of coming-of-age. Monaghan discusses the role nostalgia, boredom and liminality play in two integral questions: "What does it mean to be a girl?" and "What does it mean to be queer?". Incorporating the work of Teresa de Lauretis, Sara Ahmed, José Muñoz, and Gilles Deleuze into her analysis, Monaghan explores the intricate relationship between wayward temporality and queer subjects in mainstream and art-house cinema, which resonates with the findings of this project: films with "parallel, cyclic and non-linear stories" (Monaghan, 2016, p. 22) are more common in queer stories and they "offer much for queer theory, particularly in their depiction of non-sequential temporalities" (p. 22).

Catherine Driscoll's work on female adolescence and its representation in media and culture is also worth mentioning here. In *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*, Driscoll claims that twenty-first century adolescence bears feminine characteristics due to the traits of "changeability and malleability" (2002, p. 54) that it contains. She proposes that this non-fixity is queer because it cannot yet be assigned any sexual orientation and therefore can only be queer.

Karen Lury is one of the leading scholars of children in film.³ A substantial portion of her book, *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears and Fairy Tales* (2010), is devoted to how the child's presence in film distorts the seemingly normative flow and "homogeneity" of time. She introduces the book by stating that the chapters focus on certain themes such as "the rupture of everyday modern temporality and the recognition that childhood and the child's presence offer opportunities for transgression which usurp or ignore conventional modes of identification and expressions of sexuality" (Lury, 2010, p.6). She does not refer to the literature on queer temporality, but still positions the child as the embodiment of queer temporality in film.

Lury also edited *The Child in Cinema* (2022) which brings together scholars from various fields to create an interdisciplinary vision of the cinematic child. Some of the essays from the edition that are directly related to wayward temporality in films with children are: Robert Maslen's "Synchrony in the Work of Hayao Miyazaki" (2022), which focuses on the cohabitation of different temporalities; Stella Bruzzi's "Children in Documentaries or the Camera Never Lies" (2022), which takes on *Tarnation* (Jonathan Caouette, 2004) and *Capturing the Friedmans* (Andrew Jarecki, 2003) as depicting queerness in relation to children; Dimitris Eleftheriotis' "Kusturica's Children: The Bubble that Bursts History" (2022), which examines national history from the child's eye; David Martin Jones' "The Child Imprisoned in History: Crystalline Community Building in *O Ano em Que Meus Pais Saíram de Férias* (Brazil, 2006)", which implements a Deleuzian approach to time and positions the child as the seer in historical events. Although the collection of essays approaches the

³ Lury's work also questions the relationship between child actors and acting performance, as children on screen present a dilemma considering that they do not have a lot of life experience to draw on when working with acting techniques such as method acting, and yet they can impress and even surprise audiences by acting like a child. She reminds us that some of the most outstanding performances by children are delivered when they are not acting at all. But, then, she asks "what are they doing if they are not acting?" (Lury, 2010, p.10)

child in cinema from different angles, there is a shared consensus about a connection between the child and disruptive temporalities.

American Independent Cinema

There are active and ongoing discussions about how to define and categorise American independent cinema. A relational binary reasoning is observed in this context too; independent cinema is classified as films that are not big studio productions or from Hollywood. Michael Z. Newman, when defining what is independent and what is not, suggests, “When in doubt, read as anti-Hollywood” (Newman, 2011, p. 29). He reminds us that the term “American Independent” has been in use since before the establishment of the studio system, but became what it is today after the 1980s, in the Sundance-Miramax era. The independent scene and the studio networks, relationally bound together and therefore locked in a bind similar to the adult and the child, affect each other by adopting and mingling with each other’s means of production as well as narrational techniques. This section will explore the nuances of American independent cinema as a category in an attempt to define it in terms of (i) selected stories, (ii) narrative techniques, (iii) production means, (iv) role of auteur directors, (v) industry elements and (vi) viewer opinions. In selecting these categories, I have initially relied on Geoff King’s (2005) points of orientation, and added two more categories, namely industry elements and viewer opinions, as I find reception to be an important factor.

American independent cinema is a descendant of a current of films that differentiated themselves from the mainstream in the 1960s by their genre and topics: “exploitation films, experimental or underground films, and art films are to some extent precursors to today’s indie films” (Newman, 2011, p. 25). The uncommon stories and characters that could be found in these films became one of the defining characteristics of independent cinema. Sherry B. Ortner describes the main narratives of American independent cinema as “too violent, too sexually perverse, too depressing, too morally ambiguous” (Ortner, 2013, p. 10) and concludes that these are stories that “for the most part Hollywood simply would not touch” (p. 10). Newman agrees with this commonly accepted proposal and states that “characters become emblems for their social

identities” (2011, p. 29-30). Films that thematize social issues with a diverse variety of identities, who otherwise would not be screened without victimization or making villains out of them, are brought into contact with audiences within the independent cinema’s producing and screening practices. One outstanding example for this argument is New Queer Cinema. The name of the wave is proposed by B. Ruby Rich in a 1992 article published in *Sight and Sound* (Rich, 2013, p. xvi). The films in this cluster were mostly made by out lesbian and gay directors, delivering stories of outsiders. Rich lists, among many other factors, “political suppression” (Rich, 2013, p. xvi) and “outrage and opportunity” (p. xvi) as defining elements of NQC in her *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (2013). Chris Holmlund (2004) states that there were only three queer child characters in 1990s big studio productions, but nine in independent films, indicating a growth in the number of non-normative representations that were screened by independent cinema. Also, as Loyo Hilaria and Juan Tarancón (2022) note, female representation as well as the type of stories that female protagonists are staged in, appear to be different within the independent field. Women who do not fit in with the beauty standards of Hollywood, are from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, or who have uncommon desires, fears and agendas, as well as women who participate within the gig economy, and especially single mothers, find more screen presence. The same can be said for immigrant and minority stories. Nevertheless, Hollywood and independent cinema do not simply work as antithetical to each other but exist on a sliding scale. Janet Staiger reminds that indie cinema, when compared with Hollywood cinema, does not present a groundbreaking difference, as both showcase “fairly conservative ideologies as well as occasionally progressive ones” (Staiger, 2012, p. 25). According to Staiger, indie films often “reinforce sexism and racism and revel in elitist viewing practices for the initiated cinephile” (2012, p. 25) and art cinema does not guarantee a better representation of minorities.

The second characteristic trait that differentiates American independent cinema is the distinctive use of narration techniques. To identify indie cinema’s formal features, Geoff King considers “positioning, movement and framing established by the camera; image quality and textures created through the use of different types of camera, film stock, processing or lighting conditions; sound; and editing regimes” (King, 2005, pp. 106-107). He stresses a “rejection of slickness” (King, 2005, p. 108) as an immediately recognizable feature of independent cinema. This is sometimes due to financial

components, such as limited budgets that do not allow for technological luxuries but only very humble filming and editing conditions. And sometimes, it is a stylistic choice that signals a belonging within the independent filmmaking practices, such as disproportional frames, long takes, unsteady camera, extreme close-ups or extreme wide shots, natural lighting or an abundance of neon or pastel, a gritty capture of sound, and innovative soundtracks. The grainy, *verité* style aesthetic that disregards essential cinematography fundamentals such as the 30 degree and 180 degree rules also complements the realist approach, which is deemed apt for depicting social and minority issues. Instead of the three-act structure, episodic, recursive and non-linear narratives are favoured. Newman states that “form is a game” (2011, p. 29), which, much like any game, has no meaning outside the game itself and is for pleasure. He concludes that “appreciating the jumbled time frame of an experimental narrative makes one more aware of the linearity and straightforwardness of the typical, canonical story format” (2011, p. 205), pointing to the relational binary again. I agree that the narrational techniques of American independent cinema do, in some cases, step ahead of the narrative. However, in this thesis, I will argue that the non-linear narration, more often than not, complements the filmic world and story. The interaction between mainstream big studio productions and independent films also gave birth to certain formal traits. The “quirky” as defined by James MacDowell (2010) and the “smart film” or the “puzzle film” as defined by Jeffrey Sconce (2002) are considered to be related to tone rather than form but are nonetheless marked by stylistic choices that influence both character formations and delivery choices.

The occasional merger between big studios and the independent filmmaking scene, as well as the acquisition of small production houses by studios, has most impact on the third component of my categorization; namely the means of production. Initially, the igniting force behind the productivity of independent filmmakers was digital filmmaking technologies which allowed for “more concentrated periods of performance, without the long breaks customary when setting up to shoot traditionally on film” (King, 2005, p. 111). Digital recording made it possible to shoot with a small crew, at locations outside the studio, for shorter periods and made home-made editing studios a possibility for anyone aspiring to be a director/filmmaker. When film production did not require large budgets, the involvement of big studios was not necessary, at least in the making of the film. Distribution, however, was another issue

and large studios involved in film acquisitions also purchased independent productions. To be outside the mainstream meant very limited commercial distribution and box office success for the filmmakers. The “low-budget, low-key quality film which mostly dealt with mature themes targeting specifically an adult, educated audience”, as Yannis Tzioumakis (2013, p. 32) describes, was screened in arthouse cinemas only. “While the 1980s studio divisions remained strictly in the distribution business, the ones formed post-1990 started also venturing into the areas of film finance and production” (Tzioumakis, 2013, p. 34). While American independent film making was formerly independent from major companies both financially and creatively, within the “indie film” era (as Tzioumakis names it), new branches of large studios emerged whose main aim was to get a share of the lucrative independent film business. “Indie”, differentiated from “independent film”, is “used to connote an evolved, more commercial, and more popular independent cinema, one that has been practiced increasingly since the late 1980s” (Tzioumakis, 2013, p. 235). “Indiewood” is a third, hybrid category applied to films that have ambitious box office targets, host Hollywood stars, and present an easier viewing experience compared to independent productions due to their more conservative story lines. These three categories, “independent film”, “indie” and “indiewood”, have their specific production and distribution methods, and periods; each refers to different trends within American cinema. Yet the labels are sometimes used interchangeably “partly because the speciality film sector evolved in ways that made the distinction of these labels often difficult to discern” (Tzioumakis, 2013, p. 29). Recent years have seen a move towards the large studio environment for independent films, but alternative screening options provided by new communication and media platforms, as well as self-distribution models, cater to micro-budget independent productions.

The fourth point of orientation for delineating American independent cinema is authorship. Independent cinema often categorizes films by director, rather than by genre or star. These directors are expected to “cultivate a personal style across a body of work which helps to distinguish itself against mainstream film culture” (Newman, 2011, p. 146) and is assumed to stand ahead of commercial interests. The auteur director’s presence in a project is often sufficient for the film to be accepted within the independent or indie category, regardless of the scale and means of production of the studio involved. “The notion of independent cinema as personal cinema”, Newton

asserts, “is fundamentally anti-Hollywood, contrasting the independent artist against the soulless studio committee” (2011, p. 45); auteur directors of the independent vein are trusted to carry their personal aesthetic even when working with large studios and specialty divisions. Newman (2011) pictures the studio auteurs as figures with the capacity to implement their personal visions, despite the limitations and control of the studio system. Christina Lane describes the relationship between the studio and the auteur, saying, “a new brand of indie auteurism grew as a result of the desire for festivals and independent studios to draw attention to their films by promoting the director as a maverick who had seized the reins of low budget production and, in his own hip, cool way, made the system work for him” (2005, p. 175), and reminds us that the auteur in question is usually a ‘him’. Although independent cinema is a cinema of outsiders, meaning the stories and the people telling these stories are themselves from the margins, as in New Queer Cinema, the number of male directors is manifold compared to the female directors. As Lane notes, “The numbers of women of color in independent filmmaking were higher as contemporary mini-major cinema was forming; they began to dwindle as the movement became more institutionalized” (2005, p. 167). Linda Badley and Michele Schreiber describe the female-dominated style of indie filmmaking as “collaborative” and interpret this mode of production as political in itself. They propose that “female filmmakers transform and hybridise ‘indie’ modalities and existing genres to their own feminist ends” (2016, p. 12) and perform against the stream that privileges the white male auteur.

It would be impossible to overlook the role of film festivals, magazines and film schools when attempting to define American independent cinema and the indie film scene. Many scholars take the screening of *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (Steven Soderberg, 1989) at the Sundance Film Festival, as the formative moment of American independent cinema. Ortner describes the independent scene as “an infrastructure with a range of institutions: production companies, professional organizations, festivals, film schools, magazines, and so forth” (2013, p.92). Tzioumakis notes the institutionalization of independent cinema from around the 1980s to the 1990s happened through the consolidated opinion of distributors, festivals and other organisations. He forefronts the role of the festival as an accelerator “as distributors began treating the festival as a marketing venue and the trade press used terms like ‘mainstream independents’ to describe the festival fare” (Tzioumakis, 2013, p. 136).

The mid-1990s was a productive period for independent cinema, during which several film festivals⁴ took off around the US and the publication of various film magazines was also seen⁵. Meanwhile, film schools had already been playing a pivotal role in American cinema since the “Hollywood Renaissance” of the 1970s, which was primarily launched by “the so-called film school brats”⁶ who preferred an alternative aesthetics to Hollywood. The influence continued with the emergence of independent cinema auteurs, most of whom were graduates of film schools in New York and Los Angeles. Ortner (2013) argues that, besides their practical educational functions, these institutions perform the social function of making a filmmaking community and an independent cinema scene.

American independent cinema is more than an art form, an industrial sector or arguably a genre: it is a coherent cultural category. Newman defines this landscape best as “a cluster of interpretive strategies and expectations that are shared among filmmakers; their support personnel, including distributors and publicists; the staffers of independent cinema institutions such as film festivals; critics and other writers; and audiences” (2011, p. 11). The circulation of representations, ideas and perspectives between the makers of the films, and the reaction from the consumers of these films, together form the culture shaped around independent cinema. Those involved in the making of this culture include many positions besides that of the auteur director, extending to and including the distributors and festival programmers. Consumers, who are also active participants in the flow and establishment of the culture, include scholars, critics, bloggers, Reddit discussants, fan fiction writers and those involved in sub-cultural adaptations (even including *Halloween* costumes). The audience response works in many ways: some films are elevated to the category of ‘cult’ and some are “de-authenticated” (Newman, 2011, p. 233). Erin Pearson (2016) elaborates on the

⁴ Tzioumakis states “this phase also saw an increase in the number of film festivals dedicated to indie films or opening up to films of that designation, with the Austin Film Festival in Texas (launched in 1994) and the Heartland Film Festival in Indianapolis (launched in 1991) joining forces with significant existing showcases such as the Sundance Film Festival, the Toronto International Film Festival and the Telluride Film Festival in Colorado” (Tzioumakis, 2013, p. 35).

⁵ Tzioumakis provides a number of examples such as “*Filmmaker* (launched in 1992 and published by the Independent Feature Project) and *MovieMaker* (launched in 1993 by film practitioner and journalist Timothy Rhys)”, which, he reports, “were established to cover exclusively the independent film sector” (Tzioumakis, 2013, p. 34).

⁶ Here, Ortner refers to “Coppola, de Palma, Lucas, Scorsese, Spielberg, etc.” (2013, p. 109).

role of “review journalism” (King, 2017) and how the critics contribute to defining the value of a film as independent or not. The community and their investment in the shared understanding of what indie is, is constantly being refined.

As a final note, the role of scholarly contributions to American cinema are also important. The aforementioned academics and other scholars contribute to the field of American independent cinema through their research and analysis. As part of that field, this project aims to focus on the intersections of queerness, childhood and the post-millennial independent film scene in the US, which has proven to be a considerably productive field as these intersections have not been examined in depth before. The films in the corpus were made between 2003 and 2018. There are many other American independent films with child protagonists that implement ‘strange’ and unusual temporal dynamics, and also many independent films with queer child/adolescent/young-adult protagonists that have a more normative temporal organisation. My selection focuses on the intersection of these features and aims to bring to light a recently developing, increasingly multi-layered conceptualisation of the child that is establishing its presence in the post-millennial productions of American independent cinema.

The selected films were produced within changing financial scales and means. *Little Miss Sunshine* and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* host star names and were both produced for around 7-8 million USD. *Elephant* and *The Florida Project* are in the 2-3 million USD range, with first time actors and emerging stars. The films each had success within the festival scene, which helped them reach better box office scores, both nationally and globally. *We the Animals*, for instance, had its distribution arrangements reorganised by larger companies, like The Orchard. Some of the directors are well known in their specific speciality: Gregg Araki is arguably one of the leading figures in New Queer Cinema; Gus Van Sant is a household name in late 90s and early 2000s youth films, his first feature *Mala Noche* (1986) and later *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) are important titles in the New Queer Cinema canon; Sean Baker is also well known in the independent scene mostly for his critique of neoliberal policies in the lives of marginalised Americans (lately becoming a globally acclaimed filmmaker in the art house scene after receiving the Palme d’Or in Cannes for *Anora* in 2024). The reception of the films showed differences too. *Little Miss Sunshine*’s indie status was debated by audiences after its box-office success and the film risked

sharing the fate of *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007) being de-authenticated as a true independent film. It is now generally agreed that *Little Miss Sunshine* is an example of indiewood rather than an independent production. *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, a co-production by a British director (Lynne Ramsay) and a British lead actor (Tilda Swinton), is also critiqued, both for the production values and distribution methods that were more ambitious compared to regular independent examples. The corpus's range aims to encapsulate American independent cinema's different dimensions, exemplifying divergent depictions of childhood.

Methodology

The main objectives of this thesis are (i) to critically explore the conditions in which the newly emerging queer child takes the stage in postmillennial American independent cinema, (ii) to trace how the emergence of this cinematic child challenges the relational identities of child and adult and places both in crisis, (iii) to examine the implementation of non-normative temporal schemes in the indie films' depictions of queer children and adults in crisis, and finally (iv) to analyse the ways American independent cinema associates wayward children with wayward temporalities.

My research is formulated around questioning (i) how the queer child differs from the traditional, muted, innocent and sacralised conceptualisation of the child, (ii) how temporality functions in films that depict these unorthodox children, (iii) how the stylistic choices in American independent cinema, regarding character formation, story and also narrational apparatuses, enable the queer child and wayward temporalities to be articulated on screen. Each main chapter carries out close textual analysis by recognising films as bodies of text, and investigating them through core concepts in film theory and queer theory, and to some degree, those in sociology and cultural history, most of which are addressed in the literature review I carried out above. My analyses cover multiple visual storytelling apparatuses, such as character construction, uses of props and costumes, cinematography, particularly where this relates to camera movements and frame proportions, editing techniques regarding filmic time, including sequential, episodic, repetitive, and circular choices.

Each main chapter of the thesis covers two films from the post-millennial American independent canon. The rationale behind selecting postmillennial productions was the converging interest of western queer scholars in the child and the increasing numbers of queer child characters, specifically as protagonists in American independent productions. I aim to track and respond to an emergent academic, and coextensively industrial and artistic, fascination with and regard for the non-traditional child. My purpose in juxtaposing the traditional child and the queer child is to signal a shift in the ideological construction of these relational identities. Moreover, the “silent” powers of the child are politically instrumentalised by the adult in debates related to abortion and LGBTQIA+ rights, and the economic and judiciary systems rely on the traditional perception of the innocent, sacralised child, which does not reflect the reality of contemporary childhood. I firmly believe that informed discussions on the agency of the child will benefit children (as well as adults) if children can be perceived without romanticising, moralising and simultaneously muting perspectives.

Each chapter centres a different type of wayward childhood, and is titled accordingly. Chapter 1 focuses on Innocent Children, Chapter 2 Sexual Children, and Chapter 3 Criminal Adolescents. This approach is implemented to performatively emulate a wayward “growth” from innocence to sexuality to criminality. The protagonists’ ages increase as the temporal structure of the films becomes gradually more complicated. The waywardness of the children and the films share similarities. By this choice, I attempted to stress the cultural shift from a classical, traditional conceptualisation of innocent childhood that lacks sexuality and criminality, to deviant childhoods that gain agency through sexual desire and criminal acts.

Outline

Chapter 1, titled ‘Innocent Children’, analyses *Little Miss Sunshine* (Jonathan Dayton & Valerie Faris, 2006) and *The Florida Project* (Sean Baker, 2017) by tackling how innocence informs the conceptualisation of childhood, in relation to the characterisation of the adult as the rational, mature, experienced subject. The chapter proposes that films with child protagonists, who are traditionally innocent, utilise the

child as a point of entry into the world of the film. Their characterisations are deprived of agency, yet their positioning results in more ‘colourful’ cinematic worlds. The child protagonists are in some cases positioned to be ‘looking glasses’, which ‘soften’ the adult crises, and make hard-to-digest issues such as addiction, suicide and precarity more palatable. This placement of the child infantilises the adult characters around them, something which *Little Miss Sunshine* achieves through the use of stylistic tools such as mise-en-scène. Also, the innocent child protagonist is staged as the “child as seer”. The body of this ‘seeing’ childhood is limited in terms of motor capability and agency, but capable of observing crises and “the intolerable”, as Deleuze (2000, p. 20) suggests. *The Florida Project* exemplifies this proposition in its cinematographic choices, especially framing: the child’s eyesight sets the dominant frame height in the film, which leaves adult bodies’ upper parts out of frame. The film also implements a lot of wide shots, where characters become small in size compared to their surroundings, similar to children. The chapter also analyses the techniques deployed by American independent cinema compared to those used by Indiewood, based on these two case studies. Another focus of the chapter is temporality. Innocent, tabula rasa childhood is considered a phase to grow out of, much like a starting point, and, consequently, adulthood is conceptualised as the arrival point after a process of growth. The perception of time between these relational identities is linearly structured. The films of Chapter 1, ‘Innocent Children’, have a subtle relationship with non-normative, queer temporality, which I define as ‘time capsules’: temporal spaces like Disney World and child pageants, where the relational (yet oppositional) binary between the adult and the child are challenged, and the two parties merge. The chapter implements different conceptualisations of queer time and temporality including Halberstam’s notion of queer time (2005), Elizabeth Freeman’s “temporal drag” (2010), and Laurent Berlant’s notion of “impasse” (2011) to indicate instances in which time is neither linear nor progressive. I also examine children’s beauty pageants and the Disney World theme park experience as ‘time capsules’, where children act like adults and adults play like children to convert the dynamics of normative time. I have also considered the disenabling, arresting features of precarity and how the impasse it creates for the characters in these two films is conveyed through cinematographic and narrative choices.

Chapter 2, titled ‘Sexual Children’, examines *Mysterious Skin* (Gregg Araki, 2004) and *We the Animals* (Jeremiah Zagar, 2018), by exploring the figure of the sexual child. The scenes that introduce the child protagonists are analysed to trace different depictions of children with libidinal investment and desire. These children, in comparison to those discussed in Chapter 1, have more agency, which stems from sexual desire and the actions that follow its expression. The chapter addresses the ways in which American independent cinema’s narrative techniques contribute to the portrayal of sexual children in these films, by questioning how queer children are eroticised, how the narration reflects the agency of sexual children and positions the adults, how the relations of the gaze are articulated through adult and child POV, and how the uses of voice-over narration establish the agency and sexual desire of the child. The chapter also discusses these films’ sexualisation of children in relation to corporeal pain and pleasure, by using Elizabeth Freeman’s conceptualisation of erotohistoriography (2010), which suggests that time can be tracked through physical sensations. The child protagonists’ physical explorations, linked to pleasure as well as pain in both films, enable a queer temporal analysis through erotohistoriography. I explore the ways in which the film, as a textual body, builds a relationship with the viewer. I argue that temporality should be prioritised when analysing films with newly emerging queer child protagonists through a queer critical lens.

Chapter 3, titled ‘Criminal Adolescents’, focuses on *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Lynne Ramsey, 2011) and *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003), which feature criminal children. Both films depict adolescent protagonists who carry out school shootings. Their relation to innocence, sexuality, agency, adulthood and futurity is discussed in the light of this defining act of killing. The chapter will also discuss how ambivalence and turmoil, contained within adolescence, impact the temporality of the film, with regard to death being the main event in both narratives. It aims to track the temporal dynamics used by American independent cinema to reflect adolescence in relation to death and criminality. The chapter traces wayward and deviant adolescents in these films, positioning adolescence as a third pole, emerging between the adult-child dichotomy. The chapter treats the dynamics of adolescence as an embodiment of contradicting attributes, adopted from both childhood and adulthood. The final part of the chapter traces and interprets the narrative devices used to depict the turbulence and ambivalence which are associated with the period of adolescence. I employ Mulvey’s

ideas on death and temporality (2006) and Mary Ann Doane's notion of "dead time" (2002) to analyse the use of temporality in these films within their representation of criminal adolescence and death. Queerness, in this part, is defined in relation to deviance and waywardness, benefiting from Sara Ahmed's *Willful Subjects* (2014). Furthermore, this chapter also positions these queer adolescent characters against Lee Edelman's perspective of "the Child" as the sacralised embodiment of "reproductive futurism" (2004).

CHAPTER 1: INNOCENT CHILDREN

Most recent studies on childhood agree that it is a social construct that is re-figured according to the developments and the concerns of the era, with variations depending on local cultural differences and other defining circumstances, such as social structure and the economy. Philippe Aries's *Centuries of Childhood* (1965) was the prominent anthropological work which investigated the changing perceptions on childhood. "Aries's challenge to orthodoxy", James and Prout suggest, "lay in his suggestion that the concept of childhood emerged in Europe between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, thus blasting a large hole in traditional assumptions about the universality of childhood" (James & Prout, 2015). After analysing works of literature and arts, Aries concluded that childhood, as we canonically understand it, did not exist before the fifteenth century. Up until then, children were only small humans, who took part in labour as soon as they reached the physical capacity to do so, around the age seven or nine, sometimes as early as six. They did not receive exceptional treatment in terms of nutrition, nursing, health, dressing or education. They joined in adult activities in all social aspects, including leisure and festivities. Child death was common as family planning was non-existent. Children did not have enough importance to have names or be considered persons until they were socially active, as with all other people.

Childhood had not been a matter of much concern until the time of the religious reformations, when moralists and theologians began to apply the discipline of doctrine and training to children in the hope of securing converts. It was during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that qualities of innocence and nobility were first associated with children and the desire to foster these qualities through conscious parenting emerged (Boyden, 2015, p. 189).

The main motive for considering child lives 'of significance' stemmed from the dilemma of dead children's souls and where they would go. As religion shaped the canonical approach to childhood, the most prominent religious characteristic attributed to childhood is still of importance and hard to challenge; namely innocence. The biological and cognitive limitations dependent on age also underly the romantic figuring of the child as innocent. Innocence, as the essence of childhood, deemed the child sacred and muted as well as "incomplete, vulnerable and of no economic use" (Qvortrup, 2005, p. 9). Childhood became a category that is shaped by temporality: a key feature of childhood is understood to be an absence of reason and judgement due

to a child's limited experiences with no independent access to resources. Children became a burden on adults and the family, while fostering the emerging qualities of childhood became possible only through conscious parenting, which led to "the privatization or familialisation of children" (Qvortrup, 2005, p. 9) which took place during the late seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century, according to Aries. The sacred, innocent childhood and the child that carried these notions became the pillar of the family as a unit, as well as society in general during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The silencing and erasure of agency in the child enabled the adult to speak on behalf of the child, while projecting many other qualities, both positive and negative, onto them. Agency is erased from the child, which eventually turned it into a 'tabula rasa', upon which the adult could project its visions. However, childhood also became precious in its sacralisation: it was justifiable to take almost extreme means to protect the innocence of childhood, by keeping children secluded from the world in general.

This chapter will examine two films, *Little Miss Sunshine* (Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton, 2006) and *The Florida Project* (Sean Baker, 2017), which depict innocent childhood through their comparatively linear uses of cinematic time. Through engaging with the queer affinities of 'innocent children', I will explore critically the adult-child juxtaposition in its canonical, mainstream perception - before tackling more intricate versions of the child-adult relational complex in later chapters where the lines of separation blur. *Little Miss Sunshine* and *The Florida Project* both depict non-normative families struggling with their finances, while making efforts to maintain the innocence of the child. As childhood became a sacralised state to be protected, the responsibilities of a child's caregivers became challenging in a neoliberal system. These two case studies portray encounters with harsh economic challenges through a 'candy-coloured' lens that the child brings into the equation. Initially, the child's role in shaping the adults around them will be analysed in an attempt to underline the adult-child binary and the use of the cinematic child in American indies. Afterwards, the established polarisation between the adult and the child will be discussed in relation to temporality and the implementation of time in film, specifically, through my formulation of 'time capsules', which are brackets of time in which the constructed roles of adult and child swap.

1.1. Children as the looking glass: deconstructing family dysfunctionality

Children are not seen as fully formed individuals with the capacity to decide on substantially important matters, hence they are frequently denied subjectivity and are not thought to have fully formed agency. The role they are given as the carriers of innocence, is loaded with incapability and vulnerability, which transforms them into a sacred commodity. This commodity has no economic value but carries immense potential. It requires protection, care and conservation as well as proper mentoring. Adults, when positioned with a child, immediately become custodians. Further to the surveillance and control of children, adults are expected to adapt their behaviour to meet the needs of the child. This attribution of authority to the adult and denial of responsibility of the child stages the adult-child pair as a binary opposition. Both are social constructs, staged in opposition, but dependent on each other for self-identification: “the child, therefore, cannot be imagined except in relation to a conception of the adult, but essentially it becomes impossible to generate a well-defined sense of the adult, and indeed adult society, without first positing the child” (Jenks, 2005a, p. 3). This conundrum locks the adult-child relationship into a binary formulation: one party is defined and delineated by the capacities and limits of the other party. The caregivers and next of kin lose individual identity and become identified in relation to the child. Mother, father, teacher are distinct examples of this phenomenon. These adults are expected to behave according to their roles in the presence of the child, which are shaped primarily around securing the welfare of the child and protection of its innocence.

Developing on these arguments, I contend that, although children are not considered subjects with agency, cinematic representations of children emphasize the crystallising and transforming effect they have on the environments they are located within, and the adults they are staged together with. The presence of the child becomes the foundational element of the *mise en scène*. Spaces are classified as fit for a child or not. Houses are labelled as a family home or a broken home. Whereas schools and parks are considered natural habitats for children and so are often the primary locations of films with children, places of labour and ‘deviant’ spaces, or in some cases simply streets, become uncommon locations to stage the daily routines of children. Artistic

choices about the mise en scène usually become more playful and colourful. If not, the lack of joy and resulting dullness signal a certain problem. Colour palettes and camera angles also change if the story has a child protagonist, and the film aims to channel a child's point of view. As the child is muted and lacks experience, child actors' capacity to channel emotions professionally is considered limited. The child is treated as if having a different perception compared to the adult. Therefore, music and soundtrack are heavily relied on to deliver emotion. Due to the presumption of innocence, a different perception of the world and a muted state of agency, a particular filmic language is required, i.e. haptic ways of visual and auditory storytelling are more common elements for films with children⁷. One of the recent discussions in the field is the 'child's gaze', which I will address in Chapter 2. In this sense, the child and the social construct of childhood in film becomes a 'looking glass': the adult viewer is invited to look at the filmic world through the child on screen.

The innocent child, who is conceptualised as a tabula rasa by the adult mind, becomes a visual tool that shapes and defines adult existence and perception of the world. In both films discussed in this chapter, children are mostly seen being dragged around following the consequences of adult decisions. Perhaps the first impression the viewer gets is that the child is forced into the adult world, with regard to decisions made about homes, nutrition, and socialisation, over which the child has no control. The insufficiencies of adult caretakers place both child protagonists, Olive and Moonee, in risky situations. In one of the films, the government takes over the care and supervision of the child due to the mother's insufficient income. The adult characters are forced into certain decisions as a consequence of having to protect the child above all. This limits both adult agency and free will. The relational bind that locks adult and child in a binary, functions as a mechanism of restriction for the adults, as well as forming the ways in which adults are established for the audience. In this chapter, I will

⁷ Laura Marks' notion of "haptic visuality" (2020) suggests that haptic imagery invites the spectator to an embodied, multi-sensory experience that goes beyond the ocular and the optic. Davina Quinlivan (2012) explores "child's gaze" in cinema, in relation to sound and haptic atmosphere of films with child protagonists. Her conceptualisation of "child's gaze" is different than the approach I will formulate in the following chapter. She has delivered a seminar at Freud Museum on May 8th, 2023, related to her research on the cinematic child, with case studies including *Spider* (2003), *The Tree of Life* (2011), *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), *Where the Wild Things Are* (2009) and *Ratcatcher* (1999). She argues for the existence of a child's gaze, that is strongly related to haptic visuality, and claims that close-ups and sounds such as breathing establish a child's gaze.

demonstrate how the adult characters are seen through the prism that is the child protagonist, and how this prism effects the mise en scène and cinematography. I will be illustrating the effects of the child protagonist on the film in terms of connections to wayward, non-linear temporalities and how implementations of such temporal schemes position the adult-child binary. I will also accentuate the connection between American independent cinema, innocence, and childhood.

1.1.1. Little Miss Sunshine

The opening sequence of *Little Miss Sunshine* introduces all the characters that the viewer will be following on a family road trip to a children's beauty contest. Olive, the seven-year-old child in the family, as the protagonist, is the first to appear in a close-up in front of a TV screen. The image on the TV is reflected in her large framed, out-of-fashion glasses that have a quirky look. She is watching the winner of the Ms. World competition and mimicking her gestures. It may be too blunt to interpret this small image, inserted at the very beginning, as representative of the influence which the media exercise on the child as tabula rasa; a kind of 'monkey see monkey do' equation. Yet, it must be said that Olive is the most innocent, naïve queer child in my selection of films in this study. She is certainly a blissfully unaware child, who will learn a lot of 'adult' information throughout the road trip.

After Olive's introduction, over-achiever father Richard, drug user grandpa Edwin, secret-smoker mother Sheryl, suicidal gay uncle Frank and raging adolescent brother Dwayne who is also on a vow not to speak, are introduced, one by one, in small clips. Each character comes with a characteristic prop. Olive's father has a cell phone that he carries on his belt and with which he obsessively calls an agent. Uncle Frank wears bandages on his wrists, the result of a recent suicide attempt following an academic and romantic loss. He wears a long-sleeved shirt, but the sleeves are always folded, leaving the bandages on display. Grandpa Edwin wears a fanny pack and, in it, his little leather bag containing a small mirror to snort from, a razor blade and heroin. Dwayne's prop is a small sized note pad and a pen because he just wants to be left alone and can't bear interactions with his family, so he took a vow not to speak until he goes to the academy to become a jet pilot. Mother Sheryl is a smoker who has quit

smoking. Her prop, understood to have once been a cigarette, is conspicuous by its absence. She advocates for complete honesty in child rearing but lies about her habits. These props, some very daring for a film with a child protagonist, are unthreatening but dark objects in the ‘candy-coloured’ mise en scène of *Little Miss Sunshine*. Drugs, death, homosexuality, and family dysfunction become quirks of modern American middle-class life when the child is on stage. The characters are caricaturised, almost like action figurines that come with props. They are infantilised; their traumas are softened, and their handicaps are turned into eccentricities rather than shortcomings.

According to James MacDowell, “‘quirky’ is a word that gets applied to contemporary American indie movies with unhelpful regularity” (MacDowell, 2012, p. 53). Geoff King suggests that the word ‘quirky’ is a near synonym for ‘indiewood’, with its connotations of ‘eccentric’ or ‘unusual’ but also ‘not avant-garde’ (King, 2009, p.55). Quirky’s capacity to render hard and distressing issues palatable seems appropriate, considering that the main objective of indiewood is to marry independent American cinema along with its unusual topics and its hard-to-digest viewing experience, with mainstream audiences, in order to profit from ‘culturally sophisticated cinema’. MacDowell defines this stream within ‘indiewood’, as an approach to the world that is “sincere and ironic at the same time” (King, 2009, p.55). “One strategy” to relay this ironic sincerity, MacDowell suggests, “is for films to view characters’ schemes and achievements as comically absurd or potentially bound for failure – and thus open to a certain amount of ridicule – at the same time as they are treated with degrees of sympathy” (King, 2009, p.55). Suicide, drug abuse, hysterical obsession with achievement, and raging adolescence become comical elements in *Little Miss Sunshine*, with a touch of quirkiness. The characters and their behaviours are received with the sympathy that would be extended to a child. The absurdly innocent protagonist Olive is centred amongst the developmentally arrested adults, functioning as a looking glass that sets the atmosphere and colours of this world.

The first scene where all the characters meet together is a family meal. It is neither a nutritious (as Grandpa screamingly announces “it is fucking chicken, again”, picked up from a fried chicken spot, eaten with plastic cutlery) nor a cosy, comfortable one, because topics of death, suicide, and homosexuality come up in conversation. Olive, who “has grown so much that she is almost a real person” according to Frank, asks about the bandages on Uncle Frank’s wrists. The limits of knowledge permitted to

children classify some topics as ‘adult topics’ and out of reach, as these may spoil the innocence of the child. Death aside, suicide is a tricky matter for seven-year-old children, and equally so for the adults that find themselves obliged to give an explanation. How much Olive – as the epitome of the innocent post-millennial American child – is allowed to know, depends on parental policies. Her mother Sheryl is advocating for openness and honesty, so Olive is introduced to ‘adult information’, even if her father objects openly. The disarray that arises around the hectic and disorganized table of the modern American family, and the way characters don’t seem to take each other and themselves seriously, once again caricaturise the grim conversation.

This modern, middle class American family finds out that Olive is a contestant for the Miss Little Sunshine beauty pageant in California. As they can’t leave suicidal Uncle Frank unsupervised, because mental disorders categorise adults as children to some extent, and also because they can’t afford plane tickets, they decide to take the old van, which only Richard can drive, and settle for a road trip altogether. Another meal scene is worth mentioning. When they are at a diner for breakfast, each member is given a four dollars budget. When Olive wants waffles with ice cream, her father who is an unsuccessful mentor in creating ‘winners’ through self-help seminars, tells her that the titleholders of beauty competitions are never chubby, they must avoid ice cream to win. Upon seeing that Olive is puzzled and made unhappy by the introduction of negatively loaded body image issues into her ‘pure’ world, the rest of the family members get into a pretend competition to eat her ice cream and try to encourage her to enjoy her food. My aim in putting forward these two family dinners and topics on the table is to stage the ambivalence in the adult attitude towards information that is proper to share with the child. What type of information the child should be protected from and what type of information is important for the sake of the child depends on the adults’ perception of the child and better child rearing. Jenny Kitzinger notes that “the twin concepts of innocence and ignorance are vehicles for adult double-standards: a child is ignorant if she doesn’t know what adults want her to know, but innocent if she doesn’t know what adults don’t want her to know” (Kitzinger, 2015, p.165). What Olive is allowed to know, and how much, depends on the decisions of the adults around her. On the one hand, suicide may be a topic she is granted the right to learn about, for the sake of full transparency and openness. On the other hand, ice cream being empty

calories is unnecessary information that hurts her happiness and innocence. The financial limitations that she must abide by, while choosing food, are not part of any discussion.

The innocence of the child and the protection of this innocence exclude monetary knowledge. “The modern family”, Jenks suggests, “has become the basic unit of social cohesion in advancing capitalism, and though loving and supportive in its self-image it has become the very epitome of the rational enterprise” (Jenks, 2005a, p. 105). The family and the child at the centre of the capitalist enterprise are perceived to be constructed by values of love, trust, and safety. Yet, having a child and providing for the child’s needs are not only emotional but largely financial struggles. The child as the pillar of both the family and the capitalist social structure, is safe as long as its innocence is protected. Sex, another risky and taboo subject, is not discussed in moments when Olive may hear the conversation. Grandpa gives sexual advice to Dwayne in obscenely vulgar terms. When Olive, who has her headphones on, asks what they are talking about, Edwin replies “politics”, and Olive goes back to her music. The biggest threat against the protection of innocence in the child is sexuality. The irony in this reasoning becomes evident when we consider that they are on this trip to make Olive happy by helping her enter the beauty pageant, where girls perform aberrantly sexualised adult femininity.

In a motel, where they stay the night, Olive shares a room with Grandpa Edwin, and finds him dead, due an overdose, the next morning. Of course, she is not told why he died, only that he died peacefully in his sleep. After learning that the bureaucracy for the remains will take several hours, waiting for which would prevent the family from arriving at the pageant on time, the family commits a crime by stealing the body from the hospital. The rationale behind this is the ‘assumed’ final wish of Grandpa to have Olive competing in the pageantry; a perfect connection between the past and the optimistic future, containing nostalgia and potential simultaneously. Olive and Uncle Frank have a little conversation about the afterlife, on the way to the pageant, with a corpse in the trunk of the van. The brief exchange between a child and a suicide survivor is supported heavily with melodramatic music in peaceful tones. With a child protagonist at the centre of the story, ‘Indiewood’ makes overdose and suicide palatable with stylistic choices. Because she is the angelic innocent child that deserves

a happy ending to tragic events, Olive says they will all go to heaven. The film's possible dark turn is discarded.

Another crisis emerges when Dwayne accidentally finds out that he is colour blind. He has an anxiety attack, they pull over, and his nine months of silence end, as he screams at the side of the road. He initially says that he doesn't want to be in this family, then blatantly calls out every single member for their naked, unpleasant reality: bankrupt father, suicidal uncle, loser sister. No other family member is able to calm him down, so they send Olive on this mission. Dwayne had similarly resorted to the powers of the innocent child in a previous moment of crisis, at the hospital, by writing "go hug mum" on his notepad and showing it to Olive. In both instances, Olive, without speaking, only hugs the person in crisis, the adult and the adolescent respectively, to ground and calm them. Her mute presence, in combination with the purity and simplicity of the innocent child, control the situation without taking much action. Framing in this scene is worth attention. Dwayne is off-centre, staged in a crisis whereas Olive is placed in the centre of the frame with older members of the family in the background. The child protagonist at the centre of the narrative is the reason for and the solution of other characters' issues. All events are seen through the prism of the child, even when she lacks agency and knowledge. The traditional narrative about the child as a not-complete-person, a being in a state of 'becoming adult', is centralised and transformed into an entry point to the story in the film, which resonates with Jenks' account of the child-adult binary:

Childhood is spoken about as: a 'becoming'; tabula rasa; laying down the foundations; shaping the individual; taking on; growing up; preparation; inadequacy; inexperience; immaturity, and so on. Such metaphoricity all speaks of an essential and magnetic relation to an unexplicated, but nevertheless firmly established, rational adult world. This adult world is assumed to be not only complete, recognizable and in stasis, but also, and perhaps most significantly, desirable. (Jenks, 2005a, p. 8).



Figure 1: Olive comforting Dwayne, *Little Miss Sunshine*.

The rational adult world, although deemed complete and capable, cannot remedy the incomprehensible moments of existential crisis in *Little Miss Sunshine*, and thus requires the child to ease the situation and relieve the adults from their misery. The child, while becoming the focus point and main lens into the filmic world, ‘softens’ tragedies. The softening effect of the child is traceable both in the narrative, and in narrational choices that are evident through props, colour palette, and the infusion of quirk which I will explore in the coming sections. Where the accomplished, rational adult cannot remedy its own catastrophes and impasses, the child is turned to for multiple aids such as hope, futurity, and innocence. This contradiction between the accomplished identity of the adult and in-progress-identity of the child is the fundamental aspect of the crisis I aim to stress through this project.

The un-shaped world of the child, certainly the child protagonist Olive, is a tabula rasa in her naivete. The adults around her contribute to her ‘becoming’ an adult by educating her, each in their own direction. She, with her inherent lack of meaning, is also utilised as a motive for adult actions. The muted, innocent, and blank child is available for formation according to adult needs. She becomes a tool or remedy for crisis, sadness, and situations devoid of meaning, which the mature human mind can’t easily handle. Upon seeing the empty blanket left in the truck after Grandpa’s remains are removed, Richard says “Olive your grandpa would be proud of you”. The

emptiness and void, left behind by the departed dead, is filled with the conceptualisation of the child and the projection of the adult desires onto it. The presence of Olive becomes the motive for the adults' decision-making as well. She is the reason why they are on a road trip. Each member makes a sacrifice and leaves their personal crises aside in order to help Olive join the pageant. On the one hand, the most important goal is to keep the child happy and help the child reach full potential, reconsolidating the image of the child as fantasmatic embodiment of hope and futurity. On the other hand, concepts like legacy and will are projected onto Olive too: the child is a meeting point for the past and the future, almost as a container of different temporalities all at once. The beauty pageant is a direct symbolisation of children encapsulating different temporalities: little girls dress in flirtatious adult costumes, wear make-up that imitates grown women, and perform femininity. Yet any approach to regard the child contestants as adult women would be considered predatory, which I will discuss in the second section of this chapter while analysing the finale of the film at the children's beauty pageant. I will conclude this part by examining more closely the relational identities between child and adult, and the depiction of the innocent child in "quirky", indie American films.

I have previously mentioned the child as a looking glass or a prism that shapes adult existence. Considering Jenks' description of adulthood as "complete" and "rational", I suggest the child protagonist determines how the viewer perceives the adults in *Little Miss Sunshine*. Thus, the child and the adult shape one another – as relational identities. Each adult character in *Little Miss Sunshine* is faulty and problematic in their own way, but, in their relationship with Olive, they are softened and perceived more sympathetically. Grandpa Edwin is a vulgar, drug addicted, immoral man. Yet in his relationship with Olive, he is a gentle old man. Through the lens of "quirky" American indie, he is a rascal with a good heart. The father Richard is an overly ambitious, delusional man, ignorant of his personal insufficiencies: consequently, his shortcomings impact negatively on the family's collective well-being. At the same time, he is not taken seriously by others. Yet, when staged in relationship to Olive, he is a self-sacrificing family man. In an 'indie' setting, Richard is the caricaturised entrepreneur. The film places him at sufficient distance for the viewer to approach ironically yet still feel sympathy for the character. Sheryl may be considered a bad mother; she's not able to provide homecooked meals, her reactions are not well-

calculated, and she is unable to give enough attention to her children. Yet she is depicted as a mother above all, trying her best. The suicidal gay uncle, who is a Proust scholar, and the Nietzschean adolescent Dwayne, who wants to be a jet pilot, become Olive's supporters and protectors who try to maintain her innocence. Their personalities work satirical appropriations of stereotypes: the lack of depth to their characters permits the viewer to perceive them ironically too by creating a distance, yet they also receive sympathy due to their capacity to ridicule themselves.

Little Miss Sunshine is a prominent example of 'indiewood', in the manner it tries to make hard issues easy to digest. American indie, which stemmed from an attempt to "operate at a distance from the mainstream" (King, 2012, p. 2), was initially produced with very limited, low and sometimes shoe-string budgets. It adopts "formal strategies that disrupt or abandon the smoothly flowing conventions associated with the mainstream Hollywood style" (King, 2012, p. 2), and offers challenging stories with uncommon characters and without happy endings, which were a rarity in Hollywood. 'Indiewood', a marriage of studios with American indie, implemented some of the conventions of independent American cinema but targeted a mainstream audience. In that perspective, softening marginal characters like drug addicts and suicidal homosexuals, was one of the main conventions to make these films more palatable for general audiences. Hence, the film's positioning a child protagonist as a soft, 'candy-coloured' looking glass for deviant adult characters works a productive detournement.

MacDowell's categorisation of "quirky" in independent American cinema carries four main conventions:

1. a combination of varied comic styles such as deadpan, comedy-of-embarrassment and slapstick;
2. a type of 'self-consciousness' in visual style which hints at a sense of surreal artificiality and/or fastidious neatness;
3. a thematic preoccupation with childhood and innocence; and, perhaps most importantly,
4. a tone that is often concerned to create tensions between 'ironic' distance from and 'sincere' engagement with protagonists (MacDowell, 2012, p. 55).

Each item from MacDowell's list can be traced in *Little Miss Sunshine*, which makes the film a prominent example of indiewood and "quirky" indie. Slapstick comedy elements are carried by all characters; an outstanding example is the scene at the gas

station where Frank runs into his love interest while buying porn magazines for Grandpa. The self-conscious visual style is made evident with the use of personalized props. Childhood and innocence are central to the film as the story revolves around Olive and how much the other family members sacrifice to keep her happy and innocent. Most importantly, all characters are staged somewhere between ironic distance and sincere engagement. *Little Miss Sunshine* “disrupts adults’ positioning of children within hegemonic discourses of childhood innocence” by using “contradictory discourses that address issues such as sexuality, suicide, relationship breakdowns, drug use, death and pornography” (Robinson & Davies, 2008, p.350). While the introduction of such topics challenges adult conceptualisation of innocent childhood, I suggest that *Little Miss Sunshine* challenges normative conceptualisations of adulthood by (i) centralising the presence of innocent childhood, and hence (ii) refiguring the adult-child relational complex by staging the fragility of its operation as binary opposition.

1.1.2. *The Florida Project*

In Sean Baker’s 2017 film *The Florida Project*, the element of quirkiness gives way to other more fundamental conventions of American independent cinema. The linear temporal flow is more evidently interrupted through the finale. The film avoids the “conventional, Hollywood, three-part narrative”, to pick up a more uncommon, “episodic structure” (Tarancón, 2024, p. 221), where the viewer glimpses at the redundant, repetitive daily activities of people living in a motel close to Disney World Florida. The chain of causality is maintained in the story of a teenage mother, Halley and her six-year-old daughter, Moonee. Yet, parallel to their story, the film spends a lot of time showing children being naughty, playing games around the places they live, and adults engaged in leisure and in the company of children. These are rather lengthy sequences that do not directly contribute to the plot, which is why the film is regarded as “episodic” (Tarancón, 2024, p. 221). Its cinematography and editing have unique implementations that categorise *The Florida Project* as a significant example of independent cinema (which can be translated as ‘harder to watch compared to *Little Miss Sunshine*’). What the film shares with *Little Miss Sunshine* is that children are centre stage while the capability of caretakers, in terms of maturity or adulthood, is

brought into question. The characters depicted are more marginal, compared to those represented in Hollywood and 'indiewood'. The child at the centre, as a looking glass, not only shapes how the other characters are presented, but also shapes the cinematography as well as determining how much information the viewer is allowed to access. I will provide examples of the points I have made while introducing the storyline in the following sections.

I have previously mentioned "the privatization or familialization of children" (Qvortrup, 2005, p. 9), which resulted in children becoming vulnerable and of no economic use, as well as their position evolving into the fundamental component of the family and society at large. Bringing up a child requires an adult equipped with rationality, financial resources, and maturity. The logic of the immature, incapable and vulnerable child, with adulthood stationed as its polar opposite, culminated in childhood and child-rearing evolving into a "luxury". Going back to Aries' claims, childhood, as we understand it today, was affordable only to higher social classes from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries: "Initially only economically and practically possible for the upper classes, who alone had the time and money for 'childhood', these trends diffused downwards through society. Childhood became institutionalized for all" (James & Prout, 2015, p. 16). The institutionalization of childhood categorized families as either functional (or fertile, for the proper development of children), or dysfunctional (damaging and destructive for the decent and conventional upbringing of children). Families consisting of a mother and a father, with at least a single, and recently a dual stable income, where homes, schooling, and healthcare are planned for the benefit of the child or children, are considered 'happy', good, functional families. Childhood and family become circumscribed to one another. The categorisations of functional versus dysfunctional families are locked in a binary opposition too in this system of thought.

Little Miss Sunshine depicts an uncommon but acceptable family that protects its unity against all odds. Compared to the intricacies of the characters in Olive's family, *The Florida Project* presents a much more deviant family, consisting of a teenage mother and a six-year-old daughter. They live at a motel, ironically close to Disney World in Florida. Most families living at the facility make this purple-coloured building, with its small rooms and broken machinery, their permanent accommodation because of the difficult financial situations they are struggling with. The opening scene introduces the

child protagonists Moonee, Scooty, and Dicky. Finding out that there are ‘newbies’ at Futureland, the neighbouring bright blue motel, they run to the second-floor balcony to have a spitting contest on the car of the new arrivals. Once they are caught by the owner, they are made to clean the car as a punishment. Moonee’s mother Halley joins to supervise the proper handling of the task. The kids have so much fun cleaning that they propose to clean the interior, and the new girl Jancey joins them too. The owner of the car, who the viewer finds out is the grandmother of Jancey and another younger child, is not pleased with the amount of joy the punishment has generated. She warns, “You’re having too much fun. It’s not supposed to be fun, it’s supposed to be work.” Whereas Halley is completely in line with the kids having fun rather than feelings of guilt or regret. Juxtaposed with the grandmother, who, as a representative of ‘proper’ child-rearing, tries to bring structure and rationality to the children’s attention, Halley is shown as a loose, out-of-line, and deviant mother. Yet, under the surface, both are uncommon families: while one takes care of the children of her runaway daughter, the other appears a more responsible parent, taking care of her own child rather than leaving her with a grandparent. The two women make friends, and the conversation quickly shifts to letting off some steam, sharing a joint and getting laid to relax.

The uncommon family structures represented in the opening scenes, run in parallel with the uncommon style the narrative picks. Locations may be the biggest irony in the film. The motel Moonee and Halley live in is a vividly painted, purple motel named Magic Castle. It is one of the cheap motels adjacent to the Disney World premises. The title of the film references both the initial name considered for Disney World, i.e. Disney Project and housing projects made by the government in the United States for low-income families. The location signals the polarisation between social classes in neoliberal America. We are constantly reminded of how the ‘rich’ children and adults live a fantasy childhood at Disney World by the sounds of helicopters taking off and landing. In contrast, the ‘poor’ children, Moonee and her friends, spend time outdoors around highways and motels. This juxtaposition demonstrates that “the norms and values upon which this ideal of a safe, happy and protected childhood are built are culturally and historically bound to the social preoccupations and priorities of the capitalist countries of Europe and the United States” (Boyden, 2015, p. 189).

The precarity that Moonee, Halley and their neighbours at Futureland and Magic Castle live in, tends to be obscured by the colourful scenery, and the energy that the

child protagonists display. Yet, Magic Castle and its residents, who struggle with housing, childcare, transportation, and employment, are constant reminders of the economic context the film is set in. The viewer explores the locations and territories through the wandering children's eyes. Moonee and Scooty take Jancey to an ice cream place nearby and teach her how to eat ice cream without money. They tell the customers that "the doctor said I have asthma and I have to eat ice cream to be cured". This 'white lie' makes people buy cones for them, which they pass around among themselves, imitating the way their mothers pass joints. Ice cream, as a staple of films with children, comes up once again, the 'white lies' and empty calories meet in innocent pleasure. There are several sequences like this one, that do not directly connect to the storyline but instead function to depict the precarity in America. The bread truck that comes and gives away free bread is asked to park behind the motel, in fear that it may give a bad impression to potential guests, whereas most residents of the motel are shown getting packs of bread. The children try to make pocket money by carrying luggage that belongs to the well-off guests who accidentally end up in Magic Castle instead of Disney World. They witness the tantrum a newly-wed Brazilian bride throws when she finds out her husband failed in making proper arrangements and they have to stay at this horrible place, Magic Castle. In a packed car, Dicky and his father leave for New Orleans. Among the piles of bags and belongings that seem to spill out of every window and door of the packed car, only a small box of toys doesn't fit in, and Dicky's father gives the toys away to other kids at Magic Castle. Dicky is shown not to support this decision; letting go of whatever small number of personal possessions he has while saying goodbye to the home he has known for the time being and the friends he has had for a while.

The children are seen walking by busy highways, strangely themed shops, sometimes in deserted housing areas, and sometimes in greenery. "Only particular privileged groups or classes within society could afford the luxury of childhood with its demands on material provision, time and emotion and its attendant paraphernalia of toys and special clothing" (Jenks, 2005a, p. 57) and the families who can't afford a stay at Disney World, can't afford proper, functional child-rearing. Toys are the first things to be thrown away at a time of crisis; there is barely any space for Dicky's childhood. Being at mismatching, 'wrong' locations, the children are seen out of place most of the time (e.g. both in the tiny hotel rooms out of which they make a home, or in the

large frames of outdoor wide shots). They are seen playing around the motel, in the pool, surrounded by lush green nature that puzzles the viewer with its sudden appearance in a setting of highways and motels. In one instance a paedophile tries to approach the children as they play by the motel. He is beaten and kicked away by the manager Bobby. As the viewer is taken into the film through the entry point of a childhood experience in poverty, cinematography also supports the child-centred point of view the film obtains. Children, and sometimes Halley too, are placed in static frames and wide shots, as tiny figures, moving from one end of the frame to the other. The feeling of being small gives an account of childhood, whereas constantly moving, giving a lot of effort yet not being able to leave the frame and situation relates to the neoliberal policies the film critiques.

This type of ‘imperfect’ or ‘improper’ family is typically considered dysfunctional. The happy endings of mainstream Hollywood conventions would stage an escape from the precarious social and economic standards leading to dysfunctional families, or the children would leave their dysfunctional family behind to move towards some sort of success. In her study on film adaptations of dysfunctional family autobiographies, Melissa Bender notes “family dysfunction memoirs tend to reinforce neoliberal constructions of family as utterly private and distinct from the public realm” (2018, p. 535). Bender reminds us that, as problems arise in the family, their solutions are expected to come from within the family, and “parents are consistently depicted as lacking the initiative to pull the family out of poverty” (p. 538). Through particular choices in cinematography, *The Florida Project* represents Halley and her efforts to escape poverty as failures: she cannot break through the impasse, which is materialised through wide-shot static frames. Halley’s small escapes from the pressures of the neoliberal public realm, such as slacking around and smoking joints in the hotel room, become negative characteristics along the lines of laziness and selfishness. The neighbour and friend who works at a diner tells her that she will try to hire Halley as soon as she becomes manager at her job; however, she fails to keep her promise. Following this, Halley is seen at a visit in an official institution, talking about her unemployment and looking for solutions. She says she was kicked out of the strip club because she was not giving sexual favours. The consultant reminds her that she can’t receive benefits unless she is employed a minimum of 30 hours per week. Halley points out the irony of the situation, obviously frustrated with the entrapment of the

circumstances. She tries to, at least, get some free bus tickets before leaving the office. Halley also struggles with fitting in. As much as the children seem to be misplaced, Halley is also misplaced in adulthood and cannot adapt to neoliberal policies. She tries purchasing wholesale perfumes and selling them to guests at resorts. Halley and Moonee hang around at the resort premises until they are threatened with arrest by a guard. Halley manages to shake her off, but can't risk doing the same thing again, as, she tells Moonee, she must not get arrested again. She starts to struggle with weekly payments for the room they are staying in.

In the neoliberal vision of society, healthy, proper families produce good children, and the improper, unhealthy families produce bad children. In *Little Miss Sunshine*, the father is the epitome of such a socio-political vision. He believes that a person can condition oneself to be a 'winner' and reach success, independent of the circumstances. The level of delusion that comes with ideological discourses blocks him from self-reflection, and he can't recognise his own professional and personal shortcomings. The mother in *The Florida Project*, Halley, is trying hard to maintain the standards required for a child, but she is presented as somehow negligent for not attempting to make a living by more earnest, hardworking means. I consider this to be paradigmatic of independent cinema's realistic approach to characterisation, countering the heroism prevalent in Hollywood, where a character's personal fight against their circumstances carries them out of poverty. Both Richard and Halley are portrayed as directly responsible for the dysfunctional conditions their children live in.

Halley, finding herself unable to make ends meet, starts sex work. She makes Moonee take photos of her in a bikini, to use in an online platform. Halley also takes Moonee's photos as Moonee adopts feminine poses. The whole act of posing and taking turns with the smartphone camera, seems like a game of pretending to be sexy, in which the child is innocently acting as a sexy woman, and the adolescent parent is preparing to monetise sexuality. Halley had previously mentioned being fired because she rejected giving sexual favours, thus suggesting a link between sex and employment for a single mother of her status. Although we cannot know whether she was telling the truth, after trying trivial means of earning a living, her decision to turn to sex work so she can provide accommodation is a dilemma on its own. The scene leaves the viewer puzzled about whether Halley is going to monetise the photos of Moonee too. The ambivalence of the situation is maintained by the limited knowledge the viewer has access to. In

three different scenes, the camera, which is dominantly aligned with Moonee throughout the film, remains in the bathroom. Moonee is seen naked in the tub, playing with water and her toys while taking a bath and listening to hip hop music coming from the other side of the door. Bathing seems to be a nightly routine for Moonee, until a man enters the bathroom, says, “There’s a child here” with surprise, and Halley is heard saying, “Dude I said you can’t go in there”.

American independent cinema’s conventions show divergence from the mainstream in terms of both the narrative structure and characterisations. The film positions the child as the main connection and entry point into the narrative and the film’s world. It stages the child as the sole ‘subject’ that facilitates the viewer’s entry into the story: the film achieves this by aligning the amount of knowledge the viewer is given access to, with the amount of knowledge the child is allowed in the story. The viewer finds out that Halley is entertaining men in her hotel room when Moonee accidentally finds out. The child functions as a prism or a looking glass in *The Florida Project*, but in a manner different to how this operates in *Little Miss Sunshine*.

The episodic narrative structure brings a different pace and rhythm to the film, while breaking away from mainstream conventions. Scenes that are not connected to the main story and do not contribute to the progression of the storyline take up a lot of space, similar to the way in which children deliver a retelling of their daily activities, with descriptions that are filled with unnecessary details. The limited available knowledge also communicates the separation between childhood in relation to innocence, and adulthood in connection to maturity. Halley, as a teenage mother, however, challenges such conventions. Her maturity and capacity as a mother are constantly questioned through the narrative, by the events, by the comparisons to other mothers around her and finally by the government. She does not represent the mature adult or the parent who is sufficiently cultivated to take care of a child. I suggest that the characterisation of Halley as a teenage mother, as well as the questionable maturity of the adult characters in *Little Miss Sunshine* and the characterisation in other films in this project’s corpus, represent a change in the conceptualisations of adult and child as identities. *The Florida Project*, and I would contend, American independent cinema in general, depicts the identity crisis these conceptualisations signify by blurring the separating lines between adulthood and childhood. The characters of the American indie are slackers, developmentally arrested family men, adolescent mothers, suburban

housewives in existential crises, and quirky, childish personas. Considering that “the teenage mother is construed as a social problem, as an individual who is literally out of time with the expectations of her age grade” (James & Prout, 2015, p. 233), Halley and her sometimes childish, sometimes adolescently rebellious manners challenge strict distinctions between adulthood and childhood and provide a prime example of character formation in American independent cinema. Halley’s presentation is uncommon for films about poverty, when compared to other typical protagonists struggling with difficult economic conditions – who are usually sympathised with by the viewer. In *The Florida Project*, Pattison argues,

[s]ome viewers may be tempted to read Halley as an unlikable figure; she is crude, insolent, discourteous, and combative from the film’s first frame to its last. She is also, however, trapped in poverty and lacks the resources to pull herself and her daughter out of the impossible circumstances in which she finds herself (Pattison, 2022, p. 50).

Halley is not victimised, excused, or sympathised with. She is depicted with a certain amount of crassness and obscenity. She is not pictured as the kind-hearted victim, “her representation ties in with the stereotypical representation of the poor as sexualized, undisciplined, and self-destructive pariahs. The excess in the representation of her body marks Halley as a moral other and as a threat to her daughter and to society” (Tarancón, 2024, p.221). She is framed as the disapproved type of poor woman who is responsible for her situation. The depiction of Halley, which is distant from stark opposites of victim and hero, is realistic and in line with American independent cinema’s features.

As the saying ‘like mother like daughter’ predicts, or as ascribed to dysfunctional families and their offspring, Moonee causes trouble. Scooty, Jancey and Moonee burn down an empty house, while playing in it. The deserted, run-down houses recall the 2008 crisis and the collapse of the housing market, signalling the economical surroundings the characters are in, while their bright coloured exteriors build parallels with the run-down interiors and vivid exteriors of the motels. The kids leave the crime scene, and Moonee tells the other two to pretend nothing happened. As the residents in the area watch the fire, Scooty doesn’t want to join his mother, Halley, and Moonee at the crime scene. His mother Ashley, who is Halley’s closest friend, figures out that something is wrong and Scooty is somehow responsible. Fearing that the DCF

(Department of Children and Families) may take away her child, Ashley forbids Scooty to hang out with Moonee, and also distances herself from Halley without an explanation. Halley, unable to understand the sudden coldness, and accusations of sex work, reacts impulsively. She beats Ashley in the face as Scooty is watching. The camera is positioned behind Scooty, watching Halley on top of his mother, punching her repeatedly, as the back of his head is the centre figure in the frame. The scene of violence is both blocked and at the same time presented through the child.

The DCF pays a visit to Halley after an anonymous call is placed informing them that she is engaged in sex work. The authorities intervene for the protection of the child. Understanding that she now has limited time to spend with Moonee, Halley tries to make the best of it. As the dysfunctional family's bond is about to be torn apart, the film picks up a different pace in editing, stepping out of the slow, tranquil rhythm and dominance of static extreme long shots that it has so far used. Halley takes Moonee to a resort's open buffet. Close up shots of Moonee in partial focus, eating and talking with food in her mouth, are on screen with faster-paced editing. The suture of the film becomes more visible as the narrative structure and rhythm changes. This change is formally registered by a marked shift from the child's-height framing (where the camera is positioned at the children's height, leaving most of the adult body parts out of frame) and the wide-angle static shots (in which characters are presented fully but as tiny figures) to the close ups of Moonee in a static frame, with unstable focus and, in some cases, Moonee's chin and neck out of the frame start. She talks about the food and her stomach while she is seen putting strawberries and pastries into her mouth and talking with her mouth full.





Figure 2: Halley beats Ashley in the face, as Scooty is watching, *The Florida Project*



Figure 3: Moonee eating at a resort's open buffet, *The Florida Project*

A medium shot of Halley with a blank face is placed afterwards, constructing a reciprocal, shot–reverse shot sequence of editing. The viewer is then brought into a more conventional form of editing and character presentation, foregrounding character interiority, but the unexpected introduction of conventional framing and focal choices at a moment of crisis makes the mainstream style stand out as exceptional. This change in style climaxes when the DCF comes to take Moonee away, but Moonee manages to run off. After finding out that the institution that takes away her child for ‘safer keeping’ has lost Moonee, Halley screams “Fuck you!” in a tantrum as the camera makes an unconventional zoom in to show an extreme close up of her open mouth.



Figure 4: Halley screaming, “Fuck you”, *The Florida Project*

The scream and close up of Halley’s empty mouth alongside Moonee’s constant talking and simultaneous eating, as the last moment that mother and daughter share, are significant. I will revisit the bonding and delineating characteristics of the mouth in the following chapters. The mouth appears as a motive of connection between the mother and the child, and variously signifying themes of nourishment, eating, consuming, biting, harming, and destruction in films with child protagonists. A binding link between oral cavity and the vortex of existence comes up when Moonee runs away to Jancey. While Moonee is crying at the door, Jancey asks, “What happened?” and Moonee, in tears, says, “I can’t say it” and places two fingers in her mouth afterwards. The impossibility of uttering the tragedy, the lack created by loss and the void that separation leaves behind cannot be put into words, and the oral cavity cannot be filled with comforting foods or rebellious screams but with two fingers. The film began with children using their mouths to spit onto a car and make a new friend in doing so. The finale of the film comes through an open mouth as well.



Figure 5: Moonee crying, unable to say what happened, *The Florida Project*

An unexpected change in the film's narration takes place after this scene. Beginning with the moment Jancey puts her hand on Moonee's hand, the narration undergoes a dramatic change. *The Florida Project* is shot on 35 mm film, except for the last two minutes of the film, starting with this scene. From this moment, Moonee and Jancey run through roads, car parks, and come to crowded locations, with the camera tracking behind them, but instead of static movements, the active, shaky, handheld camera of an iPhone 6 is preferred. This decision was financially motivated, as the filming in Disney World's Magic Kingdom was conducted without permission, emulating small-crew guerilla shooting resonant with the dominant stylistic register of indie film. 35mm film, which has 24 frames per second, maintains a clearer yet slower visual effect. The iPhone, with a rapid shutter speed, creates a different texture and feeling of urgency. This stylistic choice stands outside the cinematographic register of the film and consequently creates a possibility to interpret the final sequence as separated from the rest of the film. Hence, the last sequence where the two girls run away into Disney World, hand in hand, gives a surreal feeling, resembling a fantasy or dream sequence, leading us to question the reality and temporal connections of the finale. Once it is evident that they are in Disney World, the tracking camera comes to a halt while the static frame and extreme wide shot is maintained as they run towards the Magic Castle.



Figure 6: Moonee and Jancey, hand in hand running away in Disney World, *The Florida Project*

In terms of temporality, *The Florida Project* has an uncommon structure. Expanded idle moments like memories are combined with significant events that follow one another to construct a story. The ending, however, with its completely different pace and texture, binds everything together while also leading the viewer question its overall reality. Films with unique temporal flows and structures centring child protagonists are the core elements of this thesis. *Little Miss Sunshine*, as an example of ‘indiewood’, with a linear temporal scheme and a more conventional depiction of innocent childhood, was my first example. It depicts adults in crisis through a ‘quirky’ lens that the child brings into the equation. *The Florida Project*, however, presents another type of innocent childhood, with an adolescent sex worker and mother blurring the lines between adulthood and childhood. As a work of American independent cinema, it steps outside of conventional film techniques, while keeping the child as the focal point of the world it constructs cinematographically. Linearity of time, and feeling of causality and progression, are challenged both in the finale and in the overall body of the film. The next sections of this chapter will take a closer look at implementations of temporality in a more wayward, queer sense in these two children-centred films.

1.2. Queer Temporalities

Focusing further on *Little Miss Sunshine* and *The Florida Project*, this section will explore the child-adult complex from the perspective of cinematic time and temporality. I will attempt to delineate instances, spaces and times from the two films, where the lines of separation between the child and the adult blur due to the uses of non-normative temporal constructions.

I have previously discussed how childhood and adulthood were historically repositioned as relational identities that formulate each other in opposition. The emerging concept of adolescence challenged both identities by triangulating the linear oppositional relationship, in a way which Chapter 3, ‘Criminal Adolescents’, will discuss in more detail. Here, I will focus on how wayward, queer childhoods test the binary opposition and its linear temporality. The linearity of the relationship between childhood and adulthood relies not only on the framing of the two identities as oppositional (e.g. ridiculous vs. rational, inexperienced vs. cultivated, incapable vs. accomplished and so on) but also the temporal scheme between the two identities. Childhood is seen as a ‘transitory phase’, a period of time to ‘grow out of’, towards adulthood as the ultimate destination. Hence, the attributes deemed fit for childhood signal a lack, an incompetence. The imminent act of growing seems to be only in one direction, that is, ‘up’.

This study aims to offer alternative perspectives on the cinematic child by bringing forth case studies in which growing is not only upwards but also “sideways”, as Kathryn Bond Stockton suggests. I will include other variations of growing; sometimes (i) moving back and forth, as Jack Halberstam conceptualises in his account of “queer time”, as well as (ii) moving in circles, with repetitions or with “temporal binds”, and overlaps, as in “temporal drag” formulated by Elizabeth Freeman; in some cases (iii) moving in a “wayward” manner, as Sara Ahmed puts it in her work on “willfulness”; and in some instances, (iv) moving with interruptions and pauses, as in Laurent Berlant’s “impasse”.

In this section, I will implement Halberstam’s notion of “queer time” and then Berlant’s “impasse” to closely analyse *Little Miss Sunshine* and *The Florida Project*. The chapter will initially tackle beauty pageants for girls and Disney World as

instances of confusion for relational dynamics between the child and the adult. I will first ask: Do children playing at being adults and adults playing at being children break the temporally structured binary opposition between adult and child? Then I will bring into focus the irony implicit in these films' performative settings, i.e. "motel as a permanent accommodation" (*The Florida Project*) and "road trip with a broken van" (*Little Miss Sunshine*), which I will examine, via Laurent Berlant's conceptualisation of "impasse", and in relation to growing up and forward, through progressive movements.

1.2.1. Queer Temporalities of Child Pageantry and Disney World

1.2.1.1. Pageants

Jack Halberstam positions his concept of "queer time" as an understanding and utilisation of time, that falls outside the reproductive logics of heteronormative, capitalist society and "the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk-safety, and inheritance" (2005, p. 6). Halberstam frames queer as "the non-normative logics and organisations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (p. 6). This formulation takes the queer subject out of the limitations of sexual practices and gender identity, and broadens its praxis:

(...) all kinds of people, especially in postmodernity, will and do opt to live outside of reproductive and familial time as well as on the edges of logics of labour and production. By doing so, they also often live outside the logic of capital accumulation: here we could consider ravers, club kids, HIV-positive bare-backers, rent boys, sex workers, homeless people, drug dealers, and the unemployed. Perhaps such people could productively be called "queer subjects" in terms of the ways they live (deliberately, accidentally, or of necessity) during the hours when others sleep and in the spaces (physical, metaphysical, and economic) that others have abandoned, and in terms of the ways they might work in the domains that other people assign to privacy and family (Halberstam, 2005, p. 10).

Halberstam's categorisation of queer subjects, as individuals who utilize time in an uncommon manner, fundamentally leaves out the family-centred, the safety-focused, and the financially solvent means of living shaped by capitalism. What Halberstam exceptionally delineates as normative time or heterosexual time are family-centred lifestyles that obtain a standardised societal understanding of temporality. In such a

world view, the roles participants take are clearly defined. The requirements of these roles and how to maintain the status quo are delineated. In *The Florida Project*, for example, Halley's role is to be a mother, and this requires her to take care of Moonee emotionally, biologically and financially. The financial obligations cannot be fulfilled through sex work; therefore, Halley has to find one of the acceptable occupations in order to accomplish her role. The family-centred societal standards inform normative patterns of linear time, and the sections and fragments of this time along with their specific functions. Time to wake up, time to go to work or school, time for hobbies, time to eat, and time to sleep represent the most basic, daily compartmentalisation and utilisation of the day over and over again. In a larger sense, ritualistic milestones, such as menarche (first menstruation), graduation, marriage, mortgage and home ownership, giving birth, and losing immediate family members to natural death, are considered events that 'make a person grow up'. All these take family relationships as binding connections. The family positions the child at its core:

Family time refers to normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of child rearing. This timetable is governed by an imagined set of children's needs, and it relates to beliefs about children's health and healthful environments for child rearing. (Halberstam, 2005, p. 5).

The familialisation of children and the child-centred society which is built upon this notion of the protective, educative, proper, healthy and structured family, depend upon the accumulation of capital, as Halberstam asserts. Therefore, while some of the ritualistic milestones are biological, others are capitalistic. At the core of this formulation lies the 'priceless', innocent child; however, everything related to child rearing, and the safety and security of children, requires strong, stable finances. The innocence and vulnerability attached to the child take away economic capabilities from the child as a subject. The child becomes a consumer without producing monetary value. Only in very exceptional cases, such as selling child-made crafts items, is the child one of the income generators in the household, without engaging in child labour which is largely prohibited. I will now go back to the finale of *Little Miss Sunshine* to investigate how the multi-billion-dollar industry of child pageantry positions children as subjects that produce monetary value without permitting them authority, and also how the phenomenon of child pageantry constructs a strange temporal state.

The world of child beauty pageantry is introduced initially when Olive goes backstage to get ready for the Little Miss Sunshine children's beauty competition. Sheryl and Olive step into a world of spray tans, hair extensions, teeth whitening, fake eyelashes, and overly feminized make up. Olive seems puzzled by the amount of sophisticated preparation that goes into making girls look like adult women. The effort involves not only a maternal bonding exercise but also a family business. In her study on child pageants, titled 'Working Girls: Economies of Desire in the American Child Beauty Pageant', Jennifer Dawn Whitney notes that "mothers in particular are frequently found behind the scenes as paid makeup artists, spray tanners, photographers, dress designers, and coaches" (2019, p. 456). The parental figure becomes employed by the child in such instances. Not only family members get involved in pageantry competition: local businesses also become corporate sponsors of beauty products. Child beauty contests were, perhaps, once sites of appreciation for attempts at learning how to be a member of society, practicing adulthood, or establishing the sensitivities of the nation, but they now are enormous industries. Whitney aptly summarises the transformation: "Focusing primarily on "grown-up" glamour and physical attractiveness within a white and middle-class purview, as child pageantry grew into a more lucrative industry in the late twentieth century, it simultaneously moved away from an emphasis on scholastic reward" (2019, p. 456). The contestants and their families become profiteers. Travelling for competitions, finding sponsors, and preparing with private tutors become full time occupations, as the nine seasons of reality TV show *Toddlers & Tiaras* (2009-2013) illustrates. The children who are at the centre of this industry become bread winners for their families. The role shift between child and adult, which takes shape around child pageantry, challenges the normative relational dynamic of the child-adult binary. It also implements a temporal scheme different than an education- and play-focused one. Competition becomes, if not more, as important as schooling. Parents' timetables are shaped accordingly. Instead of a parent 'dragging a child around', a child seems to 'drag parents around', as in *Little Miss Sunshine*.

As Olive and Sheryl are backstage, Richard, who is seated in the audience, next to a man dressed like a member of a biker gang, who is also alone, becomes the eye of the viewer alien to this world, while he watches a pageant for the first time. One by one the candidates for Little Miss Sunshine come on stage with their fluffed hair, porcelain

white teeth and taxidermy smiles. Among them, Olive is the only one with a childish body that is larger at the belly, with light make-up, a simple ponytail rather than exaggerated hairdo, and a normal walk instead of a feminine catwalk. The amount of effort put into making girls look like grown women is substantial. Juxtaposing a child, like Olive, with the older girls makes the gap between professional contestants and normal girls obvious. The overt feminisation would suggest sexualisation, but the concept of innocence stands as the fundamental barrier between the two. This carnal performance, or entertainment, can take place with the innocent, 'priceless' child at the centre of it, only because the performers are *pretending* to be sexual and adult. Their core identity of childhood and innocence is kept safe, even protected by the adults that facilitate the show. These are the conditions of such carnivalesque performance, where normative understanding of linear time is set aside. Girls are allowed to jump from childhood to adulthood momentarily because what is staged is a game, a make-believe performance, a show.

The extravagant and fabricated adult femininity enacted by children brings camp and drag to mind. Elizabeth Freeman proposes the term "temporal drag" and suggests the "temporally hybrid aspect of camp" (2010, p. 68) while defining camp as "a mode of archiving, in that it lovingly, sadistically, even masochistically brings back dominant culture's junk and displays the performer's fierce attachment to it" (p. 68). Whereas she connects a moment in the present to the past through camp, I suggest children's beauty pageants bind moments of the present to moments of the future. The children on stage are dressed up like their possible future adult identities. The moment that Olive is introduced in the film, she is looking at an old taping of Miss World, mimicking the contestants gestures in the present moment, imagining a future when she will win a pageant and repeat these movements on stage.

Freeman expands her concept of "temporal drag" by giving an example of herself, wearing her mother's clothing from 30 years ago, to elaborate Judith Butler's conceptualisation of drag performativity as a means of identifying with the same-sex parent in an oedipal conditioning, "perforce erasing the passage of years" (Freeman, 2010, p. 69). Freeman's body, in drag, in her mother's clothing from 30 years ago, with her mother's hair style and speech patterns, would be telling a prior story, Freeman suggests. The children's beauty pageant world is notorious for mother contestants, who 'run the show'. The intricately entangled net of relationships in this

world positions these mothers as the responsible adult, the coordinator of a team, the stylist on the payroll, and yet, also, as women trying to hold onto their by-gone youth and beauty through the gains of their daughters. Looking at the relationship between pageant mothers and their contestant daughters, I suggest that the daughters are in drag portraying adult womanhood, which is the imaginary future of the child from the mother's perspective. This type of drag carries more than one temporal jump back and forth. Returning to my initial question, 'Do children playing at being adults and adults playing at being children break the temporally structured binary opposition between adult and child?', my conclusion is that temporal drag, in Freeman's formulation, may not abolish the binary relationality, but *inverts* it in certain instances, which points to the fragility of the constructs.

In Olive's case, camp and drag are not only temporal as Olive executes a dance routine choreographed by her grandpa, with costume choices styled by him, while also presenting a look that is the opposite of wearing overly sexualised feminine dresses. She wears a tracksuit combined with a white shirt, a bright red tie, and a vest. She is the most masculine looking girl to take the stage in the Little Miss Sunshine competition. The 'dykey' look brings a significantly layered element of ambivalence to the staged performance of gender and sexuality. The performance is not only between childhood and adulthood but also between femininity and masculinity. The lyrics to *Super Freak* by Rick James, "she's a very kinky girl" are heard, as Olive starts to spank her own bottom. As much as the selection of song shocks the audience, Olive's dance, which turns into a striptease, leaves them appalled. Members of the audience start to leave. Uncle Frank stands up and starts dancing to support Olive. The jury head and administrative body of the competition try to interrupt her performance but Richard who steps onto the stage and joins Olive's moves, to be followed by Frank, Dwayne and Sheryl, ensures the performance continues until an improvised completion. They dance to *Super Freak* jumping, holding hands in a circle, shaking their bodies senselessly, and childishly. The performance is applauded most by the biker-looking father in the audience, who stands up and shouts "Hell yeah!" when they finish.

Olive's striptease causes turmoil among the administrative bodies of the pageant and some of the concerned mothers in the audience. Her masculine styling can be excused, given the reason that she is a child and not experienced enough to know the etiquette

of pageantry. The incapability and lack of knowledge in the child is almost always efficient grounds for absolution. Besides, the asexual conditioning of childhood permits androgynous looks, as well as cross-dressing style choices. However, her dance routine can't be excused on the same grounds. The principal formation of the concept of childhood, and the innocence related to it, requires the exclusion of all aspects related to sexuality. Olive, by sexualising childhood, transgresses the limits of childhood and innocence. Her transgressive routine becomes an alarming exposé of contradictions inherent to childhood innocence and children's beauty pageantry. Joanne Faulkner summarises the contradictions implicit within children's beauty pageants: "A *reductio ad absurdum* to the values of contemporary society, these pageants ironically stage the contradictions and grossest excesses of popular culture. The child pageant is the tipping point at which innocence becomes sexual, where beauty becomes garish and cuteness obscene" (Faulkner, 2010, p. 20). Innocence as a value that is supposed to transcend profit, becomes a commodity in the world of pageantry as a multi-billion-dollar industry. Yet, the sexualisation and monetisation of childhood innocence can only happen obscurely. The common understanding and consensus on children's beauty contests is along the lines of normative positioning about life, in that, it relies on "notions of the normal" which Halberstam associates with "middle-class logic of reproductive temporality" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 6). Heteronormativity's temporal structure is interrupted by Olive's striptease twofold; once because she pretends to be a grown up performing sexual acts, twice because she showcases an individual with ambivalent gender identities, which a child is presumed to have no knowledge or experience of. When her family joins her on stage and dance, the "quirky" adults join, further interrupting the normative temporality of the child-adult binary. They dance "outside the organisations of time and space that have been established for the purposes of protecting the rich few from everyone else" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 10) as Halberstam formulates with reference to queer subjects' implementations of queer time. Children playing at being adults and adults playing at being children break the temporally structured binary opposition in another moment: the biker gang member father, the obvious misfit in a pageant audience, also joins them in his praise of Olive's performance.

In view of the discussion on children's beauty pageants above, I consider them as carnivalesque events where temporality departs from the ordinary, normative flow of

time. As Halberstam also formulates, some spaces and places have alternative uses that are queer, because the people or the practices of the people in such places are non-normative, queer. Here, I aim to show how even the most normative-looking places (e.g. Disney World) and events (e.g. children's beauty pageants) can disguise the strange temporal operations that place binary structures into question. These places and moments can be categorised as 'time capsules', in which the strange functioning of time and temporality challenges the adult-child binary. The reason behind viewing the world of child pageantry as a 'time capsule' is its separation from the normative world. The tabus concerning sexuality that are generally accepted for children are not followed or misbehaving is excused within the time and space dedicated to pageantry. I will analyse how Disney World theme park in *The Florida Project* also operates as a time capsule, in which adult and child positioning become queer due to the non-normative functioning of time.

1.2.1.2. Disney World

Walt Disney World Resort in central Florida—comprised of four theme parks, the Magic Kingdom, Epcot, Disney's Hollywood Studios, and Disney's Animal Kingdom—is the largest amusement resort in the world. In 2007 over seventeen million people visited the Magic Kingdom, the most visited park in the world, with approximately ten million each visiting the other three theme parks ("TEA/ERA") (Jackson, 2010, p. 207).

Irony lies in the name: that both the most visited section of Florida Disney World and the motel Halley and Moonee stay at are called Magic Castle. It's unfortunate that Moonee was able to enter the famous theme park only in the final scene while running away from the Department of Children and Families instead of as part of a happy family vacation. Disney World is not for all people of all backgrounds and economic classes. It may be accessible by public transport, but most guests arrive by private transportation and stay overnight at one of the hotels in the Disney Resort Collection. The drastic difference between the people who can be guests in Disney World, and others like Moonee and Halley, is staged as a central theme in *The Florida Project*. The unpleasant reality is disguised in Disneyland California's introductory welcome plaque at the entrance:

To all who come to this happy place: Welcome. Disneyland is your land. Here age relives fond memories of the past...and here youth may savour the challenge and promise of the future. Disneyland is dedicated to the ideals, the dreams and the hard facts that have created America...with the hope that it will be a source of joy and inspiration to all the world (Bailey, 1982, p. 209).

The emphasis is not on the type of people who can afford to go, or who are welcomed to Disneyland. Instead, it is on the past, the future, ideals, dreams, and America. I will examine the virtues promoted by the Disney enterprise and theme parks to show the film's performance of non-normative relations in its representation of the park.

Disney World Florida (and Disneyland California) are theme parks built on the premise of encompassing the past, present, and future. Similarly to casinos, where one of the main purposes of the facility is to make the visitors forget about time, Disney World, like many other theme parks, also wants the visitors to forget when they arrived, how long they have been there and when they may leave. Disney employs several smart illusions to keep guests on the premises as long as possible. Yet along with this, Disney makes the unification of temporal segments into a motto: the visitors enter the world of a nostalgic yesterday and the promise of the future. As a theme park, the space is designed to be timeless, in such a way that it encompasses all temporalities: elements from old Disney movies are seen around the park so adult visitors have a nostalgic bond to their own childhood; the future is brought in by potentiality, children, and the technology that goes into making an innovative experience; and finally, the element of fun involves the present with its connection to momentariness and corporeality. Disney aims to bring generations together; a place where grandparents and parents take their children to have a family vacation and 'make memories'. As J.P. Telotte also reminds us, "Walt Disney repeatedly described how he originally intended simply to fashion a place where children and their parents could simultaneously engage in pleasurable activities, a kind of 'playground' where they could safely 'play' together" (2010, p. 171). A playground where adults and children come together to play and engage in fantasy can be interpreted in more than one way, one of which is not 'decent'. Disney, of course, is not a paedophilic, sexually charged idea. It is full of childhood innocence, virtuous play, and naive excitement.

Disney theme parks implement infantilisation of the adult in strange fashions, some overt and some disguised. Adults are permitted to play and to enjoy and experience the surroundings like children. This layer is plain and promoted. It is offered as a

luxury. The visitors can take rides in fictional pageants from movies, books, stories, and cartoons, which demonstrates the most surface-level infantilisation. Another layer becomes more visible when one examines the space in comparison to the ‘normal’ world, outside the Disney capsule: “(...) the darker side of life is conspicuously absent—on this Main Street there is no funeral parlour, no police station, no seedy theatres or bars” (Jackson, 2010, p. 217). Mechanisms of punishment are absent along with places of deviance or difference and confusion or conflict. Geometrical, long, and straight buildings are neatly aligned, their height and width are proportional, nothing stands out as exceptionally new or old, clean or dirty. Kathy Merlock Jackson describes the setting as “frozen in time, as if modernity had passed it by” (2010, p. 217). Jackson further observes that:

To add to this feeling of stability and order, Disneyland maintained rules of decorum that were slowly being shunted aside in the modern world outside the park. Dress codes for workers and guests were enforced, and the park itself was spotlessly maintained. Guests waited patiently in lines obeying orders not to eat or drink until they exited the attraction (Jackson, 2010, p. 217).

In a fantasy land where everyone is happy like children, adults cannot be under the influence, behave in a disorderly way, or engage in sexual acts. They are forced into the conceptualisation of westernised, innocent childhood. The control mechanism within the premises, which maintains these conditions, is also disguised: the security employees don’t wear uniforms. Idealised childhood and conventional family relationships are the norm for everyone in this space. The people who cannot match up to the standards are carefully left outside. The boundaries that separate Disney and the world outside are clearly set. Space and time become non-existent and transform into a capsule.

Normative temporality, with the conventional binary of childhood and adulthood, is kept in a continuum that moves only in one direction; locating time on a straight line, and moving purposefully in direction towards adulthood. Locations like Disney, or events like child pageants, enable visitors and participants to move in the opposite direction, and on different routes. Thus, even though these examples are family-centred, security is fundamental to them and a “middle class logic of reproductive temporality” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 6) is prioritised, I suggest there are still elements and practices that indicate queer temporalities. Halberstam suggests that “for queers,

the separation between youth and adulthood quite simply does not hold, and queer adolescence can extend far beyond one's twenties" (2005, p. 174). Halberstam comes to this conclusion through the placement of subcultures in normative settings. Going back to my initial question, "Do adults playing at being children break the temporally structured binary opposition between adult and child?", I propose that a jump back to childhood also ruptures the separation between the two identities, similar to the extended adolescence that infuses into adulthood.

A good time can be had because all the visitors, courting couples, parents and their children are out of time: out of the routine, demands and conflicts of the daily timetable. What goes on here is not really serious; it does not count in the workaday world (Hunt & Frankenberg, 2015, p. 120).

Sean Baker's cinematographic choices, which separate the last two minutes of *The Florida Project* from the rest of the film, are very much in line with the timelessness and space-lessness of Disney World. The ideal of fantasy that Disney implements in the theme park experience is communicated by the change in the film's texture, framing, and pace. The viewer cannot be sure if the two girls really went into the magic land and escaped, or whether this was only a fantasy, wishful thinking, or an attempt at a happy ending. During the finale, the sense and pace of time changes. It is an ephemeral world that Moonee and Jancey enter. While happy endings are Hollywood's, and of course Disney's, trademark, American independent cinema is mercilessly notorious for leaving a bitter taste with the viewer, even full of questions following open endings. Baker makes the two girls walk off to the Magic Kingdom instead of the sunset, which would recall the famous hopeful endings of films where the horizon bears the potential of new beginnings. Children loaded with innocence also carry the burden of potentiality. However, considering her precarious life, Moonee won't be able to have a new beginning: the colourful mise en scène of *The Florida Project* is not sufficient to strip it of the realism it bears. The situation of precarity that Moonee lives in distinguishes her from the innocent tabula rasa child with unlimited possibilities. The film's ending, ironically, reminds the viewer that what they are watching is not Hollywood: Moonee will not be able to stay in the Disney World capsule. The change in the film's cinematic language not only sustains the fantasy feeling Disney aims to create but also reminds us, simultaneously, that it is not reality.

Disney World builds connections to a fantasy history through nostalgia while possessing no real history in connection to the rest of the world. It bears traditions of

its own, which are not organic. Pauline Hunt and Roland Frankenberg summarise the cultural separation between the “real world” and Disney World by proposing that “(...) the class, language and ethnic differences of the United States and its attendant world appear transcended in already shared, and now materialized, solidified and confirmed, cultural experience” (2015, p. 112). All those who can enter Disney World seem to be integrated. Disney World’s effectiveness in creating a fantasy experience for all ages also stems from the design of the park like a film world.

What we see and experience in the parks are not just the movies; they are the movies-as-rides, attractions that do invite us to play roles, even “sell” that participation, while also reminding us of how those movies typically play us—manipulating and controlling us both within and outside of their precincts (Telotte, 2010, p. 181).

While the surroundings are devoted to the films of Disney – MGM Studios, the visitors in film-themed rides are forced into the perspective of viewers watching, experiencing or ‘living’ a film. It is not only the visitors who are controlled, but the experience itself is also organised and regulated in a way that does not let anyone leave the lines in Disney World. “[O]perat[ing] through controlled imaging aimed at controlling controlled imaginations” (Hunt & Frankenberg, 2015, p. 115), Disneyland makes their visitors delegate their agency at the entrance; the visitors are complying with rules of this highly controlled space upon their entry – although it promises, ironically, a “liberating” ‘fantasy-like’ experience.

The infantilisation of adults, or adults’ escape from the normative ‘workaday world’ and its responsibilities, is built on the fantasised image of the innocent child, with the incapability and lack of agency. The ‘priceless’ child’s value comes from the otherworldliness associated with it. Like the relationship between sexuality and the child, the relationship between capital and the child is kept hidden. I suggest that the children’s beauty pageant is a capsule within which the adultization of children works as a game, and Disney World is another capsule, where the infantilisation of adults is facilitated through play. On the infantilisation of adults, regarding the role innocence plays, Joanne Faulkner suggests that “An adult who was innocent in the sense that children are innocent would be worse than useless, and probably dangerous. Innocence must be relinquished in order that one might live autonomously in society” (Faulkner, 2010, p. 39), but voluntarily abstaining from agency, in a controlled environment is presented as a luxury and happiness. Attempts at protecting innocence, in terms of

securing the child from the mean and poor aspects of life, have resulted in a situation whereby “the delineation of a sphere for play – apart from the everyday commerce of life – has furnished opportunities for the commercialisation of childhood” (Faulkner, 2010, p. 39). This sphere of play, or capsule as I suggest, is established by capital, and thus, the experience of it is monetised. But the dynamics function in a manner to hide this, so that fantasy can prevail, like the hidden sexuality embedded in child pageantry. The sites and times designated for play that stand apart from the everyday commerce of life or ‘the workaday’, become attractions for both children and adults, morphing the two identities. In such ‘time capsules’, like child pageantry and Disney theme parks, children become adults and adults become children, for a brief period, and for a certain amount of money.

So far, I have considered how specific mediations of the relation between adulthood and childhood can create different temporal frames. I categorised two such instances, namely beauty pageants and the Disney World experience, as ‘time capsules’ in which adult and child switch roles. I aimed to show how these capsules queer the normative understanding of time and temporal relations between these relational identities. I have also tried to build connections between the formal, i.e. cinematic or stylistic, tools widely adopted by the American indie and indiewood filmmaking when such temporal settings are part of the diegesis. The next section will point out other wayward, non-linear, and progressive perceptions of time and how they work within these examples of American independent cinema.

1.2.2. Permanent Temporary Accommodation and Road Trip with a Broken Car

1.2.2.1. Temporality of Impasse

Both *Little Miss Sunshine* and *The Florida Project* depict family endeavours to keep children happy and protected, in a financially challenging world. In *Little Miss Sunshine*, Olive’s parents and other family members are forced to take a road trip because they do not have the means to purchase two plane tickets. On top of this, they have to travel with a broken vehicle because they cannot afford to have the van repaired. Nor do they have the time. In *The Florida Project*, Moonee’s mother Halley faces bigger challenges to provide accommodation in a motel, which is supposedly

temporary housing but becomes a permanent home. The provider adults in both stories are struggling to reach a 'good' life. Olive's father is using all the family finances to attempt a breakthrough in his career while her mother Sheryl is working overtime sacrificing her role as a competent mother. Halley hopes to find a job as a waitress in a diner so she can benefit from social aid and have a stable income.

What is a 'good life'? A 'good life', in these settings, is a productivity- and longevity-oriented, secure family life, which is economically stable, and shaped by policies of neoliberal capital– to echo Halberstam's description. Yet, both films give realistic examples of failure in this sense. Richard's book deal fails, and he loses a lot of money. Halley isn't hired by the diner and has to resort to sex work. As both adults try to reach a 'good life', the innocent child's future and safety remains the locus of concern. What both parents manage to do, at least, is to maintain the not-so-good circumstances. Olive's family keeps on driving to the pageant even as the car becomes a massive hindrance. Halley accepts giving sexual favours to be able to stay at a motel room, which they empty out every Friday and move back into the next day because of the establishment policies. The not-so-good life becomes an "impasse", in Laurent Berlant's terminology. Berlant proposes "impasse" "both as a formal term for describing the duration of the present, and a specific term for tracking the circulation of precariousness through diverse locales and bodies" (2011, p. 199). The present, with its constant struggle to reach a good life, becomes stretched out with repetitive attempts to pass each day by, and traps the characters.

Children and adults in both films are trapped in situations that take them captive. "An impasse", Berlant notes, "is a holding station that doesn't hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure" (Berlant, 2011, p. 199). During the road trip with the broken van that only runs when pushed from behind, Olive's family takes a rest stop at a gas station. After a series of events, they leave the station and realise they have forgotten Olive. They drive back but cannot stop, so she has to jump into a running vehicle, as they have to do each time they want to go back on the road. There are several shots with the van entering the frame from the left, with everyone except the driver pushing from behind, and as the characters jump in one by one, the yellow van is seen exiting the frame on the right. The repetition of the same framing, with the same action that carries a lot of risk, is a metaphor for the "impasse" which *Little Miss Sunshine* projects. The progressive

movement of a road trip, which would normally move in a direction towards a target, is constantly interrupted. Similarly to non-normative time, which doesn't flow in a progressive manner, in queer temporality, the movement of the yellow van in *Little Miss Sunshine* is not linear and progressive, but arrested in repetitions, and stand-still moments that reflect impasse.

In *The Florida Project*, the motel with the ironic name Magic Castle works as 'permanent' housing for families in poverty. For Halley, the cycles of time are not defined by normative segments of going to bed early and waking up for work. She is depicted within long intervals of excess time, while she looks out watching the sky, smoking on the balcony, and also enjoying 'free' time with the children, as well as engaging in continuous attempts to sell perfume at resorts. Many of these sequences are repetitive in *The Florida Project*: Halley seems to be waiting for something, while spending time repeating small redundant chores and actions, as she tries to 'get by'. Other residents of Magic Castle also wait for a moment that will generate a shift in their circumstances, like Dicky and his father who leave for New Orleans. It seems that all the characters in *The Florida Project*, other than manager Bobby, live outside of segmented, "chrononormative time"⁸. The residents of a temporary accommodation are not oriented towards "respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends (...) upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 4). Instead of a linear, progressive time, they are held in an impasse that is a duration of repeating events.

Berlant proposes that "an impasse is decompositional—in the unbound temporality of the stretch of time, it marks a delay that demands activity. The activity can produce impacts and events, but one does not know where they are leading" (Berlant, 2011, p. 199). Instead of a 'good life' centring around productivity and longevity, in which

⁸ In her *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Elizabeth Freeman uses the term "chrononormativity" to describe the "use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity", and normative understandings of time based on this premise (2010, p.3). Freeman's conceptualisation of chrononormativity places capitalist structures that attune factory hours with private and family schedules at the centre of "chrononormativity", which, she argues, "is a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts (p.3). As an alternative to this, Freeman suggests a temporality that implements bodily sensations of pleasure and pain as a connection.

moments and segments of time are added onto one another, to aggregate to a potential accomplishment lying ahead in the future, precarity traps the characters in an unsecured, repetitive present. The potentiality of change lies in the impossibility of the conditions. The situation is intolerable as it is, and it therefore demands a change.

Taylor Schey highlights the underlying sense of potential for change within an impasse, while also noting that it does not necessarily mean that the change will happen:

Within a schema of temporal or historical movement, an impasse marks a point at which the unceasing reproduction of the status quo is brought to a halt, enabling one to sense both the contingency and the brutality of the conditions in which they dwell; it opens the possibility, though not the inevitability, of something else (Schey, 2020, p.181).

Schey positions the temporal settings of impasse as “the historical condition of the contemporary moment” (2020, p.186). Using Berlant’s argument that “the impasse of the present” designates a temporal framework for those moments in which “futurity splinters as a prop for getting through life” (Berlant, 2011, p. 199), Schey concludes that “one’s knowledge of impasse is, in a sense, always *nachträglich*: a central claim of [Berlant’s] *Cruel Optimism* [2011] is that the present is first perceived affectively before it is sensed or understood in any other way” (Schey, 2020, p.186). The impasse, then, can only be defined once left behind. However, it persists in the intolerable present, burdened by a future loaded with potential, that may or may not come. Taking on this definition of “impasse” and its relation to time, I see similarities with the ‘time capsules’ I identified in *Little Miss Sunshine* and *The Florida Project*. Pageants stage children performing like adults, and Disney World accommodates adults experiencing the place like children. Precarious impasse, or the expectations shaped around reproductive, normative life, position the child as the reason and the motivation for attaining a ‘good life’. The adults’ decisions and movements are limited by the requirements of the ‘good life’ to align with “reproductive time and family time, above all heteronormative time/space constructs” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 10). On the dynamics of this normative time, Halberstam writes:

Family time refers to normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of child rearing. This timetable is governed by an imagined set of children’s needs, and it relates to beliefs about children’s health and healthful environments for child rearing. (Halberstam, 2005, p. 5)

The ideal type of child for this mechanism is the muted, innocent child, deprived of agency, yet bearing great potential. The lack of agency in the innocently coded child enables the adults to utilise them as needed, making decisions on behalf of the muted child. The loaded, yet-not-activated potential this child bears, provides ground for decisions that concern the present and the future.

In *The Florida Project* and *Little Miss Sunshine*, the adults' attempts at normative family time and a 'good life' result in impasse. They cannot leave the uncertain, anxious situations they exist within; the permanent crisis, or "crisis ordinariness"⁹ continues. Olive's father bankrupts the whole family, Halley has to give Moonee to Child Protective Services. Centred in the stories of continuous crisis, the innocent child becomes multi-functional by acting both as the reason behind the attempts at normative life, and as the looking glass into the strange, non-normative, precarious lives of Americans living under rough conditions of neoliberal capitalism. Berlant describes some of the traits of cinema of precarity, as a "portrayal of immobility from a normative, conventional, habituated solidity to a living paralysis, playful repetition, or animated still-life" (Berlant, 2011, p. 212). The precarity articulated on screen by the American independent films post the 2008 crisis (especially works by Debra Granik and Eliza Hittman along with Sean Baker's) resonates with Berlant's "cinema of precarity" both in terms of form, content, and politics of representation. Although it was produced prior to the 2008 crisis, *Little Miss Sunshine*, as an example of 'indiewood', can also be included in this group of films. The next section will position the (innocent) child as the seer in independent "cinema of precarity".

1.2.2.2. Child as the seer

I have previously focused on the central positioning of the innocent child in post-millennial American independent cinema as a looking glass. I suggested that films become more colourful and easier to digest, and crises become somewhat 'softened' when the protagonist is a child in American independent productions. Comparing

⁹ Berlant advocates for moving away from using the language of trauma to capture deep and even catastrophic social, economic, and political transformations. She introduces the concept of "crisis ordinariness" to describe the current moment, suggesting that crises are not isolated events but are woven into everyday life through underlying conditions of instability and vulnerability. This challenges the traditional view of trauma as something exceptional.

Little Miss Sunshine and *The Florida Project* to other examples of cinema with child protagonists will help make these two films' significant differences clearer.

Child protagonists were among the favourite subjects of Italian neorealist cinema, with two outstanding examples being *Germany, Year Zero* (Roberto Rossellini, 1948) and *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948). In both films, child protagonists who conform to the innocent child's characteristics face poverty, deprivation and crisis. Additionally, both films end in desperation and tragedy. These examples depict what Deleuze describes as "the intolerable" (Deleuze, 1989, p. 20) through the children's perspective. "The intolerable", for Deleuze, registers an experience when "it is too unpleasant" for the subject to face an encounter with the conventional spectatorial means, but is captured without the means to turn away: exposed to "intolerable", the subject (i.e. the protagonist or the viewer/spectator) have to face the "pure optical-sound image, the whole image without metaphor (...) in its excess of horror and beauty" (Deleuze, 1989, p. 20). The characters in neorealist Italian cinema are "in a sort of paralysis in which they can neither respond nor react to the situations in which they're placed, only see and record them (much like the viewer of cinema)" (Schey, 2020, p. 183). Deleuze draws from his analysis on post-World War II cinema and conceptualises the "time-image". David Martin-Jones describes the role of the protagonist in Deleuze's time-image as follows:

Protagonists navigate virtually through time, leaping or slipping between virtual layers of the past as they drift between present-day reality and past history, in fantasy, dream and memory. Thus, in the time-image, protagonists might be more accurately described as 'seers', rather than 'doers', whether they are witness to movements of a vast encompassing duration which catches them up within its virtual shifts, or simply mesmerized by the everyday passing of time. (Martin-Jones, 2022, p.142).

Following Martin-Jones, via Deleuze, this section will examine how the child protagonists, as "seers" in the "time-image", relate to and navigate time in American independent cinema. As the children of the post-millennial world become queerer, compared to the traditional, innocent child, the relationship with time will become more intricate, and the colourful; 'softened' stories will get darker. For now, I will focus on the dynamics between the innocent child and time, through the position of child as the looking glass and as the seer. The innocent child who is deprived of agency is the opposite of a "doer", but a "seer". Martin-Jones suggests that "the child is the ideal 'seer' of the cinema of the time-image" (2022, p.142), relying on Deleuze's

consideration of “the child’s supposed ‘motor helplessness’ being conducive to a greater awareness, a greater capacity for ‘seeing and hearing’ than adults have” (Martin-Jones, 2022, p.142). Martin-Jones also states that “children are more susceptible to an awareness of the passing of time [what Deleuze terms the ‘pure optical situation’ (Deleuze, 1989, p. 20)], due to their lesser ability (in an adult-oriented world at least) to act in a way that will influence their situation” (Martin-Jones, 2022, p.142). To see “the intolerable” reduces the capacity of mobility, the observer transforms into an entity that sees but cannot react. Consequently, time trumps action. Image and meaning are not defined by actions and their repercussions but are defined by time and observation of the process. The observer of the intolerable parallels the traditional perception of the child, who lack agency, and is allowed only a muted presence. Seeing the intolerable, “the excess of beauty and horror” (Deleuze, 1989, p. 20), while being impaired by the lack of means to react, position the character in “a sort of paralysis, in which they can neither respond nor react” (Schey, 2020, p. 183).

Taylor also draws a parallel between this condition and “impasse” by building similarities between the intolerable and “crisis ordinaries”. The entrapment of impasse and incapacitation of witnessing the intolerable both change temporality and the perception of time. While Deleuze draws the concept of “time image” from post-World War II cinema, the trauma and loss following war, the lack of meaning, the uncertainty of the future along with the potential it holds, all correlate to the 2008 crisis and the collapse of the “American dream”, or in Deleuze’s words, “the unsteadiness of the ‘American Dream’ in all its aspects” (Deleuze, 1986, p. 206).

Like other examples of the cinema of precarity, the films analysed in this chapter also incorporate their reflection on crisis and impasse into their formal/stylistic choices. The children, as the locus of the stories, both function as looking glasses that make the stories more ‘colourful’, and are also ‘seers of the impasse’, which effects the cinematographic tools available. *Little Miss Sunshine* benefits from the impact of the child as a looking glass, predominantly in the mise en scène, which I discussed earlier. The repetitive shots of the yellow van entering the scene from the left and leaving from the right also present impasse in terms of the circular motion and restrained mobility. A large portion of the film takes place inside the van. The interior shots with six characters in a small space also deliver the feelings of being trapped, not moving

forward, and being enclosed in action. The characters go in and out of different locations, rooms, diners etc, and meet inside the van again, repetitively, in an animated stillness. The feeling of crisis and incapability to react peaks when the horn of the car is broken in a way that it constantly sounds. The alarming sound serves as a background to Dwayne's crisis. He finds out that he is colour-blind, and as such that he won't be able to go to the academy to fly jets. His emotional entrapment in the vow of silence he has taken for his goal, clashes with the constant, annoying car horn. His physical entrapment in the van that is moving forward becomes intolerable and he starts kicking the seats and hitting the top. Once he is able to step out, he screams and says that he doesn't want to be in that family. Dysfunctional families are also an impasse for the children.



Figure 7: The yellow van which they travel with, *Little Miss Sunshine*

Perhaps the most innocent child in my corpus is Olive. She is mostly muted and is shown listening to the adults around her and asking questions, learning, and mimicking. In the finale, she becomes agentic and steps out of the contours of the innocent child. It is her decision to execute a gender-fluid performance in a traditional pageant setting, a choice taken against the advice of some of the adults she is surrounded by. During the pageant sequences, Richard is seated among the audience and the viewer sees the stage before Olive comes up. The camera turns to the audience

when Olive is on the stage, showing her point of view. Olive will have to endure the approaching embarrassment and the impossibility of preventing it bothers Richard, Frank, and Dwayne. Their struggle is seen from Olive's point of view from the stage. Finally, when they join her on the stage and dance, the shot– reverse shot dynamic between the child and adults breaks. The funky dancing of the family on stage is the opposite of the immobility and animated stillness the characters endure throughout the rest of the film. The high spirits of the film's ending contrast with my examples of Italian neorealist films with child protagonists. Although *Little Miss Sunshine* is a film with suicide, death, addiction, bankruptcy, the collapse of dreams, and impasse through precarity, the child as the looking glass and seer has a different power when she is a wayward-growing, non-normative child with agency.



Figure 8: Richard, Frank and Dwayne dancing on the stage to support Olive, *Little Miss Sunshine*

A unique example of American independent cinema and the cinema of precarity, *The Florida Project* implements the effect of impasse and the child as seer in an unconventional way. I have previously mentioned the repeating sequences in which Halley is seen doing nothing or performing redundant tasks to ‘get by’. The film’s structure is episodic, rather than following a linearly progressing causality. Most of the sequences don’t contribute to the plot but are prolonged sufficiently to allow the viewer to immerse themselves in the scene. Mainstream cinema employs ellipses to

indicate the passing of long periods of time, by showing fragments of actions on screen in a fast-paced edit. *The Florida Project* and several of the films Deleuze classifies as time-image-oriented operate in a manner opposite to this. Whereas in mainstream cinema time is used in an economic way (i.e. as that which sustains the action and the story), independent and art house cinemas foreground the passing of time. *The Florida Project* connects several separate moments from Halley's and Moonee's lives, inhabiting each instance and insignificant event without rushing. Precarity encases them and blocks them from rushing towards a target. The selection of independent events, like the children eating ice cream, or shouting at helicopters, playing with insects or Halley and Moonee eating waffles, or watching TV are random. So much that they are like the remaining memories of a summer holiday in a child's mind.

In addition to the episodic structure and unique relationship with time, *The Florida Project* implements the child as the seer in the framing choices too. Most frames where children and adults are together are organised in 'peanut style' with adults' chests, shoulders and heads remaining outside the frame. The camera is positioned closer to the ground, around a child's height, leaving only parts of the adults' bodies within the frame. This type of framing is a signature of the *Peanuts* comic strip, illustrated by Charles Shultz and published daily between 1950 and 2000. Adults were rarely seen or mentioned in *Peanuts*. The same type of framing is also applied in *Tom and Jerry*, where human bodies are seen only from the height of the main characters, leaving a bigger portion of the body off-frame. This type of cinematographic decision places the children at the centre of the filmic world and designates the adults as secondary in relation to them. The children's height is determined as the primary eye level in frames with children and unknown adults. Scenes where Halley and Moonee are together are exceptions, the adolescent mother and the child are not at the polar ends of the adult-child relational binary. A supplementary cinematographic decision that positions the child as the seer is the use of tracking shots that follow the children from behind. These give the feeling of tagging along with the children on their daily activities, being a member of the children's gang, and following the leader who is a child.



Figure 9: A shot from children's height following them as they are running around, *The Florida Project*



Figure 10: Peanut framing, leaving adult body parts out of the frame, *The Florida Project*



Figure 11: Moonee and Halley sharing the frame on the same level, *The Florida Project*

The other dominant framing choice is the static wide shot. The characters are located walking by shops, highways, and parks. Similar to the movement of the yellow van in *Little Miss Sunshine*, they start from one end of the frame and exit from the other. The wide shot makes them look small in large, strange urban landscapes. Halley and the children thus appear to make a substantial effort to cover distances, between opposite ends of the frame. They are small and infantilised in a strange world, which looks like a bad replica of a wonderland.



Figure 12: Children walking from one end of the frame to the other in a static shot, *The Florida Project*



Figure 13: Halley and Moonee in a static wide shot, *The Florida Project*

Katarzyna Paszkiewicz in her article on Andrea Arnold's film *Fish Tank* (2009) discusses impasse and social-realist filmmaking in Britain. She analyses the adolescent protagonist Mia's limited mobility in frames, although her only relief in the suffocating life she leads is dancing. Paszkiewicz underlines that "Mia's bodily rhythms are trapped in a more circular, repetitive pattern, rather than forging a forward motion" (2023, p.376) and adds that "working class characters relentlessly walking through blank urban landscapes is a recurrent trope in the history of (social) realist cinema" (p.384). As an example of American independent cinema, *The Florida Project* invests in Halley's and the children's struggles with their living conditions, which are supposed to be temporary but seem to be permanent. The time spent at a motel, which is expected to be a short period within a normative life, expands into normativity for them. Periods of walking or hitchhiking from one place to another, which are traditionally not screened in full duration, also occupy an excessive amount of screen time in *The Florida Project*. This stylistic choice recalls Karl Schoonover's proposition that "the slower kind of film proposes the possibility that cinema can capture excess as a temporality" (2012: p.65). Schoonover suggests that 'slow cinema' is more demanding on the spectator as it requires more effort to watch, therefore "seeing becomes a form of labour" (p.66). He stresses that Hollywood would consider

these chunks of filmic time to “overspend, upset, or even foreclose on the continuity system’s prized narrative economy, replacing eventfulness with unproductive episodic meandering” (p.65). The topic of productivity brings the argument of time and temporality back to Halberstam and normative versus queer time. The relationship between productivity, labour, and queer temporality is easy to track in *The Florida Project*, seen from the perspective of the child and ‘not-adult’ mother. Moonee and Halley are seen walking often in the film, in some instances to and from car parks of resorts where they try to sell perfume, or back and forth between locations they visit for food. The film’s episodic structure is built on these long walks, depicting how time is spent between meaningful activities.

1.3. Conclusion

This chapter tackled issues of normative and non-normative child-adult relationships, the role of time in staging these relational identities, and how American independent cinema approaches non-normative child protagonists and employs time in film. The innocent child, who is muted and sacralised in its separation from sexuality, rationality and agency was the main focus. *Little Miss Sunshine* and *The Florida Project* were the case studies closely analysed with regard to their depictions of innocent children, Olive and Moonee, living in neoliberal American society. My analysis indicates that the amount of information available and allowed to the child protagonists is critical for the characterisation of their innocence. The stylistic choices that influence form in both films position the viewer in alignment with the child in different manners. I have proposed that indie films’ child protagonists, as the entry point into the cinematic world, inform the mise en scène and cinematography. In effect, these child characters ‘soften’ the diegesis and ‘brighten’ the films’ material worlds. This characteristic stands out in the dominantly harsh and realistic approach of American independent films.

Little Miss Sunshine (as the only ‘indiewood’ example in this study) features a happy, naïve child. The emphasis on innocence, as a main characteristic in Olive, transforms the tragedies experienced by the adults surrounding her. The film’s happy-go-lucky tone and the ‘softened’ delivery of hard-to-digest issues aligns the viewer with the child; troubles such as addiction, suicide, financial collapse and the loss of future aspirations are caricaturised. The viewer’s intake of these issues, each of which are

crises in and of themselves, are similar to Olive's experience; viewed in a goofy, quirky manner rather than a gloomy one.

The Florida Project, as a neorealist American independent film, places the innocent child in harsher conditions of precarity. The innocent protagonist's influence on the film is reflected in cinematographic choices of framing and camera angles as well as following/tracking shots from the children's height. The viewer is allowed the same amount of information as the main protagonist Moonee. Even the adult bodies are not always completely visible on the screen.

Both films have covert relationships with sexuality and money, considering that the child protagonists are traditional innocent children. Both Moonee and Olive are placed in circumstances in which physicality and sexuality is monetised. Moonee takes photos of herself in a bikini, posing like her mother does in photos used to advertise for sex work. Olive performs a striptease on stage. Olive's attraction to children's beauty pageants is based on enthusiasm than financially motivated, yet the industry behind children's pageantry is not hidden (but sugar coated) in the film. Moonee accompanies her mother while Halley sells perfume and stolen theme park tickets. Moonee's presence functions like a disguise for Halley, moreover it makes the mother and the child appear as equals and partners to some extent, thus challenging the adult-child binary. Innocence, the core element of classical childhood, is maintained by the limited knowledge these girls are allowed access to, about the situations they are in. While the 'child as lack' and 'adult as completion' premise seems to be maintained on the surface by means of access to information, I propose that the infantilized positioning of the viewer is bringing a new angle to these binary positionings. Films with uncommon child protagonists encourage us to re-evaluate constructs, including the adult-child binary.

This chapter has paid particular attention to the relational binary which the conceptualisations of childhood and adulthood are trapped in. Implementing Halberstam's ideas on normative and queer time, I demonstrated how specific locations and events in indie cinema, such as children's beauty pageants and Disney World theme parks, benefit from reversing the relational binary, resulting in capsules of queer temporality in normative, reproduction-oriented settings. *Little Miss Sunshine*'s finale on the pageant stage shows the adult characters dancing like children

to support the child protagonist. *The Florida Project* reserves the infant like joy or spoiling of theme parks for the rich. The main characters cannot go there to be happy like children, but we see the newly married couple who accidentally end up at the motel having a tantrum like a child would. Both films reflect the impact of neoliberal policies and the lives of low-income families under these circumstances. This is evident in the stories as well as the form. The queer temporality of the films is also a reflection of the impasse they live in through repetitions and a mise en scène that entraps the characters within a vehicle that is not functioning properly and a motel as permanent accommodation. Both films utilise the frame as a space with an entry point and an exit point, that witnesses how characters are helpless. They are either unable to leave completely and so find themselves in the same financially restricted movement again and again, or they appear small compared to their surroundings and have to make a lot of effort to be able to move from one end to the other.

CHAPTER 2: SEXUAL CHILDREN

The previous chapter focused on representations of two outstanding girl protagonists in post-millennial American independent film productions. In this study's selection of case studies, Olive and Moonee are the innocent, more traditional, representations of childhood. This second chapter will explore child protagonists who hold sexual desires, in the films *Mysterious Skin* (Gregg Araki, 2004) and *We the Animals* (Jeremiah Zagar, 2018). These protagonists stand out in the films' conception of childhood because they are sexually charged and move us away from the more traditional childhood representations. The two protagonists are boys around age nine who are in love with a slightly older boy in one case, and an adult male in the other. Their romantic and libidinal investments also make the protagonists sexually active. Through the analysis of these characters, this chapter will make a case for the possibility of childhood agency through sexuality – as a critical response to the traditional representations of childhood that mute the child and deprive it of sexuality. I will address how these sexual and eroticised children are positioned in comparison to a conception traditional childhood, and how this emerging representation of the sexually deviant child challenges adult identity. American independent cinema's tendency to screen sexual children will constitute part of the chapter in regard to the possibility of an adult gaze reciprocated by a child's gaze. The use of voiceover narration and how its implementation establishes the agency of the child in indie narrative will be examined. I suggest that recent academic works on queer temporality, such as Elisabeth Freeman's *Time Binds* (2010), open a fruitful space for interpreting the emerging representations of the queer child in American independent cinema and uses of time and temporality in the non-traditional narration techniques implemented in the films. The last portion of the chapter will handle the two case studies, namely *Mysterious Skin* and *We the Animals*, through the lens of queer temporality. The chapter will also use theories of queer time to investigate the notion of remembering through corporality and the connections of the viewers' body and film's body by implementing theories on queer time.

2.1. The Sexualised Image of the Child: Neil and Jeremiah as Sexual Children with Queer Desires

Traditional perceptions of childhood position the child as everything the adult is not. The child, from this point of view, is stripped of all the bad traits of the adult and is thus considered more of a blank slate. The child's status as lack, and as tabula rasa, deprives them of agency while consolidating an ideologically constructed embodiment of innocence that denies sexualisation. James Kincaid in his book *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (1998) defines the position of the child as a relational counterpart of the adult:

(...) the child was everything the sophisticated adult was not, everything the rational man of the Enlightenment was not. The child was gifted with spontaneity, imaginative quickness, and a closeness to God; but that's as far as its positive attributes went. More prominent were the negatives, the things not there. The child was figured as free of adult corruptions; not yet burdened with the weight of responsibility, morality, and sexuality; liberated from "the light of common day" (Kincaid, 1998, p. 15)

A lack of sexuality is one of the signifying traits of the child. This perspective makes the child an asexual entity but with an underlying heterosexuality that is required as they grow up. The child, in a cultural sense, had been deprived of sexual desire until the early twentieth century when Freud asserted that the infant is a "polymorphously perverse" sexual being.

The newly emerging science of sexology¹⁰ in the nineteenth century, with contributions from Kraft-Ebbing, Hirschfield and others, paved the way to Freud's sexualised child, in a scientific sense. Freud's contribution to an understanding of childhood sexuality was groundbreaking and provocative "in its acknowledgment that all children were inherently sexual, pleasure seeking, desirous as well as sadistic and masochistic in the quest to fulfil their libidinous drives" (Egan and Hawkes, 2010, p.99). Freud's ideas of sexuality in children evolved and changed, in some instances in contradictory ways, through the additions and re-edits he made to his seminal work *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1962). Kincaid, whose perspective helped shape this project considerably, draws particular attention to Freud's "theory of

¹⁰ Egan and Hawkes suggest that in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, sexology emerged "as part of a wider concern with the classification of bodies and populations, along with other new sciences such as anthropology, sociology, psychology and criminology" (2010, p. 76).

latency”, which erases the sexuality from the child until adolescence, to emerge again at a time when it is socially acceptable. Sexuality, from this perspective, can emerge only in adolescence but not in childhood. The child’s encounter with sexuality is only possible in terms of an eroticising, paedophilic regard, stemming from the adult point of view, as discussed in Kincaid’s *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (1998). Hence, the child, in a traditional sense, lacks sexuality and an agency that can be attained by desire. With the work of Natasha Hurley and Steven Bruhm (2004), and Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009), the queer academic canon, after the 2000s, invested in childhood and queer sexuality. It is still relatively rare to find and hard to talk about a general acceptance of sexual desire in children, let alone deviant desires. Therefore, the queer child is a recent, relatively rare, and contentious phenomenon in cultural representation.

The most prominent study on the queer child is Bond Stockton’s *The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009). She is interested not only in the gay child, but also in different types of childhoods, queered by waywardness as they remain outside the historical descriptions and definitions of childhood. Her main objective is to find traces of atypical childhoods in works of literature and cinema. She formulates four different sets of wayward growing children: (i) the aforementioned gay child, (ii) the developmentally arrested adult-homosexual, whom she considers to be a child, (iii) Freud’s sexually aberrant child, and (iv) the child queered by innocence or colour. She proposes that, in a heteronormatively defined society, these children grow *sideways*, instead of growing *up*. Delay is a prominent notion in Bond Stockton’s framing of the ghostly gay child. Children can be queer only once they are grown up to be adults and are looking back to redefine their childhood as non-heterosexual:

The proto-gay child has only appeared through an act of retrospection and after a death. For this queer child, whatever its conscious grasp of itself, has not been able to present itself according to the category “gay” or “homosexual”—categories culturally deemed too adult, since they are sexual, though we do presume every child to be straight (Bond Stockton, 2009, p.6).

According to her definition, the queer child can only be established in retrospect; once the individual is an adult, the possibility of identifying a queer child in their past emerges after looking back at their personal history. In this sense, a queer childhood cannot be lived as a present but can only be a re-construction of the past. The personal history of a queer adult is a re-arrangement of meanings and explanations. They gather

traces and memories that do not fit in well with the expectations of a normative world and its definition of childhood in the traditional sense, to redefine an identity in retrospect. The queer child (of the past) can only be a ghost of the queer adult, who is living in the present.

The films chosen for this chapter, *Mysterious Skin* (Gregg Araki, 2004) and *We the Animals* (Jeremiah Zagar, 2018), present children who are aware of their desires and exercise agency by acting on them. The sexual representations of the boys, I would contend, challenge Bond Stockton's classification. Neil, the protagonist of *Mysterious Skin*, is established in connection to his bodily pleasures, and he knows how to generate such gratification. Jonah, the protagonist of *We the Animals*, is at a stage in which he realises that corporeal thrill and enjoyment is linked to romantic and libidinal investment. Both children investigate physical sensations, probe the limits of the body, and explore pleasure and pain. Such depictions of pre-adolescent characters are groundbreaking, considering the prevalent separations between sexuality, queerness, and the conceptualisation of the child. This recently emerging image of the queer child differentiates itself from the Freudian sexualised child, along with Kincaid's interpretation of eroticised childhood innocence, and Bond Stockton's ghostly gay child. The emerging queer child is not a product of a retrospective look at personal history, rather a product of the present. The connection this child has to sexuality does not entail delay; it contains sexuality before adolescence. Furthermore, this child is not sexualised and eroticised by the adult in a state of incapability and lack (of knowledge as well as agency), but instead, takes agency through sexuality. I will first analyse some scenes from both films that introduce the child protagonists from this proposed point of view and aim to underline how the post-millennial American independent productions chosen for this study present wayward sexual desires in (pre-adolescent) children at the age of nine that exemplify exceptional versions of childhood.¹¹

The protagonist of *Mysterious Skin*, Neil McCormick, is introduced to the audience on his bed, in his underwear, looking out the window while watching his mother give a blowjob to her boyfriend on the swing set in their garden. His 19-year-old voice-over is heard saying "that summer I was eight years old, I came for the first time". He adds

¹¹ These two selected films are needless to say not the only works that depict pre-adolescent queer and sexually agenic children. *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016), which is not included in the corpus of this thesis but is in alignment with the criteria of selection, is another prominent example.

that he had been masturbating for a few years, but this was the first time “jizz squirted”. The scene is followed by his mother going down on Alfred, her boyfriend, who Neil describes as “dumb as fuck”. Yet, Neil admits that he eventually came to be his type. Alfred’s face in the centre of the close-up frame matches graphically with Neil’s. Both squint their eyes and have their mouth open. The editing moves us back and forth between Alfred and Neil, and another grown man’s face, which the viewer later finds out belongs to Coach. The repeated shots of the centrally framed faces continue as the voice-over of the child is heard talking about masturbation. This editing builds strong overlaps with the orgasmic adult male and the child who ‘squirted jizz’ for the first time. In the initial introduction of Neil, his desire is strongly linked to bodily pleasures that take adult men as their object. Such a depiction of a child is extraordinary in the sense that it does not require adolescence or adulthood to arrive and identify sexually, and then retrospectively define childhood pleasures. Araki’s stylistic choices build strong connections between the nine-year-old child’s lustful representation and the adult men, through framing, editing and voiceover narration.

Neil’s voyeuristic pleasure draws a parallel to the scopophilia Mulvey describes in her seminal article (1975, pp. 6-18), the kind of pleasure possessed by Freud’s infant who watches their parents through a keyhole. I will return to Mulvey and her conceptualisation of the gaze, as well as the use of voiceover narration, but for now I would like to emphasise the positioning of Neil as a desiring child protagonist. He acknowledges the urges he finds in his body and acts on them by competently defining the object of his desire. Hence, he stands out as a sexually active queer child. He differs from Bond Stockton’s conceptualisation of the ghostly queer child, and, I argue, becomes a child with agency.



Figure 14: Cross-cutting of Alfred, Neil and Coach, *Mysterious Skin*

The scene ends with Neil's voice-over: "maybe I should start at the beginning". The film then cuts to the sequence of the first time he meets Coach. At the beginning of the summer, his mother takes him to baseball practice, which he says was Alfred's way of having sex without the expense of a babysitter. The older Neil's voice-over explains the feelings of the eight-year-old Neil. "Desire sledgehammered me", he says, followed by a close-up shot of Neil's face with his mouth half open and eyes squinted once again. The black lines drawn on his cheeks recall the dark shadows cast on his face from the night of the masturbation scene. The voice-over continues to explain that Coach looked like the images of lifeguards, cowboys and firemen he had seen in the *Playgirl* magazines which his mother kept stashed under her bed, as the still frames of grained magazine covers with close-ups of naked men flash on the screen. Neil is

presented as a child with a capacity for desire that is strong enough to leave him captivated by the adult men in whom he invests libidinally. As a child protagonist, Neil is radically different from more normative representations of the innocent, sexually void child, for example *Little Miss Sunshine*'s Olive. Olive's naively sexual and comparatively promiscuous presentation is only generated by the dance routine, which her grandfather trained her to do. Upon arriving at the competition and seeing other girls, she realises how scandalously 'freaky' her closing act is. She exerts agency in making the decision to perform, but her decision is partially to honour her late grandfather, and her innocence is positioned as a protective shell of ignorance until the moment of comparison with other contestants. Neil, on the other hand, is presented as a child who possesses knowledge about sexual matters; he is promiscuous, and he's attracted to adults with full awareness of the circumstances.



Figure 15: Neil upon seeing Coach "Desire sledgehammered me". *Mysterious Skin*

Neil's counterpart in this chapter, Jonah from *We the Animals*, is more naïve. He is initially presented as one of the members of a gang of brothers, with his older siblings Manny and Joel. The three seem to be inseparable, powerfully charged with youthful, playful, childish energy, which is accentuated by the use of a mobile camera and the fast-paced editing of the opening sequence. Jonah's voice-over, accompanying the shots, says, "Look at us. We are brothers". The images show three boys being mischievous; smashing tomatoes on a dinner table, shouting at each other, running, climbing, hanging from trees. They are the sons of a working-class family that lives in upstate New York and struggles with poverty. As the father is Costa Rican and the mother has white roots, their teenage pregnancy causes trouble in their larger families, so the boys and their parents navigate the dysfunctional, abusive family dynamics and

consequences of poverty as a nuclear unit. The opening of the film both introduces the brothers as a tightly knit group and gives an idea about the setting they live in. Jonah's soon to be romantic interest Dustin is seen after the opening sequence, when the boys are walking home after school. The camera explores the apparently poor town and its residents while the boys stroll around. The film gives a very short glimpse of Jonah's gaze meeting Dustin as he comes out of some bushes. Jonah, upon seeing Dustin, stops and stares at him. The mobile camera, aligned with Jonah's POV, scans the neighbourhood with a pan shot stops for a brief moment. He breaks eye contact when one of his brothers calls for him to walk faster, and the previous camera movement is restored. Shot-reverse shot editing is used in Jonah and Dustin's first encounter, the first time such a construction occurs in the film, and in a manner that builds rapport between the characters. The shot reverse-shot construction may be too transitory for the viewer to build the connection between the two characters as the sequence is not very long and there is no accompanying music to signal a different mood, as usually occurs in romantic films. Another reason why it is not easy for the viewer to decode this initial gaze as signalling a first look of love or libidinal interest is that the main protagonist, Jonah, as a nine-year-old child, does not fit the part of a romantic partner, and, being a boy, Dustin is not the expected counterpart.



Figure 16: Jonah looking at Dustin for the first time, *We the Animals*



Figure 17: Dustin looking at Jonah, *We the Animals*

Jonah's father pushes Jonah to be like his brothers, to become more masculine. Paps and Ma, as Jonah's voice-over introduces them, fight over this: Paps abuses Ma and leaves the house before the morning of Jonah's ninth birthday. His mother sinks into a major depressive episode and the kids are left to themselves. When the food at home runs out, Jonah and his brothers try stealing from a corner shop. Afterwards, they break into a garden to eat tomatoes. The owner of the garden, an old neighbour, catches them and invites them to eat in his house, speaking in the most unexpected soft voice, and contradicting the building tension of the scene. A memorable shot in the film is an extreme close-up of the old man as he kills a fly on the back of his sun-burnt, red neck by slapping hard with his wrinkled, deformed old hand and dirty nails. The brothers meet the old man's grandson Dustin. He and Jonah sit together for a while outside, and Dustin shows Jonah how to make small cuts in the shape of a cross with a knife on fly bites so they don't itch. Jonah's wide opened eyes show that he is in awe of Dustin's touch and how this pleasurable touch is followed by an incision and opening of the skin. Both the shot with the fly on the old man's neck and the bite on Jonah's arm, are examples of the many extreme close-ups in the visual inventory of the film that help create tactility and intimacy. *We the Animals* benefits from frequent use of extreme close-ups to give a sense of familiarity and closeness. Meanwhile, the exterior shots use extreme wide angles, in some cases similar to the visual style of *The Florida Project* from the Innocent Children chapter. The brothers seem small in wide rural spaces covered with trees and greenery. Extreme close-ups are reserved for internal

spaces, mostly indoors at home, in the brothers' bedroom, in the bathroom with the parents and in the scenes with Jonah and Dustin, supporting the sense of intimacy in these spaces. I will return to the close-ups and analyse the role of this stylistic choice in relation to the gaze and sexualised image of the child in the following section. Leaving the cinematographic analysis aside for now, I suggest that the mosquito bites and the itch that follows, along with the cutting of the skin by a potential love interest, resonate with the pleasure and pain coming from and reached through bodily sensations. Jonah's attraction to Dustin does not remain in the solely romantic sphere, delivered to the viewer through shot-reverse shot editing. Instead, it moves to a physical sphere, introduced by the close-ups on skin and touch.



Figure 18: Jonah and Dustin together, *We the Animals*



Figure 19: Mosquito bite on Jonah's arm, *We the Animals*

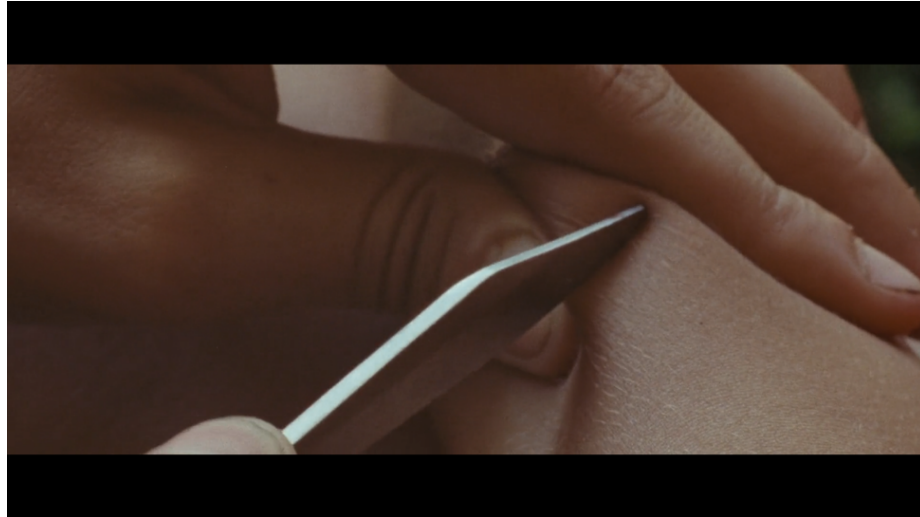


Figure 20: Dustin cutting Jonah's arm, *We the Animals*

Later, Dustin and the brothers watch Iron Maiden videos on an old TV in the basement. Dustin decides to show them something more impressive and places a VHS tape in the recorder/player. The first images to appear on the screen are shots of grasshoppers in large numbers, causing damage to rural lands, which are either from a news clip or a documentary recorded on the tape originally. Then 1-900 phonline commercials for pre-paid sex channels start. All four children start watching out of context, mix and match, heterosexual and homosexual porn sequences. Manny and Joel, Jonah's older brothers, make jokes about the women "getting it". Jonah, who seems to be watching hard core porn for the first time, stays quiet, side-glancing Dustin to see how he reacts. When the first gay scene comes up, his stare is fixed on the screen. The connection that was built between insects, skin, touch and sensuality is repeated. Children watching sex acts and the pleasure they receive from voyeurism recalls the introduction scene in which Neil is shown watching his mother and her boyfriend Alfred. Yet, this image of sexually wayward child(hood) does not resemble the baleful or mischievous Neil of *Mysterious Skin*. The characterisation of Jonah as an innocent-virginal yet sexualised-queer child is an example of the emerging embodiment of queer childhood in American independent cinema. This strikingly original presentation of a child containing both innocence and sexuality, combining naivete and homosexual desire, challenges traditional conceptualisations.



Figure 21: Dustin and the brothers watching porn, *We the Animals*



Figure 22: Jonah watching gay porn, *We the Animals*

Later that night, when the brothers Jonah, Joel and Manny are laying in their shared bed, Joel and Manny have fun by mimicking the noises from the porn commercials. The sounds that they mimic, of naked, moist bodies in motion during penetrative sex, are transformed into the sounds of flies burning in a flycatcher in Jonah's dream. The repetition of the fly metaphor, in this instance, in connection to punishment and annihilation, is reminiscent of a scene from one of the most notorious paedophile films, Adrian Lynne's *Lolita* (1997), an adaptation of the Nabokov novel. The scene takes place at a hotel where Humbert takes Lolita, and they meet the notorious paedophile Quilty. The exchange of snatches of conversation between Humbert and Quilty on the hotel porch has flashing blue-lit inserts of the flycatcher that Quilty is sitting under, accompanied with the buzzing sound of the butterflies and flies that get trapped and burn with a sizzle. The scene, in terms of lighting and sound, resembles the brothers sleeping under the flycatcher in *We the Animals*, which is followed by Jonah's sexually charged dream. The introduction of a paedophile into the context of a sexually deviant

child's life is acceptable while the paedophile functions as the introducer of sexuality to a naïve conceptualisation of childhood. As the traditional child is expected to be excluded from sexuality, the only way sexuality may be introduced to the 'innocence' of childhood is through an adult who is made deviant by desire which objectifies a child. In the case of *Little Miss Sunshine*'s Olive, as discussed before, this was through the caricatured grandfather. American indie cinema and its treatment of hard-to-digest issues in a quirky, softening way lightens such an intervention between the innocent child and the sexually deviant adult in *Little Miss Sunshine*. In *Mysterious Skin*, however, the paedophile is not an instrument to introduce sexuality into the child's world, rather the child is endowed with deviant, queer sexual desires and the agency to act on them. As for Jonah, the child with romantic desires who is also naïve, the object of these wayward inclinations is another youngster, a few years his senior (depending on Dustin's age and which state they are in, their physical rapport may be classified in law as statutory rape). In this case, the film is not reluctant to screen implicit imagery, with regard to shots of pornography, but uses metaphors to depict the desires of the naïvely sexual child. The relationship between the child and sexuality cannot be a direct connection but requires an adult to introduce the two contradicting conceptualisations. Among the three examples, *Mysterious Skin*'s Neil is the only child who has awareness of and control over his sexual desires, hence he has more agency than the other two. Olive is the epitome of the innocent child in this comparison: she lacks knowledge but can exercise agency for emotional reasons. Jonah, positioned somewhere between the two, experiences an awakening of sexual desires that are depicted through visual metaphors. His agency strengthens as he accepts his waywardness.

So far, I have focused on the introductions of Neil and Jonah, the sexually charged queer children in *Mysterious Skin* and *We the Animals*. It is worth underlining that such representations of children are not common. American independent cinema provides a possibility of screening this groundbreaking, newly emerging prototype of childhood, advanced by the unique characteristics it maintains. The following section will prioritise the methods of narration used by American independent cinema that enable the characterisation of the wayward, non-normative child.

2.1.1. The Body and Voice of the Sexual Child in Independent Cinema's Narration Styles

‘What makes a film independent?’ is a question without a single, defining answer. Several elements are in play when classifying a film, including the production methods, the director's status and connection with major studios or the niche production houses, the total budget of the film, how and at which festival the film premiered and the type of awards received if there are any, the actors and casting, the reception of the film by critics and audiences, distribution methods and many more factors. The establishment of categories within the non-Hollywood sphere is also tricky: arthouse, American independent cinema, American indie, indie wood, and special division are some of the categorisations, all of which are separated by blurred lines. Scholars of American independent cinema propose various criteria and approaches. I will employ Michael Z. Newman's set of criteria in *Indie: An American Film Culture* (2011), as it covers the main delineating imperatives. Centring around more contextually specific aspects, Newman suggests a set of three characteristics defining indie cinema's expectations:

1. Characters are emblems
2. Form is a game
3. When in doubt, read as anti-Hollywood (2011, p. 29)

The first slogan on Newman's list directly relates to the last: characters of independent cinema are given “more depth and complexity” (2011, p. 30), in comparison to Hollywood cinema's “characters who are one-dimensional types functioning as vehicles for other appeals, such as visual spectacle and the promotion of ancillary consumer products” (p. 30). Independent cinema's characters are “better developed, truer to life, more vivid and compelling” in his opinion. They do not have magical powers, nor are they exceptionally brave, phenomenally attractive or extraordinarily intelligent. “Conventions of representation of setting and human behaviour in this kind of film are typically naturalistic” (Newman, 2011, pp.87-8), the characters and the world they live in are truer to the experience of the viewer. A factor contributing to his formulation of “character that is an emblem” is the involvement of different audiences and different filmmakers in the broadening world of independent cinema. Those who cannot find a place for themselves in the big studio habitat can become a part of the independent production and consumption chain. These expelled groups include

women, African-Americans, Hispanics, and openly gay and lesbian filmmakers in the American context, according to Newman. In his words, “this fits tongue-in-groove with the viewing strategy that sees characters as emblems because it sees directors as emblematic (2011, p. 31). The outcast filmmakers tell their own stories in American independent films, stemming from their lives and experiences as minorities and outsiders in an American context.

Sherry Ortner (2013) draws similar lines while laying out the framework of American independent cinema in comparison to Hollywood. She shifts the focus from the characters to the narrative and suggests that independent filmmakers prefer to tell stories Hollywood would not dare to. Independent film narratives are too violent, sexually perverse, morally ambiguous, depressive, or too deviant to meet Hollywood studios’ need to please the mainstream. She adds: “Where Hollywood films seek to provide escape and fantasy, independent films seek to tell realist or hyper(bolic)-realist stories about the world as literally is, in all its ugliness and cruelty, or all its weirdness and strangeness, and if this makes audiences uncomfortable, so be it” (Ortner, 2013, p. 51). Both Newman and Ortner stress the realist approach in independent cinema, in comparison to the escapism of Hollywood, which manifests itself in narrative choices and character formulations. The relationship between the directors and filmmakers in the independent sphere and the emblematic characters they set forth can also be traced in the case studies of this chapter. The director of *Mysterious Skin*, Gregg Araki, is one of the most prominent filmmakers of American independent cinema, and more specifically New Queer Cinema. His work bridges these two canons as he is known for his public gay identity and his films carry direct traces of his persona and American queer culture in the late 90s and 2000s. Moreover, most of his films are produced within small to minuscule budgets, starring names from the independent scene or inexperienced debut actors. His approach, along with many of his peers created opportunities for following filmmakers by opening up paths. Both *Mysterious Skin* and *We the Animals* are semi-autobiographical book adaptations from openly gay authors. The connection between the lived experience of the author and the character as an emblem is transferred from autobiography to film, even if the stories are hard to digest and the characters are unique in their waywardness.

How are these true-to-life-stories depicted in such a stylistic formation that the harsh stories are delivered without falling into the escapism of Hollywood? This question

brings the focus to the second characterising slogan Newman proposed for independent cinema, “form is a game” (2011, p.29). This section will focus on narrational devices in relation to the previously mentioned “hard-to-digest stories” and “characters as emblems”. Newman proposes that “films encourage play by engaging unconventional genre elements and by presenting unconventional narrative structures” (Newman, 2011, p. 36). His proposition suggests that the narrative’s uncommon, rough stories are delivered by formal elements that are adapted in an unconventional or unhabitual manner. In Chapter 1, ‘Innocent Children’, I argued that the innocent child protagonists function as the entry point to the film, which consequently softens the filmic world through more colourful mise-en-scène, a particular use of props, the application of cinematographic methods like framing from the child’s eye line and episodic narration. In this chapter, I will investigate the ways in which narrative techniques contribute to the depiction of the sexual child in *Mysterious Skin* and *We the Animals*. The sexually charged character Neil is in a romantic and sexual relationship with an adult man in the first half of *Mysterious Skin*. In the second half, the nineteen-year-old Neil struggles with melancholia and a search for love and desire, similar to what he had with paedophilic Coach. The viewer recognises adolescent Neil’s voice from the previous scenes with Coach and nine-year-old Neil. I will analyse how this hard-to-digest story and its unique characters are cinematically portrayed, and how the gaze works from a Mulveyan point of view between the sexual child and the eroticising adult. *We the Animals* presents poverty, domestic violence, mental health struggles and sexual identity development. The listed components of the narrative are indisputably sufficient to characterise the film as an independent film. Zagar utilises traditional documentary characteristics, such as handheld active camerawork, specific Kodak film that gives the texture of 90s and early 2000s home videos, and a cinema vérité type narrational approach. Lastly, his delivery incorporates the use of voice-over, which will be a component of my analysis. I will focus my analysis of form and narration on how the child who is experiencing a sexual awakening gains agency, and how this agency is depicted by the utilisation of independent cinema’s techniques of narration.

2.1.2. Adult Gaze: Camera Movements and Cinematography in Scenes that Eroticize Children

Laura Mulvey, in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, proposes a psychoanalytic model of gaze relations in classical Hollywood cinema. Her theoretical framework marks the active bearer of the gaze as male. Woman, who is the relational subject of the gender dichotomy, is positioned as the passive object of the gaze, a spectacle to be looked at. This dynamic is an outcome of the castration anxiety attributed to the man. As a result, the bearer of the gaze objectifies and eroticises the spectacle of the woman by positioning her in a harmless passivity. The grounding concept behind this categorisation is the narcissistic identification of the spectator/audience claimed by Christian Metz (1982). The audience, which is aligned with the camera through a phallic power, identifies with the star images on the screen for ego formation. Discussions of the gaze and its relation to phallic power in terms of different identities, ethnicity and gender theory have been broadening and becoming more inclusive. Recalling Newman’s description of independent filmmakers from minor communities as emblemizers, the involvement of black filmmakers, audience and scholars with cinema resulted in alternative perspectives to the male gaze. To give an example; bell hooks (1992) suggested the term “oppositional gaze”, which suggests that the black male audience does not benefit from the same pleasure principles as the white male audience. The oppositional gaze bestows the black female spectator with power, which is sustained by the act of looking and interrogation. The discussion in this section will utilise Mulvey’s initial conceptualisation of the male gaze and analyse the relations of the cinematic gaze in the selected indie films’ representation (and eroticization) of the child and their on-screen rapport with the non-normative adult.

I suggest that generally filmic depictions of children align with the representation of women as passive objects, and objects of the gaze. Although the image of the child is generally desexualised and perceived as anything but erotic, there is a strong parallel between the image of the child and the woman as an object of desire in their erotic representations. Vicky LeBeau in her book *Childhood and Cinema* (2008) states that “the image of the nude or semi-clothed child was ubiquitous in late Victorian and fin-de-siècle iconographies of childhood with which cinema was immediately embroiled” (Lebeau, 2008, p. 92) and adds that this sensualised image of the child is eroticised often by analogy with the sexuality of the women, as the woman is eroticised in her

innocence and child-like presentation. I will initially aim to show how her proposition aligns with the depiction of Neil, depicted through the male gaze as a love interest of an adult man. Additionally, I will conduct a discussion around the mechanics of Neil's characterisation as a sexual child and consider whether this depiction complicates the dichotomy between male-female and adult-child representations. I will then compare Neil's remarkable characterisation and representation to Jonah's.

In *Mysterious Skin*, photographs of Neil taken by Coach fit in with LeBeau's description. On a day in which Neil's mother doesn't show up to pick him up from baseball practice, Coach takes him to his house. This starts a series of regular visits to Coach's house which eventually ignite the sexual exchange between Neil and Coach, an exchange led and controlled by the latter. On one of those visits, Coach makes Neil pose and takes Polaroid photographs of him, which are staged both childishly and sexually by Coach's directions. Coach starts by directing Neil to pose with his tongue sticking out and to 'make funny faces'. Neil follows the instructions and acts as directed in front of the camera until Coach extends his arm to put his finger in Neil's mouth. The shot-reverse shot sequence has both POVs, Neil's from his height looking up at Coach who holds the polaroid camera in his face and Coach's POV as he looks down at Neil, from a higher angle. This mismatch in eyeline sets up Coach as the powerful subject and Neil as the inferior. The same framing repeats later on during oral sex scenes when Neil is an adolescent, having sex with other adult men. The Polaroid camera, which Coach uses, is noticeable within the frame. The central placement of the camera draws attention to the 'posing game' they play. Coach tells Neil how to pose for the camera and Neil does as he is told. The polaroid camera reminds us that the scene, with the acting that Neil performs for Coach, is a replica of the filmmaking process itself. The holder of the gaze, or the camera, is the active subject. This active subject with agency is the decision maker. The receiver is rendered passive and positioned in relative inferiority, following orders and direction. The phallic power dynamic plays out in Mulvey's conceptualisation of the cinematic gaze and also in the adult-child relationship in this scene. The child is eroticised, both by the finger placed in the mouth and through the fascinated and titillated gaze of the adult. This display marks the child as a passive spectacle, in a way similar to the representation of the female body mentioned by LeBeau. When Coach's finger is in Neil's mouth, the narration takes on conventions of romantic scene-setting in classical

Hollywood, such as the use of an heightened soundtrack, close-ups in longer shots, and slowed down pace in editing. The freeze frame of Neil's face with Coach's finger in his mouth turns the child, who is already a spectacle, into a pin up. Neil becomes an object for visual pleasure. The child, queered in relation to the adult, is a visual spectacle with its physical difference. The eroticised child is turned into a spectacle by the active holder of the gaze, and through the libidinousness of the adult, projected onto the child.

Richard Dyer, in his article (2013) on the male pin up, points out that the male body, even when positioned for the visual pleasure of the looker, still "promises activity by the way it is positioned" (Dyer, 2013, pp. 265–276), for example, by tautening the muscles or posing in some sports movement. Moreover, the male figure, even when he becomes a pin up, either looks up and outside the frame or possesses a penetrative gaze that is directed at the female onlooker. Neil, in this pose and framing, is looking up but his look is directed at the holder of the active gaze, not out of the frame. His look is neither penetrative nor possessing any threat to Coach. Coach's finger in Neil's mouth, with the still frame shot in editing, signals the dominance of the adult over the child, with the penetrative control he has over the objectified child's body as well as over the management of time by freezing it. The freezing of the image also deprives the child of agency as it takes away motion as a capability. Later, when Coach and Neil are looking at a photo album of Neil's Polaroids, Neil comments on a photo by saying he looks stupid in it. Coach responds saying, "you look perfect, your expression ... like you're having a wonderful dream". Coach sees Neil as he wants to, disregarding Neil's own perception of himself. The imposed "dreaminess" is attributed to the eroticising adult imagery. Neil takes on the female role as the objectified, passive receiver of the look in this sequence.



Figure 23: Polaroid camera on coach's face and his finger in Neil's mouth, *Mysterious Skin*

The gaze, in this sense, does not offer a reciprocal way of looking, nor one where the eroticised figure aligns with the male pin up. There is only one active role and that is the looker, the possessor of power and control. Such normative operations of the gaze inform the ideological constructions of the adult-child dichotomy. The concept of the child is created and defined by the adult, relying heavily on the differences between the adult and the child. The 'lack' of certain features that are assumed evident and prominent in adult individuals defines the concept of child and its social and juridical states (mentally incapable adults are considered child-like to an extent that they might partially lose their rights). The child occupies the oppositional position to the adult due to this conceptualisation of child-as-lack in the adult-child dichotomy, comparable to the female in the male-female dichotomy. The definition, as well as the imagery of 'the child as a concept', is structured and delineated by the adult, according to the requirements and needs of the adult. Kincaid claims childhood "is a fantasy, ... a created identity, in a way to fulfil the adult imaginary" (Kincaid, 1998, p. 164). Considering these claims, can an "adult gaze" be conceptualised in a way that would address the question of eroticising childhood in the sense Kincaid underlines? And would showing the parallels between woman-as-lack and child-as-lack (vs male and adult) suffice for the required dynamics of the adult gaze? And how would a sexual child with agency interfere with such a dichotomy?

It is worth mentioning the difference between the sexual child and the eroticised child at this point. I suggest that the sexual child has desire and libidinal investment, and the agency to act on those, or to decide not to, as well as making the decision to watch (i.e. gaze) instead of acting. The eroticised child, however, is a projection of the adult, and is conceptualised as void of agency, or child-as-lack-of-agency. The erotization of the child is similar to the erotization of the female, taking us back to the claims of LeBeau. Both eroticised child and female are mental visualisations, assembled from a male perspective. Patriarchal society's male/female division imposes itself on the spectacle of the child by categorising it in parallel to the female. What is exceptional in Neil's case is his agentic, sexualised characterisation as a queer child. His desire towards Coach, established early in the film, confuses the male/female and active/passive dynamics. The scenes in which he is eroticised and objectified by abuse are presented with classical Hollywood's formal registers of romance, such as soft music, softened movements for the camera, shot-reverse-shot sequences, and close-ups. I would also add that this playful form, which is practiced through American independent cinema's uncommon narration techniques, makes it possible to deliver shocking, rough stories. Todd Solondz's *Happiness* (1998), another well-known independent film that also depicts a paedophile, instrumentalises irony by extensive use of close-ups and long takes. This narrational choice results in detachment, which enables the viewer to watch the story with a different set of emotions, compared to the default phobic responses to a paedophile. Contradicting the *tabula rasa* characterisation of the abused child in *Happiness*, *Mysterious Skin* stages a sexually active, lustful, mischievous child. I will now look at how the sexual child with agency troubles the adult-child dynamic, referring to the adult gaze versus child gaze discussion I previously proposed, and by integrating scenes from *We the Animals* and Bond Stockton's claims into the discussion. I will also pay attention to the "playful form" of American independent cinema that provides a ground for depicting emblematic characters and hard to digest stories.

Kathryn Bond Stockton regards the "child as an invented notion" arguing that "the child is precisely who we are not and, in fact never were. It's the act of adults looking back. It's a ghostly, unreachable fancy" (Bond Stockton, 2009, p. 5). From this perspective, the brothers of *We the Animals* present a mystical, dreamy depiction of childhood such that their presence is fantasy-like. Following the opening credits,

random shots of the three brothers show Manny, Joel and Jonah dipping in water, shirtless in a fridge with colourful containers with several glass frames and playing catch outside. Each small clip is transferred into an animated drawing, which as a device gives what may be assumed as ‘the child’s perspective’ through doodles. The clips continue with Jonah’s voice-over praising their brotherhood. Extreme close-ups and rapid editing show the brothers smashing vegetables, hitting furniture to make music, and poking and hurting each other. The voice-over is accompanied by the screaming and shouting of the children. This energetic, powerful opening, although presented from a child’s point of view and voice-over, is, nevertheless, an adult depiction of childhood. The sequence escalates in rhythm with the children going outdoors screaming and running among trees. The ferociousness and buzz of the brothers recalls other depictions of ‘wild’ children, for example, Truffaut’s *The Wild Child* (1970), Harry Hook’s *Lord of the Flies* (1990), and Spike Jonze’s *Where the Wild Things Are* (2009) – an adaptation of Maurice Sendak’s novel.

Bond Stockton argues that Mulvey’s theory requires an alluring image for the audience to get fixed upon, to gaze instead of merely looking. This image, according to Mulvey, is the “woman in graceful motion”. In her reading of *Lolita*, Stockton asks “if the image of the girl can provide the visual pleasure a woman could, without looking like a woman” (Bond Stockton, 2009, p. 147). She compares the book with the two adaptations from different directors. In comparing the versions of Stanley Kubrick (1962) and Adrian Lyne (1997), she focuses on the cinematography and concludes that Lyne with his use of “motion – the frenetic kind of motion we cannot associate with beautiful women” (Bond Stockton, 2009, p. 151) depicts a sexual child and a paedophile.

The spectacular status of the child-as-object, lacking subjectivity because the child’s agency is nullified in the adult eye, can facilitate a conceptualisation of the “adult gaze”. The child in cinema is pacified and granted innocence and a lack of knowledge, while also ascribed wildness and mischievousness by the adult, making it an ambiguous entity. The narration sustained through American independent cinema’s formal qualities, i.e. the shot-reverse-shot cinematography, accompanied by a classical construction of romance such as through soundtrack and slow pace editing, enables the presentation of the child-as-lack when in relation to a paedophile, in parallel to the eroticised image of the woman. This positioning is supported by the mechanisms of

the male gaze, as discussed previously. The methods used by classical Hollywood to construct romance between male and female characters, have been applied to Neil's depiction with Coach. Neil, however, is ambiguous in his characterisation as a child with a deviant sexuality. The contradictory roles he holds, in being not only sexual, mischievous, and agentic but also passified, eroticised and controlled at the same time, confuse binary oppositions. The depiction of brothers Manny, Joel and Jonah in *We the Animals*, alternatively, present a harmonious duality between granted innocence and wildness in the film's visual language. The active camera chases the boys from a distance in medium wide shots with unstable erratic motion "within their rustic environment like animals in the wild" (Winkelman, 2018) while they run shirtless through the forest. When they are in their home, a handheld camera at a child's height captures close-ups of their faces and bare body parts. The children in *We the Animals* are eroticised in their wildness, intimacy and innocence. The "frenetic kind of motion" Bond Stockton figures presents childhood in its lure and exotic wildness, yet the spectator enjoys the intimacy coming from entering the privacy of the brothers and viewing indexical captures of body parts and skin images as well as the calmer, slow-paced camera movements. This dual state troubles adult scopophilia by making it clear that it is a child that the adult enjoys watching in its eroticised depiction.

I have previously emphasised the role of the adult at the intersection of childhood and sexuality, arguing for the utilisation of the paedophile or the abusive adult. The camera movements and cinematographic choices that are applied in *We the Animals* position the adult viewer as the enjoyer of the eroticised image of the child. The sexual image of the child is merged with a wildness sustained by the rural surrounding, and innocence is nursed by Jonah's lack-of-knowledge about intercourse and his lack of masculinity. The realist narrative, a prominent trait of American independent cinema, is strengthened by the cinema verité technique in narration. The film, although fiction, gives the feeling of a documentary in some instances, and positions the audience as a direct component in the story. The audience watches the eroticised image of the child without an intervening adult to bear the gaze; the children are at home and in the wild without adult supervision. In *Mysterious Skin*, the sexual child is seen through the eyes of the paedophilic adult, through a self-evidently eroticising and objectifying gaze. In the case of the overtly sexualised child, as it is with Neil, the relationship with the paedophile becomes a reciprocal relationship to some degree. *Mysterious Skin* depicts

the ambivalent status of this affair from the perspective of the child, who is in love with his abuser and views him like a *Playgirl* model or one of Hollywood's attractive male leads. This romanticised characterisation of the paedophile is sustained by the film's narration techniques, such as depicting Coach in a blue light, under rain, and centre frame in close-ups with soft lighting, usually supported by the tender and dreamy tunes of the soundtrack. In the aforementioned sequence with the polaroid camera, despite being a depiction of child abuse, there are happy faces in the close-ups and the soundtrack turns it into a mellow, playful scene. The central framing of both characters contributes to positioning them in a close rapport, building a mutual sexual encounter between the sexual child and the non-normative adult, and so blurring the adult-child dichotomy as it is further challenged by the sexualised child. In comparison, in the scenes where Jonah and Dustin are together, they are placed side by side and the medium shots capture them together in the frame. Shot-reverse-shot cinematography is enhanced with extreme close-ups that are from a shared eye level.



Figure 24: Dustin and Jonah sitting together right before their first kiss, *We the Animals*

I will now focus on the scene which depicts Neil's first sexual rapport in *Mysterious Skin*. The scene begins with Neil and Coach sitting at the kitchen table. The angles and point of views used in the previous sequence are followed until Coach comes closer to Neil. His movement towards the camera functions like a close-up, bringing him closer to the spectator as well. As he lays Neil on the kitchen floor covered with colourful flakes like confetti, the use of centre frame shot-reverse shot with high and low angle POV shots is continued. When he finally leans in towards Neil's face to kiss him, his

image is blurred in an extreme close-up, analogous to the blurred boundaries of the adult-child dichotomy as it is challenged by the sexual child and the adult with a desire for the eroticised child. The audience, who is aligned with the camera through a phallic power, identifies with the abuser on screen and yet has a safe place, behind the paedophile and abusive male character.



Figure 25: Coach's face blurring as he leans in to kiss Neil, *Mysterious Skin*

While it seems reasonable to posit an 'adult gaze' that has the capacity of the male gaze and establishes the same mechanics, eroticising and rendering the child passive

by positioning the child as the woman under the male gaze, such a comparison requires a more nuanced analysis. Considering the institutional status of the cinematic gaze, an adult gaze that is defined as operating in a constitutive opposition to a child/infantile gaze presents a “paradox” as “children’s cinema” – i.e. cinema that children participate in both in front of and behind the camera – is an industrial impossibility in comparison to other alternative filmmaking practices critically informed by the dichotomies of the gaze such as feminist cinema, queer cinema, accented/diasporic cinema, etc. Even in cases where a film’s syntax and other narrative elements aim to deliver childhood and a child’s perspective, it will nevertheless always be an adult depiction of childhood. Investigating the scenes from *Mysterious Skin* and *We the Animals* which eroticise the socially sacralised, yet in these cases sexual, child, leads us to observe apparent parallels between the Mulveyan male gaze and the proposed adult gaze on the surface. The power dynamics of control as well as the pleasures of voyeurism and fetishism underlying scopophilia are intact in both dynamics. Mechanics belonging to the male gaze that position the woman as the passive female, also fetishize her. There are prominent similarities with the agency-lacking child, conditioned to be incapable, who is sacralised and eroticised by the adult. On the other hand, the child-as-lack and the woman-as-lack are not interchangeable.

So far, I have explored the perception of the child desexualised by innocence by exhibiting two critical responses which contradicts the general (adult) representation of children, namely Neil and Jonah. It is important to underline the fact that the sexualised child is the child acknowledging sexual desires within, and having the liberty to act on them, thereby becoming agentic. The eroticised child, on the other hand, gains further complexity in relation to the adult imagery.¹² This formation suggests that the portrayals of childhood innocence in culture (and in cinema), feminise and render the child passive, as with the eroticised female figure, as they become a spectacle of fascination in the adult/male eye. This eroticised child does not necessarily possess agency like the sexualised child. Therefore, the paedophile is the

¹² It is important to note that the western categorisations of innocent, sexual and erotic child are not shaped by considerations of poor, colonized and non-white children. The manner western preoccupations regard these exclusions also help shape the pure and innocent child in comparison to other ‘contaminated’ types of children, i.e. working-class children, children of colour, sexually active and/or prostituting children, colonised or ‘savage, wild’ children, ‘insane’ or ‘challenged’ children etc. So far, the focus of this study has been strictly on the former only.

medium through whom we are allowed to visualise this child. While identification with the male character as the bearer of the look is easier for male spectators, identifying with the paedophile is challenging and uncomfortable. The paedophile is disapproved of, and his actions are judged critically. Watching or imagining what the paedophile does with the child allows the viewer to have insight about sexuality in contact with the child. Kincaid argues strongly that the paedophile is a vector through which the society tackles a taboo, and this is why modern culture shows more interest in the sexual abuse of children compared to other types of abuse to which children are subjected.

2.1.3. Whisper in My Ear: Child's Voice-over and the Curious Case of the Missing Body

In the previous section, I have tried to emphasize the impossibility of registering a child's gaze in opposition to an adult gaze. As gaze in cinema is not only a theoretical premise but also an industrial reality, the actuality of a child's gaze, one that is similar to the female gaze or an oppositional gaze, is not a possibility. The gaze of a child protagonist is constructed by an adult imagining and mimicking a child's gaze. In a similar vein, the voice of the child is also a mouthpiece for the adult. Although an institutional child's gaze or child's voice is an impossibility, the protagonists of *Mysterious Skin* and *We the Animals* are bestowed with an eroticising, sexually charged gaze that is directed at other men and boys, evident in the scenes that introduce Neil and Jonah and their sexual and romantic interests. Moreover, they are entrusted with voices that construct and control the narrative. Therefore, it is possible to claim that, in these examples of American independent cinema, the sexual children have agency to a certain extent. The agency they have, in comparison to more classical child protagonists, is depicted through the unique stylistic and narrative choices adopted by independent cinema, recalling Newman's slogan about "form becoming a play". *Mysterious Skin's* romantic texture transforms the relationship between the paedophile and the child into a love story, hence Neil becomes party to a reciprocal romance and directs his eroticising gaze at Coach, as well as being the receiver of Coach's gaze. The line separating the adult and the child, which are relational identities, is blurred. The sexual child, in Neil's version, is not only the victimised innocent child, but also

the child who has agency with respect to his sexuality and desires. *We the Animals*' documentary aesthetic resembles the feeling of home videos, thus disguising the gaze that eroticises the naked child's body. With *Jonah*, the innocence of the child is not distorted: in his representation, deviance works in combination with innocence. The handheld, active camera tracks the child in its wildness when the boys are outdoors, whereas close-ups of the naked child are reserved for indoors, thus veiling the eroticising gaze of the adult by giving the feeling of home videos that are captured by a family member. Both films attribute agency to the child through sexuality and libidinal investment and make them active initiators of queer sexual experiences. Both films grant the sexual child protagonists a voice to deliver their own stories. In light of these analyses, this section will address these films' use of sound/voice by questioning if/how these children's voices hold agency (considering that their bodies are made into agentic/wilful spectacles through the dynamics of filmic gaze). How is the body that has this voice grasped by the eroticising viewer?

Building on the previous discussions around sexuality, agency, body and the adult-child binary, this section will analyse the ways in which the child's voice, in voice-over narration, can be interpreted in terms of intimacy and the role of the body. Voiceover narration is a common trait in films with child protagonists and with adult protagonists who remember their childhood as part of the narrative. One of the reasons behind this manner of delivery is, I would argue, the presumption that the child's perception of the world is different to that of the adult and so requires an interpretation in order to be communicated to an adult audience. Agency carries considerable importance in setting the borders that differentiate child and adult. A lack of awareness and experience encodes the child as incapable of agency. The adult, on the other hand, is the container of knowledge: he is proficient and dominant, authorised to possess subjectivity, and to make choices, as well as encompass agency. Agency is key in making conscious choices, enabling "both conformity and resistance" (Hawkes and Egan, 2008, p.195). The child is an entity created and defined by the adult. By separating it (the child) from itself (the adult) by listing the differences between the two, the adult controls the discourse around their relationship. The adult shapes the discourse by "first 'speaking on behalf of the created subject' (notably of the child in the private domain) and second, the re-incorporation of that speaking to the 'objective characteristics' of the state and the professions (in the public domain)" (Hearn, 1988,

pp. 531-544). This initially deprives the child of a voice, only to then make it into a mouthpiece of the adult ideas which are deemed fit for the child. This process creates a voice in the child and denies it simultaneously. Based on these ideas, this section will orchestrate different discussions about how voiceover narration of the child represents agency in a manner that reconstructs personal history, the visually perceived body of the child, or the lack thereof, and how adult imagery creates the missing body.

The most prominent feature of the voiceover is its non-diegetic location in the film: it is a monologue addressing the audience, thus making them a significant component of the narration and the story. In some cases of the first-person voiceover, the source of the sound or voice is previously introduced yet missing from the *mise-en-scène* of the moment. In some others, a different version of the character is present, as in their past self. In such cases the character addresses the audience directly, although both are physically absent from the images. The cause and source of sound in film, when not visible, translates as lack or absence. Michel Chion expresses the search for source of voice as “the impossible desired meeting of sound and image, symbolised by the meeting of a body and the voice that emerges from it” (2019, p. 99). Mary Ann Doane, in her *The Voice in the Cinema: Articulation of Body and Space* (1980), categorises documentary voice-over to be a “disembodied voice” (1980, p. 41). According to Doane, the internal monologues and flash-backs in fiction that are narrated by a voice-over take the voice as “the privileged mark of interiority, turning the body inside-out” (1980, p. 42) by accessing what is beyond the limits of the visible and the image. Informed by these conceptualisations of voice in cinema, I will conduct a close reading of the voice-over scenes from *We the Animals* and *Mysterious Skin* that aims to explore the function and place of the voice-over in these films, and the body it belongs to.

Both *We the Animals* and *Mysterious Skin* open with the protagonists’ voice-over narrations. Voice-over, as a device, is used at the opening of *We the Animals*, giving way to the doodles of Jonah. In the opening voice-over, Jonah introduces his family. Emulating a video-clip aesthetic with rapid editing accompanied by ascending percussion sounds, the voice-over prologue gives way to episodic, randomly progressing sequences of their daily lives. After a brief section of linear narration without voice-over, Jonah’s mother tells the story of how she met his father and got pregnant. Jonah picks up from where she stops and narrates his own birth story over the shots of his father holding a baby in the bathtub. *Mysterious Skin* opens with

Brian's teenage voice explaining the night he had a blackout when he was nine, leading to the blackouts he keeps having, which he associates with being abducted by aliens. Neil picks up after Brian, in the same manner: his teenage voice narrates a night when he was eight and continues with an account of his relationship with Coach, until his teenage self becomes the protagonist. While *We the Animals* uses voice-over only for setting the tone and introducing the characters and the film's diegetic world, *Mysterious Skin* benefits more from the use of voice-over, the main function of which is to narrate the relationship between the paedophile and the child from the child's perspective. Neil's young adult self is not granted a voice-over to narrate the diegetic events that occur when he is nineteen and twenty. Voice-over narration is mostly reserved for narrating childhood events by an older Neil. Only in the final scene, Neil's voice-over is used when he and Brian are sitting on a couch and Neil is describing what happened on the night Brian can't remember. In this instance, his nineteen-year-old voice narrates a moment when the character on screen is the same age. Both films depict the child's encounter with sexuality, supported by stylistic choices that complement the narrative. In both, the older version of the protagonist has a need to explain the events that they lived through as a younger child, and in both cases, voice-over narration of the older selves is adopted. I suggest that allowing the child to have a voice that narrates over the images and story provides the child protagonist with agency in film.

In the opening segment of *We the Animals*, Jonah is heard singing over the credits before he is visually introduced to the audience. The voice-over continues, saying "Look at us. When we were brothers, we wanted more", over a series of shots with the brothers frantically screaming and running in the wild. The shots are either close-ups or extreme close-ups of the boys' bodies, or wide shots with jolting frames as the children run in a frenzy. He continues "this is us" and then names each member of the family as their images appear on the screen. The parents work night shifts; they are seen in their workspaces while the three brothers are in bed at home. After Ma's arrival back home in the morning, the voice-over narration gives way to a brief diegetic dialogue between the brothers who hush each other as they look at their mother sleeping on the couch. The voice-over picks up again: "Sometimes we wanted less. Less work, less noise. Just this". The parents and the children are shirtless, and Ma's stretchmarks on her belly, from three pregnancies, are visible while she's laying in her underwear. The

spectator finds themselves in the intimacy of Jonah's family. The direct address of Jonah's internal monologue invites the auditor to come close. The film aims to eliminate the distance between the spectator and the characters from a very early stage, contributing to the home video aesthetics. The nudity as well as the intimacy provided by the voice-over create proximity between the characters and the audience. The voice, as Doane notes, "is the privileged mark of interiority" (1980, p. 42) and the bodies are on display along with it. The visual language gives access to privacy, displaying the bodies in diegetic space in their nakedness. The voice-over invites the spectator to come close and enter a private realm. The images of *We the Animals* are dominated by extreme close-ups. This also sustains a closeness between the viewer and the bodies of the characters on screen.

In a later sequence Ma is seen sitting in the bathtub with Jonah on her lap. Pap's voice is describing how they met. He enters the frame as we hear Ma picking up where he left off to explain how she got pregnant by sitting on Pap's lap just like Jonah is sitting on hers. The speech is not produced in the diegetic world, even though the characters are present. Each child's birth and early years are delivered through home videos. This enforces the home video feel that the overall narration carries, and creates a more "playful form", by imitating authentic archival images in the form of fiction, which are inserted into the body of the fictional film, with a documentary texture. Again, both the voice-over and the imagery work to construct intimacy. As Ma and Jonah are sitting in the tub naked, Jonah's voice-over takes over. In the next shot, Paps is sitting naked in the tub holding infant Jonah. The voice of the nine-year-old Jonah is heard saying "Look at me". He is narrating his present and past, editing the events and structuring a personal history. Zagar gives Jonah's nine-year-old self a voice without a matching body. The receiver of the story imagines the body that belongs to the voice. An infantile body is seen on the screen, and a nine-year-old is proclaiming his story of existence. Coming to existence stories are usually told by adults, considering that children are too young to remember. A child inviting the spectator to look at his newborn self while narrating the events, delivers a personal mythology, gaining control over the narrative and agency along with it.

Doane argues that the introduction of sound to cinema results in "re-presenting a fuller (and organically unified) body" (1980, p. 34). The body of the character is complete with the sound it produces through speech and gains control of dialogue with the

addition of voice. The character who has gained authority by voice-over has control over the narration. I suggest the child protagonists gain agency through voice¹³. Araki's and Zagar's use of voice-over, in which the characters narrate their childhood in flashbacks, function similarly to documentary voice-over. This disembodied voice requires a body; as the voice heard is recognised and matched with a character, so the spectator imagines the body.

The character narrating their own history using voice-over seems to be looking at the same images as the spectator, from the same point of view: Jonah's "Look at me" while his infant self is in the tub with his father demonstrates this effectively. It is almost as if the character and the spectator are sitting next to each other. The imagined body of the narrator is missing from the diegetic world but located spatially close, which the quality and characteristics of his voice indicate to the spectator. The film shows new-born Jonah and vocalises nine-year-old Jonah. The disembodied voice of the narrating character does not match the representation on screen. Contrary to the documentary voice-over, in this case, there is a visual representation of the owner of the voice in the diegetic world, the narrating nine-year-old Jonah has been seen before. Therefore, the imagined body can have a representation in the mind of the spectator; the mind's eye calls forth nine-year-old Jonah's mouth as the source of the voice. Chion uses the term "acousmatic" to define sound one can hear on film without seeing its source. In cases in which the source is introduced previously at some point, but is missing from the diegetic moment, the audience will imagine the source and the sound "will be an "embodied" sound, identified with an image, demythologized, classified" (Chion, 2019, p. 72). When the nine-year-old Jonah is speaking about his infancy, there appears to be a mismatch between the voice and the source.

Doane suggests that "the body reconstructed by the technology and practices of the cinema is a phantasmatic body, which offers a support as well as a point of identification for the subject addressed by the film" (1980, p. 34). I suggest that the phantasmatic bodies of characters in film become disembodied, incorporeal, and open to the imagination of the audience when children narrate their own histories through voice-over. In instances where the voice and the image do not match, the imagined

¹³ It is worth mentioning that this agency is limited to the diegetic world, by powers and control of the director and script. In this sense, it is not possible to talk about an actual agency of the child. What this perspective allows me is to elaborate on an agency in film.

body becomes a blank page onto which the audience project their own imagination. Such mechanics of cognitive functioning draw similarities to the adult's conceptualisation of the child as a *tabula rasa*. The audience, conditioned to match a voice with a body, creates a mental representation of the speaker. This leads to a contradiction: while the image of the child is lacking, the voice of the child is present. The competence and agency that comes with narrative control is gained, yet visualisation is under the control of the spectator.

Echoing Doane's notion of phantasmatic bodies, which highlights the moments cinema can facilitate to allow the audience to assign an imagined body to a voice-over, I suggest that, in cases of time shifts or flashbacks, the voice which lacks a body is assigned a fantasised body by the spectator. The voice-over narrations of Brian and Neil from *Mysterious Skin* are disembodied while they deliver the traumatic experiences from their childhood. The voices heard lack bodies, i.e. bodies that the audience (whom the film incites to align with the paedophile and the abuser at certain points) can only imagine. The voice-overs of the characters Brian and Neil narrate the majority of the scenes associated with their eight-year-old selves, i.e. the scenes where they meet Coach and engage in sexual acts with him. Their teenage voices are heard over their child images. It is not made explicit when on the timeline the narration is made, or how old Brian and Neil are as they vocalise the traumatic events of their childhood. By the act of re-telling, the characters attempt to gain agency over traumatic events or gaps in memory which they were not capable of maintaining control over at the time of the experience.

For these parts of the narrative, their older characters find representation in voice only. The audience is encouraged to build a relationship with the narrator without knowing what they look like; they are capable of detecting the difference as child actors' voices do not match with the narrators. The image of Brian and Neil for the first part of the film is left to the imagination: they continue to operate fully as what Doane regards as "phantasmatic" characters. The bodies these voices belong to are introduced when the film's timeline moves forward. Neil's first experience of hustling in his small hometown, taking place in 1987 when he is fifteen years old, is narrated by his older self as well. The nineteen-year-old Neil (in 1991) and the fifteen-year-old Neil (in 1987) are both performed by the same actor, Joseph Gordon-Levitt. In this instance, the bodily representation is the same except for small alterations in hair and outfits.

Only in the final sequence, when Neil and Brian break into Coach's old house and Neil explains what happened on the night that Brian has no recollection of, is the narrator spatially and temporally positioned in the diegetic world as they sit on the couch. Flashbacks intermingle with the present and voice-overs (of Neil and Brian) are once again heard when their eight-year-old characters perform the described actions. In the closing shot, Neil is seen silently holding Brian while his voice-over delivers an inner monologue. The spatial intersection of 'then' and 'now' in the living room of a house which used to belong to Coach, but now belongs to a family, binds different moments in time. The agency gained by voice-over narration re-writes the personal history and connects two different points on a timeline. The gaps in memory are integrated, and control, which was lost over moments of abuse and trauma, is regained by re-composing the events in the finale. Back and forth editing between different moments in time is constructed by the effective use of flashbacks. Events seen and events told unite in audio and visual narration; the indications of the voice-over align the bodies seen in the image with the action described orally. The voice of the sexual child and adolescents narrates the personal history. By doing so, this voice and the resulting agency of the sexual child connect the non-linear flow of time, that jumps back and forth between now and then, in *Mysterious Skin's* adoption of "playful form". The adolescent characters, who are sitting on a couch where they performed some of the sexual acts with Coach when they were children, gain control and agency over the personal narrative, which is centred around the loss of control over the body.

Neil and Brian, as adolescents, gain control over their history of abuse by an adult by narrating the past. Neil, as a child with deviant sexuality, enacts agency by narrating his relationship with the abuser. Jonah, similarly, proclaims his agency by delivering his personal mythology to the viewer.

2.2. Queer Temporalities: Time Binds and the Wayward-Growing Sexual Child

This final section will focus on the uses of temporality in *Mysterious Skin* and *We the Animals*. I have previously noted the relationship between the voiceover of the child who gains agency through sexuality, and the dictation of personal histories by this

child in connection to the utilisation of flashbacks in the “playful form” of narration. I would like to bring an alternative perspective to the uses of time in these examples of independent cinema. My approach will combine Elisabeth Freeman’s conceptualisation of queer temporality (2010) with Bond Stockton’s framing of queer childhood and wayward growth (2009). My previous analysis aimed to illustrate how the newly emerging sexual childhood places the relational identities of child and adult in an identity crisis. The dichotomous relationship between the conceptualisation of child and adult is challenged by the emergence of childhoods that contradict the traditionally defined, muted, innocent child figured as tabula rasa. It is crucial to remember that the adult-child binary is established on a temporal basis in essence: every adult was once a child, and every child is supposed to grow up to be an adult. This formulation places the linear, progressive understanding of time at its foundation. The tabula rasa child, who lacks agency due to lack of practice and awareness, collects experience and knowledge in time. With the progress that both time and the child make, the child develops into adulthood. Hence, the emergence in these films of a sexually charged child and a naively libidinal child, who possesses of sexual knowledge and/or desire, brings the polarised identities into question, and therefore makes the progressive temporal approach debatable. My analysis will take shape around these claims and centre Freeman’s proposition of a sensually connected time, instead of a linearly progressing time. In combination with this proposition, I will also include Bond Stockton’s formulation of wayward growth, which proposes a sideways growth, instead of growing up(wards).

This section will begin with the moment the last one ended on, in which the adolescent selves of Neil and Brian are sitting on the couch, where Coach abused them as children. I will apply Freeman’s conceptualisation of temporality in which she utilises corporeal sensations as binds of time. I will also trace how Araki, as an openly gay auteur, builds connections through the mouth and oral cavity to “bind” desire, familiarity, malice, destruction and memory. I will aim to demonstrate how Araki conceives of Neil as the sexual child and young adult through a decade, by the agency of the subtle yet persistent utilisation of the mouth. Afterwards, I will return to *We the Animals* and consider the sensation of water surrounding skin as a corporeal “bind” in connection to desire, memory, wayward growth, and abuse. I will revisit the critical interpretation

I previously made regarding the film's use of skin, insect bites, itch, pain and libidinal interest, combining it with Freeman's conceptualisation of temporality.

Mysterious Skin benefits from flashbacks in delivering the non-linear growing up of Neil. The film travels back and forth in a sense, binding different moments in time. Similarly, *We the Animals* benefits from American independent cinema's established aesthetic trends in alternative narration methods, some of which are animated parts, fantasy-like sequences, and dreams. The emerging queer child is represented in American independent cinema, in its body and flesh, through the playful formal approach and implementation of non-linear, wayward temporal schemes. I suggest that American independent cinema's diverse narrative techniques enable the depiction of this unusual child. Such techniques complement the emblematic characters, which Newman lists as a defining clause of American independent cinema. The non-normative child and non-normative adult are possible as cinematic visions because the non-traditional narration of independent cinema provides them with a stage. The adult-child binary relationality is challenged through the use of traditional cinematic tools, such as gaze and voice-over narration, in the depiction of the previously inconceivable, sexually wayward child and adult. Moreover, the newly conceived child and adult are products of altering perceptions on temporality that fundamentally challenge linear and progressive approaches to time. This emerging child creates a relational adult identity, in the form of a non-normative adult. Progression and competence, associated with adulthood by virtue of experience, knowledge, and control lose their fundamentality. The new adult is arrested in development, or in Bond Stockton's formulation, "grew sideways instead of up". Bond Stockton considers growing up as a limited and short-sighted perception of human possibilities, "toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness" (2009, p. 4). She proposes a sideways growth, which "suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing "adults" and "children" into lateral contact of surprising sorts" (2009, p. 4). I suggest that post-millennial American independent cinema is abundant with sideways-grown adult characters; almost all of Adam Sandler's roles as an infantile family man, Tyler Durden and the Narrator of *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) in Tyler's expression of "the middle children of history", "a generation of men raised by women", slackers who are the pillars of American independent cinema, quirky childish adults like the ones from

Little Miss Sunshine, nerds and hackers instead of spies like James Bond and the men of Hitchcock, introverts, sexually confused men and women, and many more are the non-normative personifications of the sideways-grown adults in post-millennial independent cinema. Before closely examining scenes from the two films, I would like to elaborate more on Freeman's queer temporality.

Freeman describes her approach as tracking "the ways that nonsequential forms of time (in the poem, unconsciousness, haunting, reverie, and the afterlife) can also fold subjects into structures of belonging and duration that may be invisible to the historicist eye" (Freeman, 2010, p. xi). The metric grouping of time, divided into controllable units such as days, minutes, or the numeric marking and classification of an organised, institutional time, is excluded from her conceptualisation. She defines such an organisation of time as "chrononormativity": a way of directing human life for maximum productivity, "a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts"(Freeman, 2010, p. 3), where certain temporal events and activities (such as marriage, reproduction, control and accumulation of wealth, management of health, childrearing and futurity) become natural to those who benefit from them. Freeman brings forth a sensual, tangible temporality, as a replacement for the above-listed figurations of time. Her perspective parallels Halberstam's ideas on queer time, which I discussed in 'Chapter 1. Innocent Children'. Similarly, Freeman proposes that instead of a cause-and-effect oriented accord of time, which is defined around progress and conceptualized linearly as a vector, repetitions, lingering and returns, which disturb the consequentiality of straight time, encompass a queer essence. Moreover, Freeman stresses the crucial role of naked flesh, which is "bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation" (2010, p. 3), and reminds readers of "orality, anality, fetishism and so on" (p. 8) as pitstops on Freud's formulation of the normal childhood route into "reproductive, genital heterosexuality, but not places to stay for long" (Freeman, 2010, p. 8), turning these acts, if maintained, into taboo sexual practices. The pain and pleasure derived from these activities can connect, or, as she formulates it, "bind" time and temporality as well as history. She proposes that it is not only feelings of melancholia and trauma that evoke a backwards movement in personal as well as societal perceptions of time, or create a state of being arrested, unable to move back or forward: feelings of pleasure also create "temporal binds", which she conceptualises as "erotohistoriography".

Erotohistoriography “treats the present as hybrid and it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter” (Freeman, 2010, p. 95). The present she characterises in her conceptualisation is neither a separation from the past or the future, nor a melancholic rejuvenation of a romanticised bygone time and idealisation of what is to come. The hybridity she engages with in the present holds a wrinkle or fold in itself, in which certain points in time are directly connected, or to use her words, they are “bound” through the body and corporeal sensations. To pave the way to her conceptualisation, she refers to Freud again, and reminds us of his proposal on toothache which, as painful as it is, also gives pleasure, by making the mind realise that a tooth is there, which is impossible to fathom otherwise. The corporality is actualised through pain and pleasure. Time is perceived and attains meaning, in the form of memory and history, through corporeal sensations. Therefore, her conceptualisation of queer temporality is non-linear, tactile, joyous as well as gloomy. She conducts an analysis of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1831) with Hilary Brougher’s time-travelling lesbian film *The Sticky Fingers of Time* (1997) and Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928), delineating the relationship between bodily pleasure and pain to a grasp of the past, transformation of the present, and bodies composed of unalive parts.

2.2.1. Time Binds of *Mysterious Skin*:

Going back to where the previous section left Neil and Brian, I will incorporate Freeman’s “time binds” and their utilisation of the body (the same body of the child which is eroticised by the adult and became phantasmatic through its invisibility and the presence of voice). In the closing sequence of *Mysterious Skin*, Neil takes Brian to Coach’s house. Coach has moved away and apparently a family resides there now. Neil and Brian break in through one of the windows, and sit side by side on a couch, in the same spot where they performed sexual acts with Coach when they were children. Brian has a gap in his memory, belonging to a day the three spent together. As the adolescents Neil and Brian sit together, Neil starts to describe the events that are missing from Brian’s history. The film starts to move back and forth in time. Flashbacks intervene with the present moment of the story. Brian and Neil as children are seen on the screen, the voice-over of Neil’s young adult self is heard describing

the events as the children perform the events he describes. Shots of Coach, seen from Neil's eye, and then from Brian's as he begins to remember, are also enveloped into the sequence. The cross-editing cuts to the present, in which young adult Neil and Brian are shown sitting in the living room of a family and then jumps back to the day they entered the same house as children. The back-and-forth movement of the film between the two different time points, united in spatiality, continues as Neil tells Brian everything that happened. Brian's nose starts to bleed. His body has a recollection of the events even if his mind doesn't fully contain them. This reminds the viewer of the film's opening sequence, where Brian is a child in his family home, and he has an unexplainable nosebleed. By this overlap of the closing scene and the opening scene of *Mysterious Skin*, the film's queer temporality 'wrinkles' in the mind of the viewer. While the narration moves back and forth on the film's timeline, guided by the voice of young adult Neil, the viewer sees images of Brian with a nose-bleed at different points in his personal history. The nose-bleed he has as a child cross-cuts to the nose-bleed he is having as a young adult. The nose-bleed is the tactile connection, the bind between the two separate moments on a linear timeline. Echoing Freeman, the nose and the blood are "erotohistoriographic" inventories of temporality and history.



Figure 26: Child Brian at Coach's house having a nose bleed, *Mysterious Skin*



Figure 27: Brian crying on Neil's lap with a nose-bleed after remembering, *Mysterious Skin*

Both characters verbalise the connecting function of the bodily sensations in their dialogue. Upon their entry into a room through the window, Neil looks at the ceiling and realises that the new residents haven't changed the stickers on it. He immediately remembers the time he spent with Coach in that room and mentions it. How the eye repeating a previous action directly recalls the moment in which the action previously took place is thus depicted. Once again, spatiality and what the body registers make the linear time wrinkle and connect to a different moment. Later on, as they are sitting together, he says, "It took actually till I laid eyes on you today to remember you. When Eric wrote me about you, I could only get the vaguest, hazy picture in my head. Like a staticky TV." Brian replies: "Same here. Seeing you here in this room..." Neil picks up: "I feel like he's watching us right now...". The dialogue paves the way for the viewer to remember the first half of the film, with what it depicts and what it leaves out between the sequences and flashbacks, in the form of gaps. It also evokes the positioning of the adult male gaze, eroticising and abusing the child. Neil and Brian, who were then children, but now young adults, are affected in the exact same manner as a decade ago. This dialogue portrays the connection of bodily sensation to memory and history. Even if Brian cannot consciously remember what has happened and experiences memory gaps, his body connects the past and the present. The film also has traces of these recollections: the shots that involve Coach from the night of the events are colour coded, depending on which of the young boys' POV the viewer is looking from. Neil's POV of Coach is softened with the dominance of yellow while Brian's POV – in the flashbacks – is principally blue matching the colour coding of

the UFO stories he tries to fill the empty parts of his history with. Ultimately, the film's body and the characters' bodies move in synchronicity.



Figure 28: Neil's recollection and POV in the flashback dominantly yellow, *Mysterious Skin*



Figure 29: Brian's revived memory in dominantly blue, *Mysterious Skin*



Figure 30: Juxtaposition of the yellow and blue dominance in colour coding, *Mysterious Skin*

Brian's arc as a character, until his story connects to Neil's, is a quest to fill in the gaps in his memory. His character, in an attempt to come up with an explanation, becomes obsessed with alien abduction stories, and even makes friends through this obsession. On a tour in a field, which is believed to be often visited by aliens, he sees a cow that has been mutilated by removal of the internal organs including the reproductive ones. Upon sticking his fist in the abdominal cavity of the dead cow, he has an immediate flashback of a blue lit room, with an alien hand touching his face, which transforms into a man's hand. The fantasy and flashback sequence cuts to the present moment in the field. His nose starts bleeding, and he passes out.



Figure 31: Brian's fantasy-like memories about alien abduction, *Mysterious Skin*



Figure 32: Brian's nose-bleed before passing out with his hand in the cow

This sequence takes place at the halfway point in the film's linear timeline. This centre point, midway through the film, effects a "bind" to the colour-coded final scene's flashbacks and to the opening scene with the nose-bleed. I thus argue that the film as

a text is also a corporeal entity, a body that has its own temporal binds such as these. The nose-bleed Brian experiences is his corporeal, erotohistoriographic “bind” to the events of his childhood, even though he has no recollection of them. As for the body of the film as a text, corporality can be sustained through many formal tools of film grammar, for example, cinematography, production design, sound, and editing. In this instance, colour coding and flashbacks in editing function as the “binds”. The wrinkled moments that Brian experiences are connected through the colour blue for the viewer: memory gaps, UFO fantasies and the POV flashbacks in the final sequence are blue-coded interconnected moments. As for Neil’s narrative binds, the coding with yellow functions as blue does for Brian. However, Neil also has different “binds” which I will analyse closely now.

The binds, or moments, in other words instances or scenes, which I will put forward, that constitute Neil’s character and his relationship to erotohistoriography, centre around the mouth. The previous section also made a point of the scene depicting the first kiss between Neil and Coach, emphasising the blurring lines between the adult and the sexual child. In that first kiss and the sequence of the first sexual rapport, Neil’s adolescent voice-over is heard saying, “When I swallowed, the taste of Coach’s tongue seared my mouth”. The voice-over is accompanied with his unhappy facial expression in the centre frame, suggesting that their first intercourse was not a very pleasant incident for Neil. The following sequence makes a jump on the linear timeline and moves to Halloween night in October 1983. Neil, being malicious rather than mischievous, decides to trick one of the kids into laying on the ground and forces him to hold firecrackers in his mouth. When the kid is badly hurt, Neil pulls the kid’s pants down, starts playing with his penis off screen and then bends down to give him a blowjob. Araki’s storytelling does not have a judgemental tone that questions whether Neil’s sexual energy (including his violent encounters) finds its source in his bad nature or if it is a consequence of any damage caused by the abuse he experienced. Within this event, there is also a shift in the power dynamic: when compared to the submissive role Neil has in his rapport with Coach, Neil becomes the one in control in his experience with this kid. Kissing, oral sex and firecrackers in the mouth build an analogy in themselves, referring to oral pleasures and pain. This analogy also links to Neil’s voice-over, as he is commenting on his first kiss and intercourse with Coach.



Figure 33: Neil places firecrackers in another boy's mouth, *Mysterious Skin*



Figure 34: The boy is hurt and bleeding around the mouth, *Mysterious Skin*

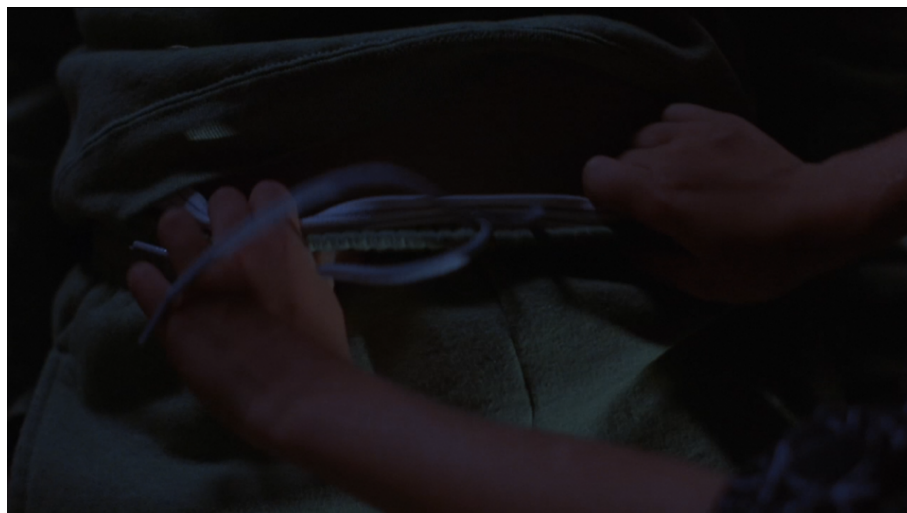


Figure 35: Neil takes the boy's pants off to give him a blowjob, *Mysterious Skin*

When Halloween night is over, the film and Neil's story jump to November 1987, when Neil is a gay adolescent who decides to have sex in exchange for money. The

scene is between him and a middle-aged man in a hotel room, where the man gives Neil a blowjob. Neil, laying on the bed, in a medium shot from above is seen placing the man's fingers in his mouth. His placement in the frame resembles his positioning in the scene when Coach approached to kiss him as he was laying on Coach's kitchen floor, before their first sexual encounter. His placement and the hand on his face also share similarities with Brian's alien abduction fantasy. Neil's adolescent self squints, the soundtrack changes and the film cuts to a flashback of child Neil happy at Coach's house before they have their first kiss. The film depicts the implicit sensual connection Neil's character has to sex, men, the mouth and temporality, and then immediately breaks this connection as it turns to a shot of adolescent Neil in the bed, making a gesture of displeasure. The film reminds the viewer of the temporal connection and "bind" which is generated through framing, graphic match and tactility for the watching eye as well as the character on screen. Later, Neil tells a friend that the man gave him bruises on his genitals. The disappointment he experiences in his first sexual encounter with Coach and the first time he has sex for money overlap. He climaxes where he is laying on the bed in the motel room. The complicated and multi-layered mechanics of erotohistoriography canvas and blanket pain as well as pleasure and other sensations besides these.



Figure 36: The middle-aged john taking off Neil's pants in the motel, *Mysterious Skin*



Figure 37: Neil puts the middle-aged john's fingers in his mouth as he's receiving oral sex, *Mysterious Skin*

Neil is seen having sex with different men at different moments throughout the arc of his story, all of which have visual, audial and tactile connections to one another and his first rapport with Coach. I will include the last encounter he has with an abusive john in this analysis' inventory as it also centres the mouth in relation to pain and erotohistoriography. The adolescent Neil moves to New York and continues doing sex work. The night before New Year's Eve, when he and Brian are on Coach's couch, he gets into a car with a man who is willing to pay for sex. The car scenes are accompanied by the soundtrack reserved for Neil's happy childhood encounters with Coach. He falls asleep during the ride. When the john and Neil arrive at the john's apartment, he directs Neil to take bumps of cocaine. The shot-reverse shot editing shows identical matches to the shots Neil and Coach have in the Polaroid scene, only the eyeline of the adolescent Neil and this john correspond. But when the john becomes more abusive and forces Neil to perform oral sex by pushing him down to his knees, the eye line shifts and both framing as well as the eyeline become the same as the Polaroid scene. The scene with Coach's finger in Neil's mouth is re-staged, with a penis forced into his mouth. This scene is a point of mutual experience for the character and the viewer; the viewer recalls the previous scene by the aid of the film's body utilising stylistic devices while the character's body recalls the previous experience corporally. The mechanics of "time binds" work for both, through erotohistoriography and tactility.



Figure 38: The abusive john directing Neil to take a bump of cocaine, *Mysterious Skin*



Figure 39: Neil forced onto his knees and forced to perform oral sex, *Mysterious Skin*

Neil escapes to the bathroom, the john forcefully enters, and hits Neil thereby making him fall into the bathtub. Neil turns on the water in an attempt to escape but fails and the john beats Neil as he rapes him. The john picks up a baby shampoo bottle and hits Neil around the mouth with it. The blood coming from Neil's mouth mixes with the running water and goes down the drain. The scene has photographic references to Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and its infamous shower scene including the drain shot. The blood coming from Neil's mouth during forceful penetration recalls the child Neil's voice-over, "When I swallowed, the taste of coach's tongue seared my mouth". The pain Neil receives in the present resonates with the past experience in which Coach created unpleasant sensations in his mouth, and also affixes to the pain Neil gives to another child by inserting firecrackers in his mouth and then trying to soothe him by taking his penis in his mouth. The sensations received through sex, the mouth, beating, pleasure, and giving and receiving pain and pleasure collide and also align. These

construct Neil as a sexual child, and later as a sideways-grown young adult who searches for the feelings he had towards his abuser in the men he has sex with for money. The use of a baby shampoo bottle as a prop to beat Neil with is one of the stylistic choices Araki makes that cues the viewer into “binding” different moments and bodily memories of the film.



Figure 40: The baby shampoo bottle, *Mysterious Skin*



Figure 41: Neil bleeding as he is being physically abused and raped, *Mysterious Skin*

Interpreting Freud’s work “On Narcissism”, Freeman’s *Time Binds* (2010) focuses on the oral cavity and describes “how the libido invests in an uncomfortable local sensation such as a toothache, by which means it doubles back upon itself to delineate body parts as such” (Freeman, 2010, p. 12). She then takes the oral cavity as a binding figure of time in her close reading of Hilary Brougher’s *Sticky Fingers of Time* (1997). Picking up on her approach, I suggest that the pain and pleasure located in the mouth

are binding and defining sensations for Neil. The oral cavity, and the pain/pleasure it can bear, links these different points in time through Neil's memory. The nosebleed performs a similar function for Brian. Through the pain and pleasure experienced and produced at different points in time, Neil delineates his body and existence. Brian's body connects and binds time to register his personal history, to resurface the stored sensations when needed.

The temporal flow has repetitions, re-visits and direct temporal connections to previous moments, as well as parallel expansions. Both the child protagonists who are becoming young adults and the body of the film are affected by the movements and operations regarding time and temporality. The linearity of time in direct correlation to progress is disrupted, even reversed on occasions. Nor do the characters progress into traditional adulthood, instead become sideways-growing young adults, exemplifying Bond Stockton's formulations. Brian becomes obsessed with UFO stories and remains arrested in a void in his memory. Neil and his friends cannot fit in in the conservative small town and so move to bigger cities. Neil grows sideways into a young adult, who has sex in exchange for money, while he seeks the feeling he had with his paedophile abuser. Coach is the most aberrant sideways-grown adult. His house "has all the cool things" according to nine-year-old Neil. He has a collection of different coloured Coco Pops (a type of cereal for kids), video games, beanbags, and soda pops. Araki's characterisation of Coach is distinct from the usual predator profile. The soft colours, scenes with elements of romance, and Neil's eroticising gaze directed at Coach, contribute to the depiction of a man who has childish interests, as well as children as an interest. Bond Stockton describes perverts as diverts who "extend themselves or linger" (Freeman, 2010, p. 25). She elaborates on her description: "perversions are characteristic of people who either extend themselves beyond the normal 'path' of 'copulation' or linger at midpoints along the way" (Freeman, 2010, p. 25) and categorises both these diversions as sideways movements or suspensions in the normative perception of development for copulation and reproductivity. In *Mysterious Skin*, the depiction of deviance from alternative lenses is not limited to the sexual child, it broadens to the deviant adult too. Araki challenges the binary oppositions I have previously addressed: between predator and nurturer, innocent and deviant, adult and child, now and then.

2.2.2. Time Binds of *We the Animals*:

This subsection will revisit *We the Animals* and establish the connections of bodily sensation, desire, familiarity, distance, abuse, and wayward growth through water. I will further my claim about the body of the film constructing a connection to the viewer's experience of temporal binds and erotohistoriography. While *Mysterious Skin* incorporates flashbacks, colour coding, soundtrack, graphic matches in framing, and prop styling to activate the viewer's association with the story and the body of the film, *We the Animals* employs animation, fantasy and dreamlike sequences, as well as a verité style documentary distance, in combination with extreme close-ups and haptic narration for the same means. The overlap of documentary aesthetic with fantasy sequences, mostly in moments of libidinal, romantic interest, enables the depiction of the emerging queer, sexually charged child in Jonah, without sacrificing the innocence attributed to the traditional conceptualisation of childhood. I interpret this achievement as a possibility independent American cinema provides for breaking the polarised binary framing. I have previously mentioned the intimate connection *We the Animals* makes with the viewer through the screening of children's naked bodies with active camera movements and extreme close-ups. The eroticising gaze of the viewer is not cast onto the child protagonist by means of a direct look from the paedophile, as it is with Neil, but distanced by the tracking camera and redirected through the titillation Jonah experiences for Dustin. The developing intimacy between the two boys takes place mostly in scenes that are immersed in a dreamlike style, underwater. Below, I analyse these sequences, with the main focus on situating the erotohistoriographic, temporal binds that depict a sexual child in queer temporality and how the film's body connects the viewer and this child through corporality.

Jonah, as the protagonist of *We the Animals*, also stands out in the inventory of traditional childhood, although not as boldly as Neil. He is much softer and more naïve. The difference between Jonah and conventional representations of masculinity, of which his brothers and father are good examples, is introduced during a day the family spends at a lake. In Jonah's words, heard in his voice-over, his brothers are "fearless". They jump from rocks, fly in the air, and swim far. Like his mother, Jonah can't swim. Jonah and Ma prefer going into the water at the shore and sitting, watching others display muscular strength and masculine courage, as they cuddle. The two with their

red swimsuits that contrast with the blue and green setting, placed in the right corner of the frame, tell the viewer that Ma and Jonah have their own bonding in a more feminine sphere. They look at the body of water and watch the bodies of the boys and Pops in frantic motion as they talk softly about why they don't swim.



Figure 42: Jonah and Ma sitting by the lake in their red swimsuits, *We the Animals*

Pops convinces Jonah and Ma to climb onto him and then carries them into the deeper end of the water to dive suddenly, then eases his grip on them to leave them to their own devices. They both sink. The first underwater scene in *We the Animals* is comparatively chaotic as the following underwater experiences pack softer sensations. This initial experience of being underwater sets a boundary between sinking and floating, which transforms into a metaphor for homoerotic desire and romance for the rest of the film. The recurrence of swimming and sinking, as visual motif and metaphor, is key to the depiction of a peculiar childhood, embodied in Jonah, in *We the Animals*. The recurring use of bodies of water and human bodies echoes the pain and pleasure dynamic in *Mysterious Skin* built around the oral cavity, blood and the nose. Close-ups of bare skin, with marks, bruises, cuts, tattoos or fly bites are used extensively, accompanied with caresses and touches, sometimes slaps and bites, contributing to the sensual transference of the film. Parallel to this sensuality expressed throughout the film, 'swimming or sinking', used as a metaphor, functions as a "bind" that connects moments of fantasy, memory, desire, and fear. The contrast between Jonah and his fearlessly swimming, manly brothers (one of the brothers is named Manny) and controlling father is set forth from this sequence on. When Jonah fails to swim and stays underwater, he also falls out from the lineage of manhood that his

brothers continue following the path of their father. Jonah, instead, goes wayward. He does not, or cannot, stay afloat on water, and so goes under the surface.



Figure 43: Jonah underwater for the first time in panic, *We the Animals*



Figure 44: Jonah sinking peacefully, seconds after the initial shock, *We the Animals*

Following this incident, Pops and Ma fight at night. Pops leaves the house and tells the brothers that their mother had to go to the dentist, in an attempt to explain the wound, cut and bruising around Ma's mouth from Pops' abuse. The figure of the oral cavity, in the context of the relationship between the mother and the child, the nurturing that starts with the breast and the mouth, recurs in many of the films discussed in this project. *The Florida Project* (2017), as Chapter 1 analyses in detail, has significant depictions of the oral cavity's role in maternal attachment. *Mysterious Skin* formulates an integral connection between the pain and pleasure stemming from the oral cavity to the existence of the sexual child and his transformation into the queer,

deviant young adult. The oral cavity and its delineating role in the Freudian perspective, which Freeman integrates into her conceptualisation of temporality, is secondary to the sensuality of skin and water in *We the Animals*. Yet, the role it plays is still significant. After Pops leaves, the brothers enter the parents' bedroom on the morning of the following day, which is Jonah's birthday. Ma tells him to never grow up to more than nine years old because otherwise he will leave her like his older brothers who are on the way to manhood. Jonah wants to comfort Ma by showing affection and so gives her a kiss on the lips. With the damage caused by the father's abuse, she feels pain from this gesture of love and pushes Jonah away. From this moment onwards, the maternal relationship and nurturing bond are suspended by Ma's depression. In a way, the adult who wishes the child would never grow up and stay frozen in time, remains arrested in an emotion herself and becomes infantilised, incapable of providing care for herself and others. The moment of intimacy with Ma on her bed is depicted with extreme close-ups. Jonah's kiss as well as the dry blood and bruises on Ma's mouth create a tactile quality, intensified by the verité texture of the cinematography. *We the Animals* uses extreme close-ups in screening corporeal marks like insect bites and cuts, and sensations such as the touch of skin and water, in such a way that the film becomes a body and the viewer's watching experience becomes sensory. This exchange has a temporal aspect: as in *Mysterious Skin*, the temporality of *We the Animals* has wrinkles, "time binds" that connect the present to the past through sensations. Meanwhile, both films make connections between the mouth and blood. The films build a communication between the mouth, feeding and kissing, and bleeding, pain, and biting. I have previously mentioned how films with children touch on the connection built between motherly love, nurturing and the mouth. Films with unordinary child protagonists bring a different perspective to this connection by introducing an element of pain and destruction.

When the brothers are left to their own means for feeding themselves, they consume all the edible products in their home within a couple of days and then go out in search of more food, ending up at Dustin and his grandfather's house. How the brothers devour, with helpless hunger, packs of soy sauce and sugar that they found in kitchen drawers after the first days of going without food, is delivered with rapid editing and close-ups, evoking the invasion of insects on a field in the first short video clip the boys watched before the porn sequences. The analogy of brothers, insects and sex

recurs throughout the film, like the visual motif of being underwater. The analogy between masculinity and invading insects is opposed to the metaphor of sinking underwater and queerness. Jonah's dream on the night the brothers watch porn clips with Dustin enacts both alignments. The dream starts with visions of Pops in different settings, each lit differently with contrasting primary colours. The first is of Pops rising out of the water at the lake, evoking eroticism with water dripping from his naked body in blue light. He resembles male underwear models as he lifts his arms up, exposing his shoulders, arms, armpits and chest. The connection between water and sensuality becomes more established in this short scene. The feeling of separation and melancholia is connected to the male body's beauty, from the perspective of a child, looking at his father. Attraction to the male figure is introduced through love for the father. *We the Animals* relies on rather covert constructs of imagery compared to *Mysterious Skin*. Neil's interest in and explicit excitement about the male pin up models from his mother's *Playgirl* magazines are openly mentioned in his voice-over. As he was positioned as the deviant, mischievous sexual child, Araki and *Mysterious Skin* had fewer reservations about Neil's erotic and sexual desire. Jonah, on the other hand, is portrayed with a lack of knowledge about sexuality that reads as naïve and innocent. Nevertheless, both Neil and Jonah's desire for the male body is depicted through the eroticization of their gaze.

The following images depict Pops, mostly half naked, at different locations in the house, all of which channel Jonah's complex feelings towards his missing father. There is a shutter click black frame and accompanying sound at the cuts between these shots which give the feeling of looking at photographs, creating a sentimental effect of longing and desiring. This stylistic choice supports the nostalgic feel of the film, maintained by the 16mm grainy film it is shot on. The last frame in the sequence replicates the style with which Jonah draws in his diary, which he hides under the bed. This drawing, identical to the last dream image of Pops, is animated. The dream sequence transforms into a fantasy sequence. Jonah is seen hiding and drawing under his bed and a fly's buzzing sound is heard. At first, Pop's profile in the drawing grows the very tiny wings of a fly then moves to roll onto his side, and catches a blue body drawn on the other side of the frame. Together they roll down and start having sex. Now the drawings are on the TV screen from Dustin's basement room which is filled with water. Jonah turns to his right where Dustin is sitting. Dustin's blonde hair dances

underwater as air bubbles come out of his nose, and the camera catches Dustin's neck in a close-up. The following shot is the moment from the lake when Jonah was sinking underwater.



Figure 45: Pops coming out of the water and Pops smoking and an animated drawing of Pops smoking, *We the Animals*



Figure 46: Jonah's drawing growing wings in animation, *We the Animals*



Figure 47: The animated drawing depicts two men having sex, *We the Animals*



Figure 48: Jonah underwater at the lake in his fantasy/memory, *We the Animals*

The sequence plainly presents a series of connections between insects, masculinity, corporality, sensuality, desire and water. The transfer of dream to animated drawing, and to fantasy, epitomises temporal binds or wrinkled and overlapping moments in time; a melancholic dream of the missing father (the lost object that is incorporated into the body) intertwines with drawings. These drawings are animated to give the feeling of viability, which is a possibility and a signifier of the present (the illusion of cinema taking place in the ‘now’), to transform into a fantasy about a desire actualising in the future, that has an immediate connection to a memory. Different time modules are intertwined; the feeling of nostalgia, which is related to the past, is animated and connected to the present. Animated still imagery creates a feeling of revival or revitalisation of the past. The transformation from the still frame to animation gives it a capacity that extends natural limits, opening up the borders of the human body to imagination and fantasy. The still image from the past and the nostalgia it carries are hence connected to a futurity. Underwater becomes a fantasy space for Jonah, as with under his bed, where he keeps his diary and drawings. Both spaces hold the looming desire of the emerging queer child and function like a closet. Simultaneously, for the viewer, the body of the film connects directly to sensibility and the associations derived from it, in comparison to causality leading the storyline. Linear narration gives way to creative depictions that transfer feelings more efficiently than reasoning. Progressive temporality is set aside for a temporality travelling back and forth as well as taking alternative routes via sideways paths, such as through animated drawings, fantasy and dream sequences that are hard to differentiate.

The role water plays in *We the Animals*, and its relation to wayward desire and sideways growth is not limited to the fantasy sequences. The film builds a relationship between the awakening of sexuality, masculinity and flies. The documentary or news clip before the porn commercials in the VHS tape, and the sounds from the flycatcher which the brothers mimic, while making fun of sounds produced during intercourse, are examples of this connection. A different sexual awakening is represented through water and Jonah's relationship to it. His inability to swim or float, forcing him to sink and be underwater is connected to his longing for his father and his fantasies about Dustin. I have previously analysed the scenes in the bathtub, in which Jonah constructs his creation mythology and his brothers' via voice-over narration. Delivery of this in a bathtub is remarkable. This choice contributes to the tactility the film constructs, by having the characters naked. Here their nude presence is intimate, vulnerable and, at the same time, affiliated to another instance of excess exposure of skin; the porn commercials. The bathroom and the bathtub as intimate places, where only members of the family can be together, is accentuated, supporting the affective tone. Stylistic choices regarding form, such as the home video texture of the film, and inserts of home videos, capturing the infant years of the brothers, reinforce the intimate tone. The first bathtub sequence highlights one of the several roles water plays in *We the Animals*. Initially it is a tool for constructing intimacy and giving access to a private state. Secondly, at the lake, water – as a body – assumes the role of separating element between the lineage of manhood and wayward, queer childhood in contact with femininity. Swimming, floating, and sinking in a body of water emerge as metaphors for libidinal interest and normative vs wayward desire. Thirdly, water becomes a wrapping for Jonah's desire, filling the space between him and the object of his desire, connecting and binding them. Jonah's fantasies and daydreams about Dustin include the two boys sitting close in water. The space between the two is not filled with air but water, an element easier to sense, more concrete to the touch, and more effective in transmission. The water, in wrapping Jonah's desire, creates a safe space for his waywardness by containing his desires – like a closet. It also helps relay the feelings he has to the viewer. Hence, water becomes a separating and connecting “bind” simultaneously. For the viewer, water becomes an erotohistoriographic element that binds the sense of touch and desire. This bind, as I have discussed before, has temporal connotations too, as Jonah's dreams, memories, and fantasies are also connected through water.

Another bathroom scene is significant in terms of its relationship to male bodies, the paternal role, and masculinity. The brothers hide in the bathtub behind the curtain as Ma and Pops are in the bathroom too. Pops, instead of joining their game, starts making out with Ma. Both are mostly naked except for Pops' white briefs and the white towel around Ma's waist. The brothers get angry. Ma realises and sends Pops away to look for something. She joins them in the bathtub, and in their game of hiding. They jump-scare Pops, and the game switches into a chase around the house that turns into a tickling contest in the living room. As Ma is laying on the floor with Pops on top of her, the boys start slapping and hitting Pops' back. The last one to hit, Jonah, shouts, "You were supposed to find us". The slaps become harder and more rapid. The brothers release anger by blows. The cinematography shifts to close-ups, then to extreme close-ups, of the Pops' back, scarred with red marks. The tactility is strengthened with the sound of slaps, the close-ups of skin, followed by extreme close-ups of faces. The close-up of hands, skin getting red, and the sound of slaps recall the shot in which Dustin's grandfather slaps his own neck to kill a fly. Suddenly, the camera angle changes and, instead of watching the characters in action, the POV places the viewer at the centre of the slaps and hits, positioned as the receiver of the released anger. The juxtaposition of water and flies is reoccurring, in this instance as a transformation from the element of water, liquidity, connection to masculinity, anger, physical impact, hitting and killing flies with the hand.



Figure 49: Brothers hiding in the bathtub, *We the Animals*



Figure 50: Tickling game with Pops laying on Ma, before it turns sour, *We the Animals*



Figure 51: Close-up of slap on Pops' back, *We the Animals*



Figure 52: The viewer positioned as the receiver of the slaps after the change in camera angle, *We the Animals*

The final sequence I will incorporate into this analysis of *We the Animals* embodies different metaphors, due to the enmeshing of fantasy with reality in the sequence. Pops loses his job, has a breakdown, and digs a large hole in the yard. The boys watch him and comment on what that hole may be. One of them suggests it is a pool, another says it is a grave to put them in. Ma comes home after her shift in the factory, she asks the

boys what the hole is, and Jonah says it is a grave for them. She goes out, stands by the grave, and jumps into it even as it starts to rain. The brothers, who are watching her from the window, come to the conclusion that she made it rain. Jonah adds that the hole is magical. Their fairytale-like interpretation of the situation affixes water with femininity. Ma comes inside soaked, and covered in mud, she lays on the couch, and the children cover her and try to dry her with toilet paper. Later, Jonah goes to the hole, which has rainwater and mud in the base. Close-up shots show roots coming out of the wet ground, muddy soil, and small creatures like worms fidgeting after the rain. These shots construct a dialogue with the insect bites, grasshopper invasion and close-ups of marked, bruised, bleeding, cut, red skin in the inventory of the film. The erotohistoriography in this sequence adds a new connecting mode to the existing binds between skin, water and insects; soil in a mixture with water and mud are also included in the sensual, corporeal binds of *We the Animals*. Jonah takes off his clothing, goes into the hole, and lays on the surface of the ground. His voice-over is heard: “My father dug a grave. It was a grave for me”. Then he slowly starts to be elevated. As he is lifted from the ground up, the soundtrack gives ceremonial tones. His wet, mud-covered body ascends higher, and the narration picks up fantastic tones, channelling a supernatural, miraculous movement, performed by the child’s body and the film’s body, simultaneously. Jonah’s ascension takes him over the countryside, and his POV shows the top of the high trees as he flies over them. The flight is interrupted by the other brothers’ voices asking him, “What the hell are you doing?”. The sequence cuts to Jonah laying in the hole covered in mud.



Figure 53: Jonah laying in the hole in the yard, *We the Animals*

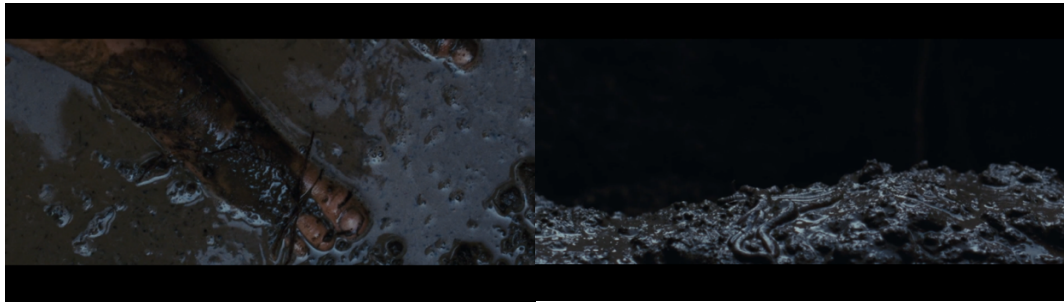


Figure 54: Close-up on Jonah's feet and small creatures fidgeting in the mud, *We the Animals*



Figure 55: Jonah ascending, *We the Animals*

So far, I have aimed to construct a dialogue between flies and water, as analogies for normative and non-normative desires, respectively. Zagar's delivery does not code either as positive or negative, yet fluidity is depicted in connection to femininity as well as male beauty, only when stripped of machismo and the desire to control integrated into it. The brothers and Pops, as the signifiers of masculinity, exhibit power and control over water; they fearlessly jump into water and "swim like fishes" as Ma says. Jonah and Ma are marked with a lack of that control and fearlessness, and this lack is the igniting issue in the troubles Ma and Pops have, on the surface. Jonah's relationship with water and the dual metaphor of swimming or sinking, in relation to control over fluidity, introduces a third perspective. Jonah cannot swim, yet he becomes content with sinking and grows an appreciation for being underwater. This formulation of Jonah, as the child who does not align with dichotomous polarisations, and finds comfort in being wayward, locates him as a significant example of the emerging queer child. The last fantasy sequence I covered stresses the connection Ma, as the female figure in the film, has with water, when the children suggest she made the rain start. Jonah's incapability of fitting in with the norms of maleness does not automatically classify him at the polarised end of the dichotomy but places him in a peculiar state. He becomes the child who can sink as well as fly: he does not die when he cannot swim, and when he lays in a 'grave', he ascends to fly above the horizon.

Jonah, as a different case of an emerging queer child in post-millennial American independent cinema, when compared to other examples like Neil or Olive, embodies a wayward growth, different from the blatantly innocent child and the deviant and sexualised queer child. His wayward growth embodies naivete and deviance, challenging binary oppositions by embodying contradicting conceptualisations attributed to childhood.

Whereas *Mysterious Skin* relies on graphically matching frames, *We the Animals* incorporates sensuality, constructed by extreme close-ups of skin and touch. The overlapping, recurring moments and themes are metaphorical. The viewer is given the incentive to construct “binds” between different signifiers in the metaphoric narrative, the open-endedness of which is sustained by dream and fantasy sequences as well as animated parts. I have outlined the binding temporal and metaphorical connections of water and insects, which are the most prominent two components of *We the Animals*; moreover, I aimed to analyse them using Freeman’s framework of erotohistoriography. I have considered the body of both films, as texts, to be corporeal entities in themselves. I proposed that these textual bodies have relationships to temporality and sensuality with the viewer. *Mysterious Skin*’s body makes forward and backward movements in time through flashbacks. It binds certain moments in the storyline and the surface of the film’s body by mainly cinematographic devices, along with the soundtrack and the prop styling. *We the Animals*’ body has more diverse movements in its construction of time binds. The fantasy, animation and dream sequences are bound with recurring metaphors of flies and water, and their temporal connections are not only backwards and forwards on a linear timeline, but sideways and circular, as well as integrated overlapping, and repeating.

2.3. Conclusion

This chapter aimed to bring the spotlight to a newly emerging representation of childhood, namely the sexual child. The analysis focused on *Mysterious Skin* (Gregg Araki, 2004) and *We the Animals* (Jeremiah Zagar, 2018) with discussion centred around various aspects relating to a queer child’s representation in film. One of the main aims of the chapter was to critically consider the agency of the sexual child, in comparison to the more traditionally conceptualised innocent, muted and sacralised child that is defined as a lack of adult values. Hence, the chapter also aimed to tackle

the adult-child binary from the angle of the sexualisation and erotization of the child. While handling these questions, it also paid attention to the temporal structures of the films. This project, as a whole, takes the premise which suggests that the adult-child binary is temporal in its essence. Understanding how American independent cinema registers emerging queer childhoods, in relation to the exceptional adulthoods it represents, and organises temporality in form is an aim of the project in general.

Here, I have chosen two films with male protagonists around the same age, one with an already active attraction to adult men and the other with a developing desire for a boy older than him. I juxtaposed these sexual children with the innocent children from the first chapter. The first chapter discussed the role of knowledge and the amount and content of information the protagonists, and along with them the viewer, is allowed access to. It investigated the role knowledge plays in relation to innocence, and how queerness is on display in innocent children. The protagonists of this second chapter are not kept safe from so-called adult information by their parents and other grown-ups. Yet, what mainly separates them from the innocent children is not the amount or type of information they have access to, but the desire they acknowledge and act upon. The child protagonists of the sexual children chapter do not fit in with the “child as lack” description, not because they possess knowledge but because they possess desire.

While looking at the adult-child positioning with respect to this sexual child, I paid attention to what type of methods the directors rely on in depicting an uncommon child who has queer desires and how the adults around this child are portrayed. American independent cinema’s capacity to exceed traditional methods of narration and implement unconventional, playful approaches, proved very productive in depicting sexual children. I have investigated methods of establishing agency in a fictional character. I paid attention to the gaze, drawing on the relevant theory. I investigated if the adult gaze versus the child’s gaze can be positionings to those of man and women in gaze theory. Although the sexual child, who has agency through desire, shares similarities with representations of women, the two are not identical. The child as lack and the woman as lack are not interchangeable and the gaze, as a loaded term, which is also institutionalised, does not permit the child to be its bearer. A children’s cinema,

in the same vein as women's cinema, i.e. made by women, is not a possibility¹⁴. Some scholars employ the term child's gaze, yet when all the dynamics of the Mulveyan gaze are considered, a child's gaze does not seem to be a possibility. Another strong element with which to assign agency to the unconventional sexual child is the voice-over. Voice-over is common in films with child protagonists because it gives more insight into the child's world. In the two examples examined here, it allows the characters to narrate their own mythologies and histories, and hence allows them agency and control. Building on my discussion of the gaze and the objectification of the sexualized child's body, I discussed how the body that bears the voice is involved. I concluded that the voice-overs of the child protagonists are different from the documentary type voice-over that lacks a body. The viewer, who is introduced to the body of the voice, instinctively tries to bring them together and imagines the eroticized body of the sexual child while listening to the voice.

While maintaining my attention to the relationships between the child characters and the adults in the narratives and examining the narrational tools that challenge these binary positionings, I paid attention to the temporal aspects of the case studies. I asked how the queer adult remembers their childhood, how the films' body keeps track of this connection and how it is reflected to the viewer. Both films have deviant temporal flows. *Mysterious Skin* holds a back-and-forth structure with flash back scenes. *We the Animals* takes detours through dreams and fantasies. The connecting tissue between different moments are corporeal sensations which both the sexual child protagonists and the bodies of the films carry. While the child protagonists have experiences that build connections between pleasure and pain, the bodies of the films have scenes that connect these experiences.

Overall, the chapter's analysis of films depicting child protagonists with sexuality, desire and relatively more agency indicated that the adult-child binary blurs as a consequence. The innocent children chapter gave examples of a polarized positioning of the child and adult, while indicating instances where these relational identities can

¹⁴ Children's cinema here does not refer to films made considering children (and their parents who have no choice but to watch those films in most instances) as a target audience, but cinema made by children. Children's cinema, by this intended frame, cannot be an industry component, and be similar to queer cinema or women's cinema.

be swapped through capsules of time. This chapter points to the leaking of each identity into the other.

CHAPTER 3: CRIMINAL ADOLESCENTS

Throughout this chapter, I suggest and aim to provide evidence that, with the emergence of adolescence, the adult-child binary is complicated in a way that questions both social constructs and their binary opposition. This adjustment led to an identity crisis for both identities, resulting in deviant children and child-like adults. These atypical children and adults are frequently portrayed in post-millennial American independent cinema. Filmmakers creating such atypical works are children of an era that Philippe Aries identifies as the “century of adolescence” (Ariès, 1962). The manner in which contemporary American society and western cultures accommodate death is also starkly reflected in cultural works, including independent cinema of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Sherry Ortner argues that darker topics with ambiguous, unhappy endings, and non-linear narratives with unconventional uses of temporality became signatures of late 1990s and early 2000s filmmaking in American independent cinema, and she stresses this quality as a defining element of American indie films.

Informed by Ortner’s claims, this chapter explores notions that are shaped around the relationship between adolescence and violence, in a period in which the perception of childhood changed along with the perception of death. Accordingly, the cases examined in this chapter are films that portray criminal adolescents, conducting school shootings, namely *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003) and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (Lynne Ramsay, 2011). The chapter will briefly go into the genealogy of adolescence from its historical emergence in anglophone cultures, aiming to place it as a third pole within the adult-child relational binary, and demonstrate the effects of adolescence on these categorisations and their perceptions. It will explore the relationship between criminality and queerness in children/adolescents, utilising post-millennial queer scholars’ perspectives on wayward growth, deviance, and futurity. To present an overview on criminality and queerness, some general information can be useful. A shared logic that connects sexual deviance to violence and crime is supported by more than one third of countries worldwide (71 to be exact in 2022) that prohibit consensual homosexual sex and also have penalties for gender nonconformity. The USA moved away from criminalizing sexuality in 2003, yet some states hold “no promo homo” laws that prohibit “sex educators [from] promoting a homosexual lifestyle” (Buist and

Lenning, 2016, p. 38). The bold separation of children and sexuality, specifically non-normative sexuality is still prevalent. It is worth underlining the intertwined relationships between criminality, homosexuality, and adolescence and the consequent intensive protective measures to draw homosexuality and criminality from institutions of upbringing for children and adolescents.

What makes criminality queer as well as how criminal children are excluded from the category of child will be discussed by using the framework Lisa Downing (2013) establishes through a triangulation of gender, age and agency. Children that step outside the traditional perceptions of incapacity and innocence associated with childhood, and that grow sideways or wayward, will also be discussed through the theoretical lenses of Kathryn Bond Stockton (2007) and Sara Ahmed (2014). The coupling of children with the future, the conceptualisation of futurity through reproduction and the position of killer adolescents in this context will be discussed in the framework Lee Edelman (2004) proposes with regard to his conceptualisation of “reproductive futurism”. Revisiting connections between death and the moving image in contemporary film criticism, the discussion will offer a critical account of the ways in which indie films with criminal adolescent protagonists implement particular modes of cinematic temporality in depicting death. Cinema’s relationship with death will be explored with particular reference to the work of Laura Mulvey (2006) and Mary Ann Doane (2002). The last section of the chapter will address the extent to which the representations of adolescence are shaped by the contextual specificities of postmillennial American independent cinema.

4.1. Not a Child, not an Adult: The Adolescent as the Emerging Third Pole of the Child-Adult Binary

Historian Philip Aries challenges the traditional perceptions of childhood and death in western societies through his works based on the research of medieval and modern archives. He suggests that the emergence of childhood, in relation to innocence, took place in the eighteenth century, parallel to the awakening of the economy of feelings

centring around the nuclear family¹⁵. The adult-child binary was structurally developed around the same time, later challenged with the categorical emergence of the adolescent in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. According to Aries, this shift occurred parallel to the “relaxation in family control”¹⁶. His later research on death and how it was treated from the Middle Ages to modernity indicates a change in the perception of death in western society, mostly under American influence, around the time childhood was conceptualised in relation to innocence. Death, which was an imminent, accepted part of life in the seventeenth century, became baleful in the twentieth century. Children, who were once a part of the scene around the death bed, were protected from death at all costs around twentieth century. Drawing from his studies on childhood and death, Aries suggests that the emergence of adolescence coincided with a shift in attitude towards death. He ties the expansion of youth and adolescence to the First World War, where younger troops were positioned at the front and older ones at the rear. He considers WWI to be the turning point when society, which was beforehand ignorant of adolescence, remodelled itself into a society that favours it. Noting the spotlight turned onto adolescence by a tragic event (i.e. a war), in which most of the youth involved were killed or killed others, Aries highlights the intimate connections between adolescence and death.

In *Centuries of Childhood*, Aries suggests that before the Middle Ages, children were regarded as small adults, who worked, played and mingled with mature adults. In the course of the seventeenth century, according to Aries, a change takes place. Before, the end of childhood was not linked to puberty but to dependence. Exiting childhood was an act of becoming independent from the father. Children spent time either begging or helping grown-ups in their professions, in exchange for food or money. Schooling meant joining the church body, at any age from eight to twenty. Education became systematic and adapted in order to separate ages only after the sixteenth century. The transition from the mixed-aged schools of the Middle Ages to secondary

¹⁵ Buist and Lenning argue that “until the end of the Middle Ages, the child was, almost as soon as he was weaned, regarded as a small adult, who mingled, competed, worked and played with mature adults. Only gradually the parents begin the separation of adults and children and a new family attitude, oriented around the child and his education appeared” (2016, p. 25).

¹⁶ Buist and Lenning also suggest that “if economic or social circumstances bring about a relaxation of family control, childhood and youth may escape from the isolation in which they are enclosed by a tradition going back at least to the eighteenth century; that is probably what is happening today, with childhood losing some of its special characteristics in favour of a new age group: adolescence” (2016, p. 285).

schools and colleges from the fifteenth century onwards, also announced a shift in “the world of feelings: it expressed a new attitude to childhood and youth” (Aries, 1996, p. 157). The new attitude towards childhood, which was loaded with immaterial qualities and sentiments, positioned the child as alien to the adult, as Bond Stockton describes (2009). It also sacralised childhood in a way that deprived childhood of all the characteristics of adulthood, including the capacity to generate income and the possession of knowledge and agency, transforming childhood into a state that required protection and signified naivete and innocence. Hence, the new attitude towards childhood that developed after the sixteenth century turned childhood into a *tabula rasa*, as mentioned before. This conceptualisation of the child and childhood has been sustained by institutions such as the government, the family, education systems and schools. Therefore, the planned mass killings conducted by adolescents in schools are worthy of close examination considering collisions between protective institutions, adolescence, criminality, queerness, innocence and death.

I suggest that, in the post-millennial era, both childhood and adulthood, within their relational economy, became unstable. This change can be traced to the exposure of traits that fundamentally contrast with these polar identities’ core formation, such as the emergence of sexual children and developmentally arrested adults, and other juxtapositions I aim to showcase. Moreover, as the direct focus of this chapter, I claim that the introduction of adolescence forces both identities to go through a transformation while challenging the binary opposition between them.¹⁷ This shift in temporally relational identities is reflected in the works of culture that portray children, and adults in relation to children. This chapter, in line with Aries’ claims, explores the formative role of death within the experience (and performance) of adolescence in schools and the family home. The chapter will also point out how the construct of

¹⁷ Lengthy debates on whether younger non-binary individuals, between the ages of 13 and 18, should be permitted to start on hormone blockers centre around whether to consider them as “children to be protected who are not eligible to make decisions on sexuality with elongating impacts” or to consider “children as rational, conscious individuals capable of making decisions about their sexuality”. This debate about child sexuality is only possible once the child’s “asexual heterosexual” coding is altered. Sexualising the child is only possible with the introduction of adolescence into the conceptual sphere of the child. In addition, manhood, the direct normative and gendered interpretation of adulthood, has been distinguished historically as the opposite of childhood. It has been replaced by masculinity, which requires constant performance for maintenance. The transition to manhood through rituals is erased by adolescence and replaced by liminal phases that carry boys into a state of entering and falling out of masculinity.

traditional childhood is changing to make room for wayward growing children. Moreover, the chapter will also aim to describe how the emerging non-normative childhood and adolescence are queered by this change in the blueprint of childhood.

4.2. Criminally Queer: Wayward Adolescents and Wilful Violence

4.2.1. Growing up out of line

This section will investigate the connections and intersections between criminality and queerness. It will analyse scenes from Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* and Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. The main focus of the section will be the ways post-millennial American independent cinema stages queerness and criminality in relation to adolescence. The scene analysis will consider stylistic choices, such as cinematography, as well as character construction. Queer theory scholars, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's and Kathryn Bond Stockton's ideas on childhood and homosexuality will be employed to pave the ground for the chapter's queer framework. Alison Young's and Lisa Downing's research and analyses on criminality and its relation to age and gender will also be applied, to indicate the connections and intersections between adolescence and criminal deviance. Bond Stockton's inquiry into motive and temporality in the context of crime, and her concept of "sideways growth" will be paired with Sara Ahmed's conceptualisation of "wilfulness". Furthermore, the section will elucidate the connections between the future and childhood/adolescence in relation to queerness and criminality, while critically integrating Lee Edelman's account of "reproductive futurism". Overall, this chapter will provide an analysis of the two selected films with regard to queerness, which criminality and adolescence induce.

Throughout this project, agency is a fundamental element of the discussion on childhood and subjectivity. The traditional perception of the child, in its muted innocence, does not contain agency. I underlined the relationship between agency and the child in the previous chapters. The selection of films, chosen as examples of post-millennial American independent cinema, also showcases an increase in agency as the children depicted become more deviant and destructive; sexual children have more

agency compared to innocent children (which Chapter 2 investigated by exploring uses of the gaze and voice-over in the selected films) and the criminal adolescents, as I will show, are allowed even more agency, which is supported by the narrative and narration of the films.

The children that are presented in this project develop agency through their deviance, sexual awakening and desires, and finally, through criminality. Where do the criminal children take agency from? How can they have agency while the child, in its traditional perception, is deprived of agency? Do violence and death grant agency? How can children and adolescents obtain the capacity to engage in violence, and cause death? The fabula of both *Elephant* and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* beg the question ‘why?’ and arrive at no defining answers. Violence carried out by adolescents in spaces considered to be safe, such as in schools or in the family home, occurs for no identifiable reason in these two cases. It is therefore uncontrollable. Kevin, when talking to his mother after damaging her computer with a virus, summarises the existential angst and anger that adolescence contains. When she asks him, “What’s the point?” he answers, “There’s no point. That’s the point.” The search for a motive in adolescent criminality fails to result in definitive answers in these examples of American independent cinema. The reasons behind this seem to be complicated and multi-layered. Children and juveniles who kill bring up fundamental questions, such as ‘what a child is’ and ‘what a child is capable of’. Murder, especially planned mass-murder, is regarded as an adult act, given the amount of calculation and rationality it requires. Children and adolescents who kill transcend their age category and are labelled as monsters, “abjected outsiders” (Downing, 2013, p. 175) or “anomalies” (Jenks, 2005c, p. 126). Considering the lack of a clear motive, killers Kevin, Eric and Alex become archetypes and represent aberrations. While the reasons behind their acts of violence are missing, the abundance of agency and their capacity to execute that agency, troubles conventional definitions of childhood/adolescence, as well as rational explanations for violence. The irrationality of the deviance they perform challenges norms along with causal relations. Such disturbance in causality challenges normative, progress-based, linear perception of temporality as well. The lack of reason and cause compels the viewer and those who experience the violence (such as Kevin’s mother Eva) to go back to memories, repetitively in an attempt to detect a possible explanation. Therefore, the temporality cannot progress forward but instead revisits

the past in flashbacks and circles. Both films avoid linear progression of time in their depiction of waywardness and queerness in criminal adolescents. This section of the chapter initially aims to define the connections between adolescence, deviance, juvenile crime, agency and queerness in depictions of child/adolescent characters in the selected films, by applying queer theory from the aforementioned scholars. The impact of these factors on temporal relations will be investigated in depth in the final section.

To answer the questions listed above, I will initially draw on Alison Young's and Lisa Downing's research on criminality, in order to investigate the connection between agency, criminality and queerness. Criminality is coded by society as a behaviour that falls outside the regular and the safe. In her book *Imagining Crime, Textual Outlaws and Criminal Conversations* (1996), Alison Young highlights the connection between deviance and criminality through a roster of examples, one of which is the relation between heterosexuality and homosexuality: while heterosexuality operates as the norm, homosexuality is deviance associated with criminality. In her *The Subject of Murder* (2013), Lisa Downing examines the subject who is a killer, at the intersection of gender, age, and agency. She asserts that the murderer and the homosexual were established in relation to "genius and degeneracy" (2013, p. 18). Downing states that the murderer along with the homosexual were described and categorised in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "in terms that draw on ideas both of genius and degeneracy, and the damaging presupposition that homosexuals had criminal tendencies stemmed from this epistemological and ideological conflation" (2013, p.18). Both criminal and homosexual became markers of identity, that are prevalent in every-day language around the same time, carrying meanings of non-normativity and ingenuity. This time frame coincides with the period deployed by Aries when he discusses the emergence of adolescence. I suggest that it is possible to track a general need to define the wayward, non-normative states of being and living around the emergence of these categories. Criminality, homosexuality and adolescence are categorisations that were requirements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and which arose to define different types of deviance. With the twenty-first century these exceptional characterisations started emerging in cultural depictions, such as the films in this project. The materialisation of criminally queer adolescents in

film brings the polarisations constructed between the child and adult into question, yet it does not impose immediate influence on the traditional norms.

Both *Elephant* and *Kevin* are examples of cultural works which showcase exceptional characterisations in their depiction of killer adolescents. *Elephant* is loosely based on the events that took place at Columbine High School in 1999. Two students entered the school heavily armed and killed twelve students and a teacher before committing suicide. Gus Van Sant's film takes place in a high school and the home of one of the killers, Alex. Different characters are followed through the hallways, the cafeteria, the toilets, the library, the classrooms, and as they enter the school building from the yard or go out. Characters are not given much depth and remain as "archetypes" as Anna Backman Rogers defines them: they are "neither characters with whom we can identify nor agents who help to drive the narrative forward. They are bodies, quite literally, in transition – who wander aimlessly and, seemingly, endlessly" (Backman Rogers, 2015, p. 47). The monotonous trailing is supported with extensive use of tracking shots; the back of the heads of the characters, or bodies, as Backman Rogers names them, are placed centre frame and the camera follows them during the time they spend walking through the hallways, the yard, the rooms etc. The direction or arrival point is not clear to the viewer as the story unfolds without relying on cause and causality, in a manner similar to the episodic structure of *The Florida Project* (see Chapter 1) and *We the Animals* (see Chapter 2). The monotonous flow (of both the narration and time) is disturbed by repetitions of instances when two students, one of whom has previously been followed, run into each other. The viewer is suddenly reminded that the 'now' of the story is also the 'then' of the story, the interaction on screen has happened before, the viewer experienced it from another perspective. In *Elephant*'s confusing narrative and narration, only three students are given more depth, and only the killers Eric and Alex have control over the events. Crucially, subjectivity and agency are reserved for criminals in *Elephant*. A clear perception and understanding of the events and their reasons (or motives) as well as recognition of time are not permitted to the viewer and the characters, other than the killer adolescents.



Figure 56. One of the intersecting moments in which the temporality of the film draws a full circle; all three students in the frame have been followed in their story line separately to arrive at this “present moment” in the hallway, which repeats with each story, in *Elephant*

We Need to Talk about Kevin portrays the relationship between a killer and his mother and explores the mother’s life before and after the school killing her son committed. Eva Khatchaturian, as the mother of a killer, is defined by the actions of her son. Although she is the protagonist, and Kevin occupies less screen time with less insight given into his thoughts and feelings, Eva is captured in a post-traumatic state of incapability and inaction. Her life before the school shooting is revisited multiple times via flashbacks, as Eva attempts to analyse and interpret her relationship with her son, displaying her helplessness in handling a wayward child. This dynamic between the mother and the child positions Kevin as the one in control of the narrative. Eva constantly attempts to locate herself, as the adult in the relationship, according to the actions of Kevin, i.e. she tries to build a maternal connection through play and Kevin strongly rejects her attempts. Nurturing, feeding, and dressing as the society deems appropriate for role of motherhood are not permitted to her because Kevin denies her help and mocks her compassion from infancy onwards. Kevin constantly challenges the normative parental and familial roles Eva tries to take upon herself, even though she herself is reluctant to be squeezed into them. Kevin, as a criminal and before that, even as an infant, possesses subjectivity and agency in his rejection and disruption. Kevin is the one in control, may it be passive aggressively, by threat or manipulation.

Elephant and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* stage queerness in relation to deviance and violence, rather than sexuality. Kevin's sexuality and relationship status are touched on briefly in a conversation with his mother, during which he openly dismisses the possibility of connection by such means and aggressively belittles romantic partnerships and Eva's motherly interest in his happiness. His deviance is presented as a sort of existential waywardness and protest without cause and direction, which is related to the nonconformity he performs against all the clichés of normative, modern, suburban life. He barely tolerates family relationships other than having limited interaction with his father and occasionally torturing his sister, both of whom he kills. He refuses a positive bonding with his mother at all costs. His relationship to her is characterised by him constantly challenging her affection and personality, yet it is more sincere compared to the relationships he has with other family members. His characterisation is ambivalent in terms of gender performance and includes a significant obsession with wardrobe styling and how a certain part of his hair falls on his face, both of which lead the viewer to question his heterosexuality alongside evoking stereotypical traits of sociopathy in classical cinema. The manner he carries himself with sways between feminine and masculine, uncannily refusing clear identification.

Elephant's approach towards queerness and its relation to violence is more layered. Stylistic choices in the cinematography of the movie create a forward motion for the viewer, even though the movement is circular on a school ground, a combination which feels impossible to map. The spatial confusion, created by tracking shots and interrupting repetitions in *Elephant*, clears in a brief instance when the killers Alex and Eric are looking down at a map of the school they drew for their plans. The scene implements the same point of view as the opening scene, when John's drunk father is driving him to school, and John takes the keys and the wheel after sensing the danger. The placement of this stylistic choice and its reservation for only two instances is significant. Its first use is in one of the few scenes with adult characters in *Elephant*. The two sequences which stand out for having identical shot construction, signal an exchange of agency and control. Adult, as the parental figure, loses control; in contrast, the adolescent gains agency through the act of killing without reason.



Figure 57. John's drunk father driving in zigzags, out of a straight line, seen in a top angle, *Elephant*



Figure 58. John taking the wheel, *Elephant*

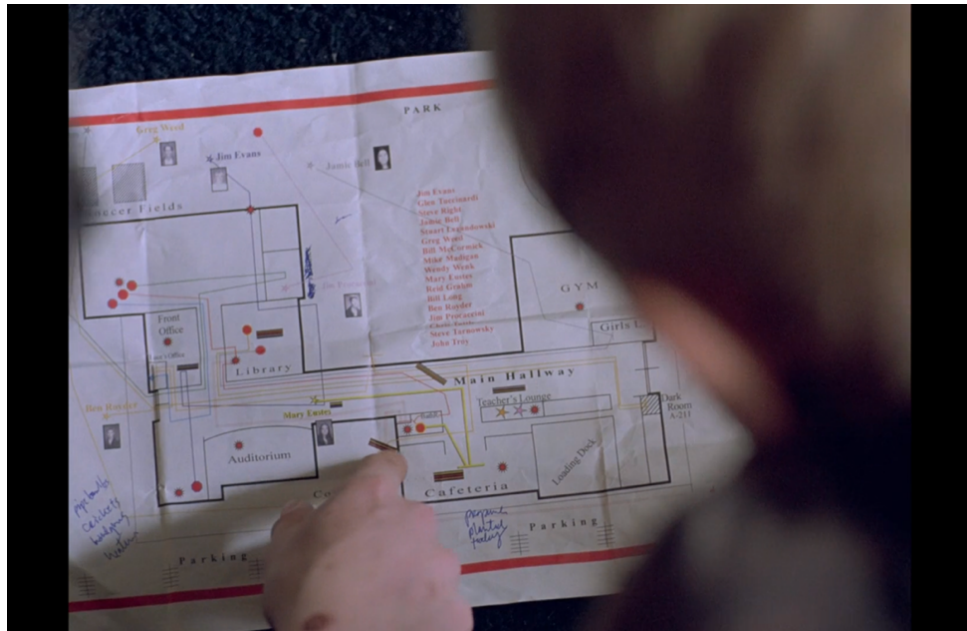


Figure 59. Eric and Alex looking down at the map while planning the shooting, *Elephant*

Besides these brief sequences, there are two distinct and lengthy instances when a circular camera movement is preferred to a tracking shot. The first one is set in a classroom where a Gay-Straight Alliance meeting is taking place. The camera focuses on the centrally framed faces of the students, taking turns in a discussion on whether it is possible to tell if a person is gay or not by only looking at them. Without pausing on faces and constantly – yet slowly – moving from one person to another, the camera circles the room. Sometimes a speaker's voice is initially off-screen, until the camera reaches the body and face attached to it later on, while empty spaces between bodies are also scanned at the same pace and in the same manner. The faces of students, some of whom will be shot and killed later, remain in centre frame for a brief instance, like a portrait photo or a headshot. This stylistic choice evokes 'indexicality', which both Mulvey and Doane relate to photography and film, in connection with death as an event that defines and gives meaning to other events. The small amount of time for which students appear on the screen makes it impossible to remember them afterwards, but the framing reminds us of the commemoration photos used in vigils, wakes and funerals as well as yearbooks. The discussion topic, which is on "if it is possible to tell whether a person is gay or not by their appearance", is significant too. The impossibility of identifying queerness by external observation and appearance is agreed upon.

The second instance of the circular camera movement is when the killers Alex and Eric are alone in Alex's room. The scene is accompanied by Beethoven's *Für Elise*, as a diegetic component, coming from the piano Alex is playing. The camera scans drawings on the walls, giving insight into the killer's persona as an artistic young person. Eric is on the bed, playing a first-person shooter game on his laptop, matching with the film's cinematographic choices including the expressive uses of framing and tracking shots. The scene ends with Alex coming to sit close to Eric, who is now on the couch. The duration of the sequence and changing placement of Eric in the *mise en scène* function like an ellipsis. But it is not constructed as an omission of repetitive events, which is one of the core functions of an ellipsis in indicating that a certain amount of time has passed. Instead, the sequence is structured as the first instance in which the spectator is given some insight into the killer adolescents, revealing more details about them in an intimate manner. Here, there is a playful confusion staged by the use of time. The linear vs circular course as well as the duration and function of temporality results in confusion yet paradoxically carries an explanatory role in narration. This scene is later followed by a scene in which one of the adolescent killers takes a shower to be joined by the other. We hear them talk about this being the last day of their lives followed by the question, "I've never kissed anybody, have you?" The kiss is then seen partially from the glass door of the shower cubicle.



Figure 60. Eric and Alex together in Alex's room, hanging out, *Elephant*

In both instances of the circular camera movement, queerness is in focus.¹⁸ When Alex and Eric kiss in the shower as they are getting ready for the school shooting, their intimacy introduces homosexual sex into the concept of childhood/adolescence and breaches the contract of innocence, which is already disrupted by violence. The video game, their nerdy preparations to execute their plans, watching WWII documentaries with a childish ignorance and admiration, and buying and trying heavy guns, almost as if they were toys, present the characters as somewhere between mindless and uninformed killers and simple children with a lot of anger. Even the kiss is somewhat ‘childish’, but when everything comes together Eric and Alex are transformed into something other than children or ‘normal’ adolescents. The circular camera movement which leads to the shower scene stands out in the cinematic inventory of a film that is dominated by tracking shots. The forward movement, the linear progress of time and childhood’s completed journey into adulthood are interrupted by adolescence, to arrive at mass murder and suicide in *Elephant*, thus stopping completely. Eric and Alex cease to be children and stop growing up. Much in the same way as John’s drunk father behind the wheel couldn’t follow a straight path, the criminally deviant and wayward adolescents also fall out of the straight line.



Figure 61. Eric and Alex in the shower, *Elephant*

¹⁸ Murat Aydemir stresses the circular use of camera in relation to queer orientations and disorienting narration in *Elephant* (Aydemir, 2016, pp. 32-47).



Figure 62. Eric and Alex kiss, *Elephant*

In analysing this kiss and connecting it to the strange temporality of *Elephant*, I will benefit from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*" (1993). She takes on J. L. Austin's conceptualisation of performativity through language ("a statement that does rather than describes" (Love, 2021), such as "I do", "I promise", "I apologise" etc.) and proposes replacing it with "Shame on you" instead. She indicates the difference between the missing subject in her proposition, and the unwillingly present carrier of the shame. Moreover, she proposes that this phrase would be a suitable initiation point for staging queerness and queer performativity: "Shame on you [is] so unsanitizably redolent of that long Babylonian exile known as queer childhood" (Sedgwick, 1993, p.4). Sedgwick reminds us of the impossibility of completely separating the word *queer* from shame no matter how much effort activists put into transforming it from a word of degradation to a word of pride, because it is impossible to detach "from its associations with shame and with the terrifying powerlessness of gender-dissonant or otherwise stigmatized childhood" (Sedgwick, 1993, p.4). Sedgwick unravels the transformation of childhood affected by sexuality, by linking it to shame and its performative connection to disapproval: "If queer is a politically potent term, which it is, that's because far from being capable of being detached from the childhood scene of shame, it cleaves to that scene as a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy" (Sedgwick, 1993, p.4). The adolescent who makes mistakes, challenges rules and norms, commits violent acts, breaks laws, and experiments with pubescent bodies and sexuality

performs queerness in Sedgwick's description. Eric and Alex cleave to the shame of a kiss and of admitting to not having kissed before, (maybe) because they think that they will die soon. Death is the reason behind the kiss in both ways: they kiss, and are able to kiss, because they will die. Death is not only metaphorically behind the kiss, but it also stands temporally ahead of the kiss: the incident that will happen in the near and planned future, is also the preliminary condition of the kiss, as if it comes before it. The criminal adolescents' connection to death and its unstable temporality *queers* them while also granting them agency.

In her 2007 article "Feeling Like Killing?: Queer Temporalities of Murderous Motives among Queer Children" (2007), Bond Stockton meditates on the working principles of motive and intent in crime. She suggests that a motive to kill is born backwards after the killing has taken place. She states that this backwards birth is akin to that of the gay child, who can come to life only after the gay adult emerges and announces their childhood to be gay. The gay child can only rise from and on the gravestone of the heterosexual child. Bond Stockton's claim for the queer child is different from Sedgwick's, who suggests that the child from the normative adult's perspective is always queer, whether "queered" by innocence or sexuality. She considers childhood, in general, to be queer in its distance from adulthood, because it is "a state of one's being while also delaying a temporal approach to a time it is not" (Bond Stockton, 2007, p. 304). Bond Stockton's definition of the child is positioned from the adult's point of view, in a manner that looks backwards. Sedgwick's definition bridges adulthood and childhood through queerness, stemming from childhood shame. Adolescence, I suggest, is the semi-permeable connecting tissue between adulthood and childhood, which both separates and overlaps with the polar identities. Adolescence's turmoil and delinquency grant it the potential of queerness. And arguably, this deviance is caused by the acknowledgement that death will arrive eventually, which also bestows agency.

The motives behind the conduct of Kevin, Eric and Alex become of importance only in the aftermath of their actions. What made these children/adolescents kill at institutions of safety such as the school and the family home is a question which attributes passivity to the actors and locates reason as an external force which precedes the crime. Kevin's mother Eva, like some of the mothers who lost their children at the shooting, blames herself and questions her capacity to mother, and even her capability

as an adult. Therefore, she revisits moments from their shared past, trying to pinpoint the traces of corruption and mistakes she imposed on Kevin. The narration accompanies her, in her backwards and forwards travels, in the form of flashbacks and the sudden emergence of memory shots. In *Elephant*, the search for motives and reasons behind the killings, carries the viewer in indefinite circles, confusing past and present. The lack of rational explanation as an extraneous factor leads to the assumption of an innate problem, contained within these non-normative children/adolescents. Most of the discussion in the media following the Columbine shooting, which *Elephant* heavily relies on, accused the real-life killers of being homosexuals, sociopaths, and “weirdos”¹⁹. The motive, which is born backwards in Bond Stockton’s definition, gives birth to queerness related to deviance as well.

We Need to Talk About Kevin takes a more conventional stand, to some extent dehumanising Kevin and excluding him from the traditional conceptualisation of child/adolescent. Kevin’s rejection of compassion also results in a lack of depth in character. The reasons behind his formation as an adolescent killer are not accessible to the viewer. *Elephant* deploys a radically different approach in forming characters; almost all are denied depth except the killers Eric, Alex and John, who takes the wheel from his father. The characters who stand outside the regular and normal in both cases are the ones with agency, even if it is monstrous and deviant. Their deviance and monstrosity appear mainly in their failure to cooperate and conform with the society around them. Kevin does not play the part of innocent child or ‘only pretends to play’, John takes control of the adults in his life, Eric and Alex kiss and kill. Sedgwick’s and Bond Stockton’s accounts of queerness can be traced in all three of the killers. Moreover, their deviance, as a character component that is attributed postmortem, is not always evident in the present. Eric and Alex are depicted as two childish, goofy, talented adolescents with friendship bonds and teenage angst when in their own space. Only after killing (other children/adolescents) does their non-normativity become apparent. Even the motive behind Alex killing Eric once they are in the midst of the school shooting is open for discussion; is it a favour Alex does for Eric or is it because Eric becomes useless to Alex at that point? The obscurity of the cause is infused into

¹⁹ *Bowling for Columbine*, a 2002 documentary by Michael Moore collects media sources describing the event, interviews from the classmates of the killers and their parents, most of which characterise the criminal adolescents as “weirdos”.

the motives of the characters, which shapes the characters in an amorphous strangeness. This vagueness opens up the possibility of incorporating various interpretations and definitions of queerness into analysing death and criminality in adolescence. My purpose in applying different perspectives of queer theory is twofold: firstly, I map childhood's queerness from an approach which both incorporates and challenges existing perspectives, and secondly, I aim to integrate a discussion on post-millennial American independent cinema's queer affinities. Based on this premise, the following section will incorporate Sarah Ahmed's and Lee Edelman's accounts of queerness into the critical debate I lead around criminality and adolescence, positioning death and queerness in relation to the perception of time.

4.2.2. Wilful Child without Futurity

So far, I have attempted to establish the connections between agency, deviance, criminality and queerness. I have incorporated Aries' research on the emergence of adolescence to stress the intersection which adolescence, death, criminality and queerness stand upon. I have focused on the consolidation of the past, with the present, in terms of motive, childhood deviance, criminality, cause and causality, while pointing out that the narration of the two films I analyse here have backwards movements on their timelines in search of explanation. In this section, I will try to place the ongoing discussion in a broader scheme of family, society, and future. I will initially introduce Sarah Ahmed's conceptualisation of waywardness and wilfulness, while examining the relationship between the family/society and the criminally deviant child/adolescent. Moving the discussion forward to futurity, I will introduce Lee Edelman's conceptualisation of "reproductive futurism", and compare Edelman's "Child", which is considered as a phantasmatic image consolidating the traditional, muted, innocently sacralised perception of the child, with the newly emerging wayward children protagonists in American indie filmmaking.

Sara Ahmed argues that the deviant adolescent is "the one [who] leaves the path of becoming part, breaking, or threatening to break, the tie that holds the community, a family, a nation together" (2014, p. 115). While elaborating on this definition, it is important to remind ourselves that in the 'century of adolescence', parental control

weakened according to Aries. According to Jenks, once the nuclear family is shattered, child and adult are set loose from the binary opposition they were once locked in. The adolescent arose as the turbulent, wayward identity that threatens the child's linear progress towards normative adulthood. In support of these claims, children and adolescents of failed nuclear families, in which patriarchal gender roles are lost, are believed to exhibit atrocities of sexuality and criminality in the public eye.²⁰ I have previously revisited Sherry Ortner's statements about the influence of the aforementioned *zeitgeist* on American independent productions of the late 1990s and 2000s that describe them as stories with dark and unhappy endings, or as in Anna Backman Rogers' framing as "films of crisis". The two independent films that are this chapter's case studies depict adolescent killers and hint at their waywardness and deviance, not as grounds for their criminality, but instead treating adolescent queerness more as a component of their delinquency and wilfulness.

Ahmed's conceptualisation of will, wilfulness and willing is multifaceted; she combines philosophy, feminist and queer theory, and critical race theory with phenomenology and considers *will* as an individual activity that is in relation to a bigger social activity, a form of compliance as well as resistance. She differentiates between "wilfulness" and "good will" or "general will" and examines the relationships between the whole or the body and the part. Her analysis takes both metaphorical and physical bodies into account and builds connections between these and productivity, as well as reproductivity. She reviews the human body and the social body in a capitalist setting along with the roles which organs and labourers play, in compliance with or resistance against the whole. Concerning the relationship between the child and the society, she categorises "educable will" or "the strong will" which may be transformed into "the good will". Ahmed concludes that the child with the good will, who obeys, will carry on the lineage of the family and become a point on the family line. The "other" kind of child, who she defines as "wilful wanderer", who refuses to stay put in a place and stay in line, walks away from the straight path of the family and society as a whole. Those who don't follow the straight line, who are not properly

²⁰ The most famous cinematic case is the queer son of a clinging, controlling mother, e.g., Norman Bates, in *Psycho* (1960) along with other literally evil children of cinema. Whereas it is almost customary to turn to the mother for an explanation of the child's abnormality, in the case of *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, the child is the explanation behind the mother's identity. Bond Stockton's backwards search for motive functions from the child to the adult, in a forward fashion in this case.

aligned, are wayward, deviant subjects. These wanderers, or strangers, are a threat to the coherence of the societal body. Ahmed takes the figure of the wilful child and uses it as a metaphor to elaborate on how different types of will and willing can be made to accord or crash, “coincide or collide” (Ahmed 2014; see also Quesenberry 2015, 388), with social policies, institutions, family and parenting, education, and violence. She reflects on how education is an apparatus for breaking the child’s will: “the wilful child is the one who is improperly aligned. The aim of education is to bring the will of the child into line not only with parental will, but the moral law, upon which parental will is assumed to rest” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 68). That the films of this chapter depict how wayward children/adolescents become a threat to the moral law by killing other children, who are presumably innocent, and endowed with the good kind of will, is noteworthy. By killing other children, the wilful killers disrupt the lineage for many families. Moreover, the killers unsettle the coherence of the societal body by destroying the safe castles, namely the school and family home. Their will is not directed in the right way, or to formulate it in Sara Ahmed’s terminology; their “strong will” is not converted into “good will”, their agency or will, which is improperly aligned, results in deviance and waywardness. I suggest that Sedgwick’s queer child, who “cleaves to the scene of shame” and Ahmed’s wilful child, who resists being “straightened out” according to societal morals are similar to one another; they are both delineated by agency and external disapproval.

Ahmed opens her *Willful Subjects* with a Grimm’s fairy tale which she frequently revisits and uses as a metaphor throughout her work. The tale is about a girl who is wilful and doesn’t do as her mother wishes. The girl becomes very ill and dies. When she is placed in her grave, her arm stretches out of the soil spread over her. Only when the mother climbs down into the grave and strikes the arm with a rod, is the arm drawn in. Institutions of discipline such as the family and high school are apparatuses similar to the rod that helps bring behaviour into line, in the tale by aiding in correctly replacing the resisting arm of the wilful child, in accordance with societal will. These institutions function to keep fictions such as the ‘innocent child’ and ‘mature adult’ intact. Taking the family as such an institution helps in understanding and reflecting on how inheritance and reproduction relate to willingness: “If the wilful child is the one whose will is not directed in the right way, toward the preservation of the family, then she would acquire life only from death, as if her life would amount to the killing

of the body of which she is a part” (Ahmed, 2014, p.113), Wilful adolescents threaten the “reproduction of an order” (p.99), whether that order be gender norms, the preservation of the traditional family or the regulation of life and death. The protagonists of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and *Elephant* endanger the institutions that keep the family and society safe and become wilful children/adolescents.

Kevin’s broken arm, the result of an accident which occurs when he drives his mother Eva to the limit, becomes the ‘rod’ which the wilful child uses against his mother. Kevin gets on Eva’s nerves to the extent that she throws him while changing his diaper. Eva takes Kevin to the doctor, and when the doctor asks Kevin what has happened, Kevin lies and hides Eva’s responsibility for the event. He does not tell his father that Eva caused his arm to break either. By keeping a secret that the mother and the child share, Eva is trapped and has to comply with Kevin and his demands. Kevin scratches the scar tissue on his arm whenever he wants his mother to oblige him. By doing so, he reverses the analogy Ahmed builds between the rod and the will. Whereas the rod is a tool for traditional, normative family and supporting institutions, Kevin uses his arm to maintain power and control over his mother. By doing so, he exits the borders of innocent, muted childhood and gains agency, to become a wayward, wandering child who leaves the straight line, as Sara Ahmed terms it. By the same token, the past incident, which is kept as a secret between the mother and the child, extends into the present by arresting the adult in a reversed power dynamic. Ahmed states that one of her aims is to “explore how the will becomes a question of time by thinking through how will relates to the past as well as the future” (2014, p.19), and hence describes will as standing behind the action or the decision and also extending into the future through consequences, therefore becoming non-spontaneous. She states, “a willing subject is always behind or ahead of itself” (2014, p.29). The reason Kevin decides to tell the doctor and his father that his broken arm was his fault is not a spontaneous decision. It is rather a calculation, which was set in motion from the moment his arm was broken or even before that, when he was testing Eva’s patience. The consequences of Kevin’s decision to keep a secret and to lie extend into the future when he establishes dominance and takes control over his relationship with Eva by reminding her, by scratching his arm, of what he has done. By doing this, Kevin restricts his mother’s capabilities as an adult, and arrests her in their relationship through a past event and a secret. The relational identities, child and adult, hereby go into a crisis

where the roles are nearly swapped, and control has shifted hands. The linearly progressive temporal scheme, which positions the adult as a completed, matured, capable character, is disturbed, not only because of Eva's loss of competence but also because Kevin destroys the traditional perception of innocent child.

Another scene depicts Eva opening the bathroom door to find Kevin's back turned to the door; Kevin is seen masturbating by the sink. Kevin does not stop although he is caught in a shameful act. Instead, he looks Eva directly in the eye, with a hostile yet pleased expression. The only indication of the indecent and embarrassing act of masturbation is that his arm that moves rapidly. As he continues, he exemplifies the description Sedgwick proposes for queer as that which cleaves onto the "childhood scene of shame", transforming it into a "near-inexhaustible source" of deviance. The shame, which is normally attached to adolescent sexuality, is passed onto the mother, who turns her eyes down and closes the door without interrupting him. When the traditional nuclear family's societal roles are turned upside down by the deviant child, Eva becomes arrested in a converse power dynamic and a temporal pastness. Her entrapment in the past is reflected through the intervention of flashbacks in the narration, and the sudden interruption of images from the past, which burst into the present of the film, forcing Eva and the viewer to keep the connection with the past intact and alive at any moment. Moreover, as a concrete manifestation of being arrested in the past, she keeps Kevin's teenage room intact, and replicates it in her new house, while she waits for his release from prison. The rest of the house, with the cluttered objects, and disorganised and messy rooms, represents Eva and her internal confusion. Yet, Kevin's room, in a contrasting colour scheme, minimally designed and obsessively cleaned, replaces Kevin's absent presence at its core. The existence of this room is revealed to the viewer at a very late point in the film, as an unexpected element that materialises as Eva's arrest in the past.



Figure 63. Kevin with a broken arm in the car with Eva, returns from the hospital, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*



Figure 64. Kevin scratching scar tissue from broken arm while manipulating Eva, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*



Figure 65. Kevin masturbating as Eva opens the door to the bathroom, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*



Figure 66. Kevin looking directly at Eva while masturbating, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

Sara Ahmed argues, “to follow the figure of the wilful child is to stay proximate to scenes of violence. And we learn too how those beaten by the rod become rods that beat” (Ahmed, 2014, p.66). This brings another violent adolescent of American indie to mind: De Palma’s *Carrie* (1976). Carrie immobilizes her mother, like Kevin does. Whereas Kevin’s mother Eva is trapped in an emotional state and temporality, Carrie’s mother is physically impaired by the knives Carrie throws which hang her on the wall, recalling Christ on the cross, an ironic gesture towards the religious controlling parent and the rebelling child. Carrie, in regret, tries to carry her mother out, but fails to do so because she can’t unfix her mother’s arm from the wall. The family home collapses onto the two. In the closing scene, Carrie’s arm, or her ‘rod’ of violence and wilfulness, rises out of her grave. Unlike the Grimm’s tale Ahmed refers to, there is no longer a mother or other supervising adult to put the arm back into the resting place of death. Deviant Carrie rises from the grave of the bullied obedient Carrie, recalling Bond Stockton’s “gay child”, who emerges on the gravestone of the dead heterosexual child in a backwards birth. In the “century of adolescence” as Aries defines it, wayward teens are rallying against traditional family values. Consequently, reproductive futurism, which rests heavily on the traditional perception of the child in its capacity to embody the future, is threatened by the deviance of adolescence. I will explore the capacity of American independent cinema to portray this change in the following sections.

Carrie, Kevin, Alex and Eric threaten the “reproduction of an order” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 99) by demolishing or disturbing the traditional family, alongside endangering the regulation of life and death. They erase the possibility of futurity, which depends on the child, family and what Lee Edelman calls “reproductive futurism”. In *No Future: Queer theory and the Death Drive* (2005), Edelman draws attention to how politics is invested in futurity, as projected through the family and specifically “the Child”:

The Child who becomes, in Wordsworth’s phrase, but more punitively, “father of the Man” ... to serve as the repository of variously sentimentalized cultural identifications, the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust... we are no more able to conceive of a politics without the fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child (Edelman, 2004, pp. 10-11).

Edelman’s categorical child, with a capital ‘C’, is a phantasmatic figure of innocence, in need of protection, along the lines of the romantic perception of the child, as Aries describes. This all-pervasive child is the keystone of authoritarian politics in his opinion. Edelman connects political and governmental control and domination, configured over the phantasmatic figure of the Child, to what he calls “reproductive futurism”. The order of the family and nation, which Sara Ahmed terms a “straight family line”²¹, are sustained through heteronormative reproduction and inheritance policies in reproductive futurism. Edelman positions the queer as a future-negating subject, i.e. the antithesis of the Child. He associates the death drive with homosexuality: in his figure of queerness, there is a trace of the death drive in disguise because queer sex cannot be made to stand for life as it is stripped of the guise of reproduction. Queer sex is always regarded as sex for pleasure only, or “just fucking”, according to Edelman: “Homosexuality is thought as a threat to the logic of thought itself insofar as it figures the availability of unthinkable jouissance, that would put an end to fantasy – and with it futurity – by reducing the assurance of meaning in fantasy’s promise of continuity to the meaningless circulation and repetitions of the drive” (Edelman, 2004, p. 39). The suggested lack of continuity and the evacuated promise of the future, embodied by homosexuality, correlates to the death drive’s immortality. Edelman positions the Child, life, and futurity sustained by heteronormative

²¹ Ahmed asserts that “the child is the one who promises to extend the family line, which requires the externalization of will as inheritance (to bequeath one’s property is to write a will) ... The family becomes given as a straight line. Perhaps a child too in becoming wilfully wayward would get in the way of the straight lines of the family tree” (Ahmed, 2014, p.113).

reproduction at one end of the opposition that he formulates, and death, jouissance and the homosexual at the other. His binary formulation is similar to the binary that the child and adult are trapped in, as described by Chris Jenks. I contend that queer children and adolescents challenge both polarisations. Criminally queer adolescents, depicted in post-millennial American independent cinema, do not recognise parental control, trouble the innocence of childhood and threaten the tie that binds the community and its norms. Above all, in the films analysed in this chapter, they contain agency through violence and the death of other children. The promise of the future, or progress, is exhausted and reduced to circles drawn in the school grounds in *Elephant*. The students walk towards their deaths. Kevin's mimicry of adult speech is reduced to childish blabber as he repeats the same syllables several times, as a form of communication. His repetitive blabber, like that of an infant as he refuses to communicate clearly, repeating the same sounds over and over, functions as resistance to authority by lacking meaning. He refuses to produce sentences that progress towards an idea, and yet establish a controversial force and impact. His method of destruction of mutual conversation, to hold agency through violence. The possibility of progress is reduced to circles of repetitive sounds, as it is in *Elephant's* temporality and cartography.

The criminal adolescents in *Elephant* and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* kill other children at school. Both films take the trauma caused by adolescent killers and look for motives and reasons behind their violence. *Elephant*, going in circles, deliberately avoids arriving at a conclusion. Kevin, when asked, "Why?" by Eva, on his eighteenth birthday before being transferred to an adult correctional facility, answers, "I used to think I knew. Now I'm not so sure." The open, grim endings of both films are in line with American independent cinema's defining features as set forth by Sherry Ortner in *Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream* (2013). Kevin, Alex and Eric kill for no particular reason. The crime they commit is "just killing" for killing's sake, almost only for the pleasure of killing. Their actions lack any aim or motivation besides chaos and the destruction of the secure, the regular, and the normal. Bond Stockton's search for motive in criminal adolescents and the connection she builds to queer temporality will add further nuance to the analysis of the film:

it is the specificities of queer children (children who include the normative child) that make them emblematic of a general problem: the problem of motive as a form of explanation when it is more often a living, growing, cubist form of dramatically mismatched feelings and movements from different temporalities and from multilayered sideways inclinations (Bond Stockton, 2007, p. 302).

Going back “in the chain of explanation” (Bond Stockton, 2007, p. 302) in search of a reason which will fill the void of senselessness by presenting a/any/the motive has the risk of becoming an endless process, that aims to reach for a motive which may be the motive of a motive. Such a unidirectional, backward search cannot take organic and multilayered connections into account. Both films take this proposition as a defining element and build their temporal structures and narration on it. Spatial and temporal confusion in *Elephant* breaks the causal chain and aids Van Sant in his venture to make it impossible for the audience to find a single reason for the crime. The back-and-forth temporal movement in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* brings up the chicken and egg question: “if the criminal is a child, is the fault to be found in motherhood/education or to be regarded as a consequence of the nature of the child?” The desire and drive to cause death, and death itself that the criminal adolescents are drawn to disturb the ‘reproductive futurity’ described by Edelman, while also aligning with the queerness Edelman locates at the heart of the death drive. It should be noted that the wilful subjects of such violence are neither the innocent children of Aries, nor the all-pervasive Child of Edelman who needs protection.

4.3 Wayward Temporality: Death and Time

In the previous section I aimed to make a point of death as a queering apparatus for adolescents and criminal children. I strongly agree with scholars, such as Mary Ann Doane and Laura Mulvey, in that death has an undeniable effect on the perception of time, and I propose that juvenile criminality also plays an important role in the perception and depiction of temporality. Analysing a further selection of scenes from the two films, this section will examine (i) how the representation of death and criminal adolescence through non-linear temporality responds to futurity, (ii) how narrational choices in the two case studies tackle death, criminality and adolescence, (iii) how death as both an ending and an indexical marker of time and existence plays a role in

the depiction of adolescence, and finally, (iv) how adolescence operates as a conceptual and thematic anchor in understanding emerging (queer) trends in post-millennial American independent cinema.

Doane, in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (2002), discusses cinematic time in relation to the Freudian unconscious, the indexicality of photographic and moving images, the Bergsonian and Deleuzian concepts of duration, and the archival capacity of the moving image. She suggests that the representability of time changed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to industrialisation and capitalism. Time, in the public sphere, became rational, “no longer experienced but read (on the watch or clock), calculated” (Doane, 2002, p.8) as a continuum of standardised unity, that is “the tightness of a direction, an inexorable and irreversible linearity” (p.5). Corresponding to this progressive linear perception of time, it also gained monetary value in its transubstantiated form in capitalism; “a logic of pure differentiation, quantifiability, and articulation into discreet units” (Doane, 2002, p.8), that is represented in phrases such as “personal time vs work time”, “forty-hour work week” etc. According to Doane, the atomisation of time ruptures the continuous sense of time and sets forth a tension “that strikes many observers as being embodied or materialised in film form itself” (2002, p.9). The atomised parts of film, single, still frames, which are captured in the past, create the pretence of animation taking place in the present, which gives the impression of an uninterrupted flow of time. She concludes that “film is divided into isolated and static frames – ‘instants’ of time in effect – which, when projected, produce the illusion of continuous time and movement” (2002, p. 9). In this sense, Doane’s definition is similar to Mulvey’s account of the uncanniness of the moving image, since it is composed of still, deathlike images giving the impression of animation and life. The following parts of this section will elaborate more on Mulvey’s propositions on death and cinema.

Doane proposes that ““dead time” – time in which nothing happens, time which is in some sense “wasted”, expended without product – is a condition of the conceptualisation of the “event”” (2002, p.161). The event that takes place after or in between these “dead” times is considered “a moment”, in which something worthwhile is happening. This moment becomes the index as time becomes meaningful. She also suggests that “death functions as a kind of cinematic ur-event, because it appears as the zero degree of meaning, its evacuation” (p. 164). I would suggest that the

spectatorial experience of following *Elephant*'s characters moving through hallways, almost aimlessly and without causality, is an experience of "dead time" following Doane's conceptualisation, time which does not add up to anything, and occurs without reaching a meaningful destination. In *Elephant*, this dead time's final destination is the actuality of death, the unexpected yet indexical trauma, the ur-event. Doane, while discussing dead time, adds "the documentary event is not so far from the narrative event. The event may take time, but it is packaged as a moment: time is condensed and becomes eminently meaningful" (p. 161). Composed of tracking shots and long takes, *Elephant* has a documentary texture. The spectator follows apparently random adolescents, in a high school, on what seems to be a regular day. The verité style of narration is one of the common denominators of non-classical, non-Hollywood filmmaking. *We the Animals* (as discussed in Chapter 2) shares this trait with *Elephant* and I have previously made a point of the relationship these cinematographic and narrational decisions construct for the viewer.

Elephant makes heavy use of tracking shots of random characters walking in the hallways of the high school. The tracking shots are structured similarly to the perspective of the first-person shooter video game which we see killers Eric and Alex play. Backman Rogers characterizes the camera in *Elephant* as "an 'anonymous' floating and observational eye within the diegetic world" (2015, p. 45) because of the dominant travelling-shot cinematography. This floating eye tracks the characters as they walk through the hallways, entering and exiting rooms, using space inside and outside indifferently. The forward motion becomes aimless, the space transforms into a maze, and the distances which give the impression of ending where they began and thus seem to be going in circles. A sense of time becomes redundant; in contradiction with tracking and moving forward, there is no progress or destination to reach. Watching the backs of the characters, for extended periods of time, without an expectation of arrival deems actions banal and unimportant, similarly to the repeating visions of a cloudy sky which Van Sant places in *Elephant* without diegetic connection. Time, in this sense, is not running or flowing but has become repetitious, resulting in an animated stillness, in the way described by Mulvey. *Elephant*'s cinematographic language is established by steady shots and extensive long takes, giving a monotonous yet uncanny, queer feeling, as if the spectator is wasting units of

time while trying to reach the moment of an event.²² The tracking of dead time goes in circles spatially and temporally. Only when the characters are killed, does time become intelligibly present.

Death caused by criminal children/adolescents is the defining action in the narration of the film; the shooting becomes the ur-event that assigns meaning to the other episodic sequences, like the motive behind and after killers Alex and Eric's kiss, or the preliminary discussion that the Gay-Straight Student Alliance leads. The linear, progressive causal structure of classical narration is transformed into a before and after division, that is finally shaped into a circular form. The events that precede death become either redundant and empty/dead time or become meaningful as events that lead to death. Events that take place during and after the shooting are viewed in light of the ur-event. Regarding this analysis following Doane's formulation, I propose that Doane's categorisation of dead time and time that is not wasted or killed but which becomes meaningful in relation to the ur-event (of death) is rather binary in its essence. In order to include a more nuanced perspective, I will incorporate Karl Schoonover's ideas on "wasted time", body and queerness.



Figure 67. First-person shooter video game Eric and Alex play, *Elephant*

²² Gus van Sant's choice of actors, who are all high school students acting for the first time, and the story's reference to Columbine High School shooting add more depth and nuance to the film's documentary register or "feel".



Figure 68. Tracking shots of students before they are shot by Eric and Alex, *Elephant*



Figure 69. Killer's point of view during the shooting, *Elephant*

In his 2012 article “Wastrels of Time: Slow Cinema's Laboring Body, the Political Spectator, and the Queer”, Karl Schoonover considers art cinema's slowness and how it contradicts Hollywood's organization and disposal of time, suggesting that the slow, overspent time that upsets filmic continuity by “replacing eventfulness with unproductive episodic meandering” (2012, p. 65) is queer in its essence. He proposes that the “wasted” time that does not produce an event or action, and which does not lead the viewer to build the causal relations that are endemic to Hollywood and classical narration, demands a different kind of labour from the viewer's body,

whereas “the body functions on screen to amplify and expand the aesthetic registers of a slower spectating” (2012, p. 70). He sets forth questions regarding nonproductivity and the value of wasted time and roots the deviance of art film in its drifting characters who lack motivation and their wasting or spending of time unproductively, in comparison to Hollywood’s linear construction of time. In his response to these questions regarding time, productivity, waste and labour, Schoonover proposes that “the debates over slow cinema may be about the question of queerness or what it means to live queerly. Queerness often looks a lot like wasted time, wasted lives, wasted productivity. Queers luxuriate while others work. Queers seem always to have time to waste” (Schoonover, 2012, p. 73). He visits Edelman’s “reproductive futurism” and agrees with Edelman that queer, as a category, is defined by “anything that works against or is left unrealized under that temporal regime” (Schoonover, 2012, p. 74). Schoonover concludes by suggesting that a closer consideration of slow cinema may be able to provide answers for “how “reproductive futurism” demands that queer forms of exertion and labour go unseen, and how alternate forms of living may remain unfigurable in mainstream cinematic language” (2012, p. 70).

Schoonover’s account provides an alternative perspective to Doane’s conceptualisation of dead time in cinema. Doane regards wasted time as uneventful and insignificant, in a dichotomous normative manner. When applied to *Elephant*, Schoonover’s approach attributes queerness to the dead time in Doane’s theorisation, making the uneventful, wasted time before and after the ur-event of death, worthwhile, by transforming time to a state rather than a stage for an event. Following André Bazin’s formulation of the issue, Schoonover reminds us that “the slower the shot and the greater the sense of unfettered, living duration, or *durée*, the greater the effort required of the spectator” (Schoonover, 2012, p. 66). Hence the act and the labour are located outside the image and the film, in the act or experience of watching and meaning making. In Schoonover’s formulation, “the slow film’s wallowing image invokes an indulgent temporality in this viewer”, which the scholar suggests, operates “like a counterpart to Linda Williams’s “body genre”” (Schoonover, 2012, p. 66). Williams in her article “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, Excess” (1991) takes on horror, pornography and melodrama and builds connections between these so-called “women’s genres” and the bodily materials that are produced by the viewer as well as the actor/character while consuming these genres. The drifting adolescent characters

of *Elephant* and the wallowing, sinking, floating Jonah from *We the Animals* (see Chapter 2) are paradigmatic of emerging new queer children and adolescents in independent American cinema. Wallowing, being under water, moving slowly without a clear motive or target, indulging in pleasure and pain, breaking chains of causality while constructing episodic structures, and the relationship between the film's body and the body of the viewer are some of the core motives that this project identifies in its attempt to showcase the connections between temporality, queerness, and the child and adult as relational identities, in contemporary American indie film.

We Need to Talk about Kevin does not have an aberrantly circular timeline like *Elephant*. *Elephant* has very few scenes with adult characters, as all the characters that are followed are adolescents, whereas *We Need to Talk about Kevin* treats the mother's point of view and her story as the narrative centre. There are three versions of Kevin at different ages: infant, child and adolescent. The timeline travels back and forth with sudden interruptions from the past. Random moments from different points on the timeline break into the present of the film in an invasive manner. Flashbacks are heavily relied on, alongside significant repetitive shots, and practically meaningless frames or fleeting glimpses of memories that stand idle, interfere and disturb the flow of narrative and time. These glimpsing and breaching visions are not attached to the context and thus lack connection to the present events Eva is going through. The mother's search for a motive in the act of killing, after the shooting, is entwined with the nature of a trauma that interrupts, holds back and remains uncontrollable. Her life before and after the high school killings that her son committed, is redefined by the act of killing and its aftereffects. Therefore, moments from the past suddenly flash up as if in a search of a new meaning to be attached to them. The past is reorganised in a retrospective manner. Along with the meaning attributed to the past, the idle rupturing moments also become hints that signal the coming of the ur-event, therefore carry importance rather than simply acting as dead time.

This recalls Bond Stockton's ghostly gay child, which I previously discussed. Her argument suggests that the heterosexual child and adult die, to give way to the queer child and adult; only after the heterosexual adult and child cease to exist, can the queer child be born backwards. The gay adult reinvestigates the past and rewrites their personal story to give meaning to a gay child, which is unfortunately only a ghost. In the case of *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, the mother's search for a reason and

explanation for her wayward adolescent son's crimes forces her to revisit past events from her personal history. She comes to question her capability as a mother, and her ability to relish the joys of motherhood, suburban life and her normativity, resulting in an identity crisis.



Figure 70. Curtain shot in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

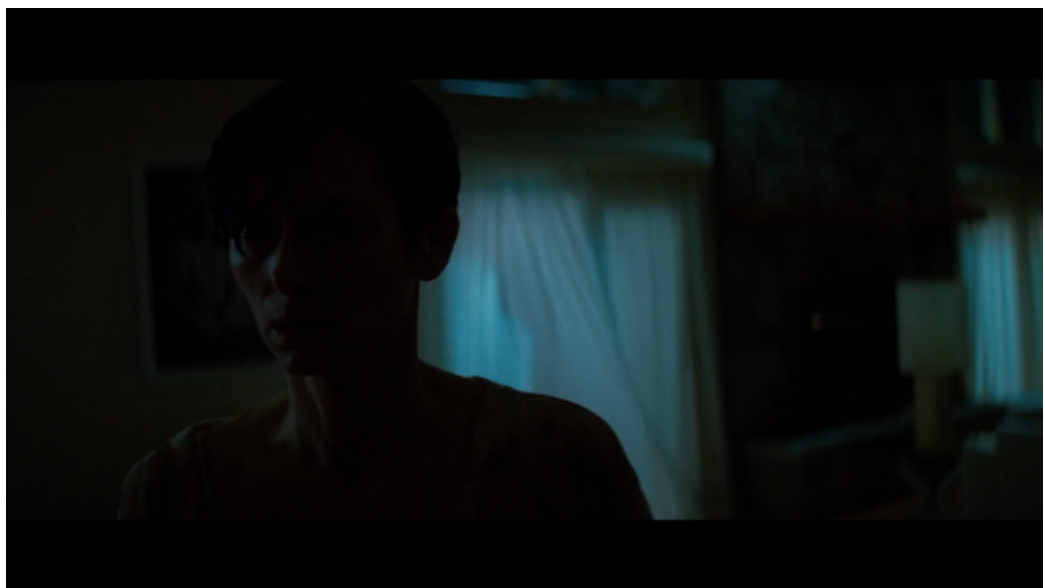


Figure 71. Curtains and Eva in shadows as she's walking away from them, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

In *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, a shot with long, white, flowing curtains stands out. This scene is shown more than once, initially appearing, out of context, like the glimpse of a memory or a flashback. It gains meaning when finally placed within the unfolding series of events that make up Eva's story and her son's murders. Eva sees the flowing white curtains when she comes home after Kevin has committed the school

shooting and been arrested. The curtain flows in front of the entry to the yard, where she finds her husband and daughter, also killed by Kevin. This scene of death, the unexpected, unexplainable, traumatic event, is indexical in two ways. First, it plays an important narrative role, marking the temporal structure of the film, as a point that creates a border between ‘now’ and ‘then’, between the flashbacks of Kevin’s infancy, followed by his early childhood and his present criminal adolescence, assembling the two different lives of Eva. Second, this indexical death scene, or to be exact, the single moment right before the confrontation with death, carries a *Nachtraeglichkeit*²³ effect. The meaning it contributes to the story can only be understood as events unfold in their own timing, within the non-linear, back-and-forth structure of the film. I suggest that the indexicality of this scene is similar to the mark Kevin carries on his arm, left from the once-broken bone, which is healed except for the everlasting mental and corporeal trace it has left on the mother and the son. The scar is the assurance of ‘something that has happened’, and becomes a non-verbal, indexical storage of the dynamics between the two, a metaphor for being frozen and arrested in a former state.

The intrusiveness of the flashes of images, sounds and scenes from Eva’s past invites a reading for the restless and turbulent temporality of trauma. Mary Ann Doane describes trauma from the Freudian perspective as follows:

(...) trauma is the consequence of the non-assimilation of an event that has its physical impact years later, after the impact. But the event somehow persists in the semiotic limbo, a kernel of the real that awaits only a second event, whose collision with the first generates readability. In a sense any event is by its nature that which is unassimilable, that which resists meaning, that which like the index, serves primarily as an assurance of the real – “something is happening” (Doane, 1980, p. 140).

The event which the mind cannot attach meaning to, at the very moment the event takes place, becomes unassimilated. It is considered an unreadable experience, which

²³ Translated to English as “afterwardsness”, the term was initially used by Freud, though he did not provide a definition for it. The term, when elaborated on very simply, means a revision of memories to better fit in with recent experiences. Mulvey in *Death 24x a Second*, frames Freudian *Nachtraeglichkeit* as follows: “There is a loose parallel here with Freud’s concept of deferred action (*nachtraglichkeit*), the way the unconscious preserves a specific experience, while its traumatic effect might only be realized by another, later but associated, event. Freud developed his thoughts on deferred action out of his analyses of the problem of sexuality in human development. A small child might well not understand the significance of a sexual encounter or witnessed event. Later, however, after the onset of sexual maturity, a similar experience may reactivate the significance of this memory, forgotten and stored in the unconscious” (Mulvey, 2006, pp. 8-9).

the mind revisits, or the impact of the experience forces itself from the subconscious to the conscious in attempts to gain meaning, resulting in trauma. Doane, picking up on Freud's ideas, suggests that death is the ultimate trauma, and cinematic ur-event. It also becomes indexical, similar to the un-assimilability of trauma, "serving primarily as an insurance of the real – something is happening". From this perspective, she develops her ideas on dead time as "time in which nothing happens, time which is in some sense "wasted", expended without product [...] a condition of the conceptualisation of the "event"" (Doane, 1980, p. 161). The flashes of empty, insignificant visions from Eva's past, as well as chunks of memories that were once part of routine daily life, constitute dead time, when analysed through Doane's perspective. Yet, considering Schoonover's approach to wasted time and Bond Stockton's proposal on a queer retrospective look that reassigns meaning to the past, these flashes of memories demand new meanings. In Eva's case, the death caused by her son and the 'dead time' which is plentiful in the repetitive chores of domestic life²⁴ and child-rearing work together to redefine her identity and shape her past and future reality. The scene of death, presented nearly at the end of the film, also redefines the spectatorial point of view and meaning-making process. The repeating visions and flashes as well as flashbacks gain meaning through understanding the trauma caused by death in the narrative. Death in both films designates meaning and time. In *Elephant*, time becomes fully present only when the killings begin. Beforehand, it is redundant and repetitive, lacking meaning. In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, death functions as the traumatic ur-event that forces meaning onto the past and present. In both films, the uncommon and non-linear uses of time become a means to relay the challenge of adolescent criminality and death to adults and normative perspectives.

In her *Death 24x a Second*, Laura Mulvey takes Barthes's ideas on photography as an operational ground for her ideas on the indexical attributes of film and its relation to death. Photography can capture 'then' and present it in the 'now'. The moving image, on the other hand, combines the "boundary between life and death" (Mulvey, 2006, p. 11), introducing the Freudian concept of the uncanny: "As a trace of the past that persists into the present, and one in which, in the case of the cinema, appears to animate the inanimate human body, the photographic index reaches out towards the uncanny

²⁴ In her conceptualisation of queer temporality in *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman discusses the Kristevian circular time of domestic activities and chores (2010).

as an effect of confusion between living and dead” (Mulvey, 2006, p. 31). The underlying terror within the concept of the uncanny stems from the possibility that the already-dead might return from the past and intervene in the present. When ‘then’ and ‘now’ intertwine (as they do in *Elephant*) and when the threshold between life and death becomes repetitive (as presented in the curtain shot from *We Need to Talk about Kevin*), there surfaces an uncanny feeling. The uncanniness in both films complements the narratives that are strongly tied to adolescence and death. The possessive nature of trauma, that captures and arrests within the fractured memory of the event which caused death, leads to this fragmented, repetitive, haunting narration that appears not to progress. Both films close with open endings. Eva keeps waiting for Kevin, without knowing who her son ‘was’ or ‘is’. Almost all the characters introduced in *Elephant* are shot: whether they are dead or not, remains unknown. The lack of linear and progressive, cause-and-effect-based development in both films is not coincidental in my opinion. Continuity and progress are related to succession, forward movement and achievement. Discontinuity, articulated by jumps in time, overlaps, gaps, fragmentations, intervening images and shuffles in sequential order, signals a lack of and/or disregard for progress. I interpret this approach as a negotiation between forward movement and the “desire to return to an earlier state” (Mulvey, 2006, p. 77), encapsulating the attempt to break out of the oppositional, dichotomous logic embedded within the fixed, almost still and in that sense deathlike, “frozen” definitions of child and adult. The assumption of progression entailed within the fiction of the development from childhood into the accomplishment of adulthood is suspended, neutralised and reversed.

Doane and Mulvey both base their account of death’s relationship to film on the simultaneously static and animated quality of the film strip, a characteristic parallel to time being in a flow as well as being atomic. The film strip, composed of still frames, creates an illusion of movement and animation, which erases the resonance of death in still frames. Yet, ironically, time as a core component of film creates “movement along a path to death, that is, to the stillness that represents the transformation of the animate into the inanimate (Mulvey, 2006, p. 31). The two films of this chapter, with their non-linear narratives, acknowledge the contradictory nature of the moving image. In the scene in which killers Alex and Eric load heavy weapons and homemade bombs into a car, which feels as if it is from *Dazed and Confused* (1993), the camera is

positioned behind the back window of the vehicle. The frame is composed of the front seats, front window and the side windows. We see the backs of Eric and Alex, matching with the tracking shots from the other scenes. The centre of the frame is occupied by a very clearly visible Satan air freshener dangling from the mirror. The “boys” talk about this being their last day, but most importantly agree that they should have fun doing everything they have planned. The engine starts, the car moves forward, and the side windows show lateral tracking images of streets with houses and trees that become harder to define as the speed increases. As the focal point of the frame is the centre and the objects that are furthest from the centre become blurred, the figures of the killer adolescents, who are close to the centre, stay static and clearly visible, while the scenery on the periphery, seen from the windows, is unclear and in movement. The sequence gives the impression that the killers and the audience are held still on the way to a school shooting, which in my opinion is a parallel to the distressing anatomy of film, which is still imagery at its core but simultaneously gives an illusion of movement and progress. As for the viewer, seated in the backseat of a car driven by adolescents, to a school shooting, there is forward motion but no progress or arrival at a destination.



Figure 72. Criminal adolescents Eric and Alex loading the car, *Elephant*



Figure 73. Eric and Alex in the loaded car driving, *Elephant*



Figure 74. Eric and Alex driving; only the devil in the centre of the frame is clearly visible, *Elephant*

By making use of methods that disregard linear continuity and causality created by conventional constructions of time, contemporary independent cinema has developed its narrative techniques in a manner that is more fitting to the darker, more realistic and truthful narratives it projects. Previous chapters covered some of the main hard-to-digest as well as realistic matters that post-millennial independent American cinema narrativizes, such as poverty, neoliberal policies, suicide and drug use, teenage parenthood, sex work and paedophilia. Each film from the corpus implements unique stylistic choices to deliver a story, thereby making the viewing experience in some

cases lighter, softer or bubblier as in *Little Miss Sunshine*, or confusing and ominous as in *Elephant*. Although it is nearly impossible to clearly define what independent cinema is, or whether a film is independent or can be categorised as Indiewood, there are various scholarly approaches that attempt to elaborate on these categorical markers, as I discussed in the introduction section. Sherry Ortner draws the distinction between Hollywood productions and American independent films through a set of comparisons. The first of her criteria is concerned with whether a film is “entertainment” as opposed to being “difficult to watch”: she proposes that studio productions with the main aim of profit prioritise easy watching and a good time for the viewer, whereas “independent films often set out to challenge their viewers with relatively “difficult” subject matter and/or techniques” (Ortner, 2013, p. 4). Independent films, according to Ortner, do not shy away from engaging with political debates, being critical and taking sides, but Hollywood films are mainly “in the business of fantasy and illusion” (2013, p. 4). She summarises the last defining separator on her list as “finally, where Hollywood films classically have happy endings, independent films rarely do” (p. 4). *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and *Elephant* fit in with several of the criteria Ortner lists above. Their dark plots could have concluded with happy endings; however, open, ambiguous endings are preferred. Mulvey asserts that there are “two grand conventions of narrative closure” (Mulvey, 2006, p. 75), namely death or marriage:

Marriage as closure also brings with it the topographical stasis conventionally implied by the new home, the ‘palace’ in which a hero settles, after his travels, balancing the family home from which he had originally departed. Within the conventions of popular cinema, the final, emblematic, kiss very often provides an image for the erotic stasis of marriage in ‘The End’. But in this narrative pattern, marriage is usually achieved only once the hero has defeated the villain, whose death is the inevitable companion to a ‘happy end’ (Mulvey, 2006, p. 75).

As for Kevin, a happy ending in the classical form could have been one in which he comes to his senses in the correctional facility, where wayward, wilful children are “straightened out”. Possibly going back to his home and reuniting with his mother would be a happy ending of some sort. Such an ending would not fit in with the classical scheme that constructs marriage and reproductive futurity and would instead represent a mother-son relationship that resembles the Bates family of Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). Yet, undeniably, this reconstructive oedipal step would be a big leap

on the way to a future heteronormative partnership, potentially occurring once the adolescent protagonist is fully straightened out and matured enough to have a committed relationship with a woman, that could potentially produce a reproductive family. Yet, considering that the protagonist of independent cinema can be the villain in the story, Kevin is neither corrected nor dead in the finale, being the unconventional queer child and the adolescent criminal he is. As a homicidal antihero, Kevin does not die, and as a deviant adolescent, he does not mature by completing a hero's journey. He only shows hesitation about his choices when he is clearly afraid of taking the next step, which is going to an adult prison facility to complete his sentence. His fear and reluctance about progressing into adulthood have material motives.

As for *Elephant*'s adolescent villains Alex and Eric, death as a finale happens through the execution of agency. After taking separate paths to be able to kill more people during the massacre, Alex shoots Eric unexpectedly once the two reunite at the cafeteria. With regard to her account of the cinematic tools of normative closure, Mulvey also mentions an alternative happy ending in which "a deviant doomed couple enables the two kinds of ending to fuse and the sexual drive of desire and the death drive are woven together in the 'dying together' ending" (Mulvey, 2006, p. 77). This type of 'dying together' may have been the ultimate resolution for *Elephant*'s queer adolescent couple; however, whether Alex takes his own life later is not made clear, as he is last seen in a walk-in freezer, rhyming "eenie meeny miny moo", while trying to decide which partner from a pair of high school sweethearts who are expecting a baby to kill first. In its evasion of heteronormative adult-child dichotomies, and its departure from the hegemonic necropolitics of mainstream cinema, *Elephant*'s last sequence of Alex resonates with both Edelman's and Mulvey's ideas. By killing children, adolescents, students and teachers, Alex and Eric sabotage reproductive futurism and the institutions that safeguard it. Alex's last appearance, in the freezer, as he is about to stop the progression of reproductive futurity, depicts a queer adolescence in Edelman's terms, accommodating a desire for death.

Alex's location in a freezer is also significant in terms of Mulvey's conceptualization of the freeze frame. Mulvey frames death as "the point 'beyond narratability'" (2006, p. 79), bringing trauma to mind. Mulvey also suggests that "the cinema's specificity is able to supply the perfect image for the metaphor: doubling up the 'end as death' with an image of death itself stilled by a freeze frame" (2006, p. 80). Alex is not

captured in a final freeze frame like another famous criminal child Antoine, who is stilled in a freeze frame at the finale of François Truffaut's *400 Blows* (1959). Embodying a lack of movement and progress, the freezer Alex and the pregnant couple are placed in connects death with a literalising account of cinematic stillness. The uncertainty in Alex's future is reminiscent of the uncertainty seen on Antoine's face in the last frame of *400 Blows*.



Figure 75. Alex in the freezer with the high school sweethearts on the point of killing them, *Elephant*



Figure 76. Kevin lit by the police vehicle lights right after raiding the school with a bow and arrow, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

Both films present adolescent characters executing criminal acts in institutions regarded as safe for children: school and the family home. Their deadly acts transform spaces of discipline into spaces of chaos and crisis. *Elephant*'s last scene acts as a metaphor for the destructive violence of wayward adolescence towards reproductive

futurity, which relies on childhood, the family and the associated heteronormative social conduct. Kevin, on the other hand, damages the nuclear family by killing his own father and sister in the garden of their suburban home. In an era when “people keep children away from anything having to do with death” (Aries, 1975, p. 12), death brought by adolescents to children and the family is shocking and traumatising, to the extent that it challenges all norms of societal cohesion. By threatening and breaking the relationships that hold institutions secure and intact, adolescent killers refuse to obey and extend the reproductive orders. They become wayward and wander away from the ‘straight’ path of reproduction and happiness. By declining progression into adulthood and instead challenging the perception of childhood innocence through producing death and abolishing the possibility of futurity, they become deviant. Instead of growing up, they take a sideways path, thus appearing to exemplify Bond Stockton’s conceptualisation of “sideways growing queer children”.

The killers of *Elephant* and *Kevin* are excellent examples of American independent cinema’s treatment of the adolescent subject as an embodiment of unrest that unsettles the adult-child binary – with its turmoil, violence, insecurity, and capacity to produce crisis. As I have aimed to show using different examples throughout this project, post-millennial American independent cinema often demonstrates the identity crisis the adult-child binary goes through. The emergence of adolescence as a third category bolstered this critical shift. The children depicted in post-millennial American indies became less innocent, more decisive and more deviant. With the unique characters created in the postmillennial context of indie filmmaking, adolescence extended backwards into childhood and forwards into adulthood, while its turmoil and violence started occupying more space and unsettling the hegemonic queerphobic distinctions of the adult-child binary. Thus, adulthood also found itself in a transformation and crisis, echoing through childlike parental figures, irresponsible adults and arrested adolescent characters²⁵.

²⁵ Adam Sandler, who is known for his “hyperbolic displays of comic infantility” is an example of an ‘arrested adolescent character’. Aaron Taylor describes Sandler’s prototypical comedic action as “a curious admixture of puppyish ingratiation, reactionary bullying, and rabid masochism” (2013, p. 22). Taylor also notes that “Sandler’s physiognomy and comic performativity evoke an anxious masculinity that is not merely juvenile but instead is positively prepubescent” (p. 24).

Adolescence, in comparison to the traditional conception of childhood, contains agency and the capacity to decide and to take action. Still, when compared to the (normative) adult, the adolescent is not yet sufficiently rational and competent. The turmoil and deviance attributed to the nature of adolescence stems from this combination. It is an in-between state, characterised as a “search for identity”, which also carries an immanent temporal structure, due to its staging between childhood and adulthood, in the continuum of growth and maturation. On the one hand, the adolescent is allowed the capacity for action whereas the child is normatively frozen in its incapability, innocence and sacralisation. On the other hand, the adolescent is repressed due to having insufficient maturity to choose wisely and thus being expected to be obedient instead of impulsive. Adolescence, from this perspective, is a composition of contradictions, a confusion between the capacity to act and the expectation to halt. Adolescence blurs the boundaries separating childhood and adulthood by carrying opposing traits from each. Remembering the crystallised formations of the traditional child and adult, the adolescent is equivocal, ambiguous and unclear. The shots of cloudy sky that appear three times in *Elephant* resonate well with the confusion and unrest related to adolescence and the abject violence staged in the high school in the narrative. There is an expectation of thunder, a storm or rain at the very least, yet only heavy clouds in movement are seen repeatedly. The expectation and anticipation of a change is responded to with stillness in the form of detached, ungrounded ominous anxiety. The lack of connection with and attachment to the narrative, forces an interpretation of segment separators or markers for episodic clusters, for which there is hardly any evidence. Considering the weakness of these markers of separation, they function similarly to the role adolescence takes on, between childhood and adulthood. I suggest that certain examples of post-millennial American independent cinema, which depict wayward, deviant adolescents in crisis and in liminal states (in this case violent, criminal adolescents), produce a unique sense and expression of temporality²⁶. The contradictory state of having agency, while being faced with a restriction on impulsiveness culminates in an expectation of immobility. The adolescent is stranded and fastened, and at the same time charged and ready to sprint, resembling, in a sense, the heavy grey clouds that don’t produce rain in

²⁶ Other examples are *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001), *Gummo* (Harmony Korine, 1997), *Spring Breakers* (Harmony Korine, 2012), *Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999), and *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999) - to name a few.

Elephant. Becoming the medium of crisis, the film adopts such conflicted narrative traits too. The conflict between movement and stillness recalls fight, flight and freeze (as trauma responses). Similarly to the way trauma and crisis affect a person, film is also affected: memory becomes dubious, the order of events becomes disorganized, reason and causality are lost. Time, occasionally, ceases to flow in a linear manner, and instead travels back-and-forth, is suddenly interrupted by images or sounds, and circles in an attempt to reach reason and/or resolution.

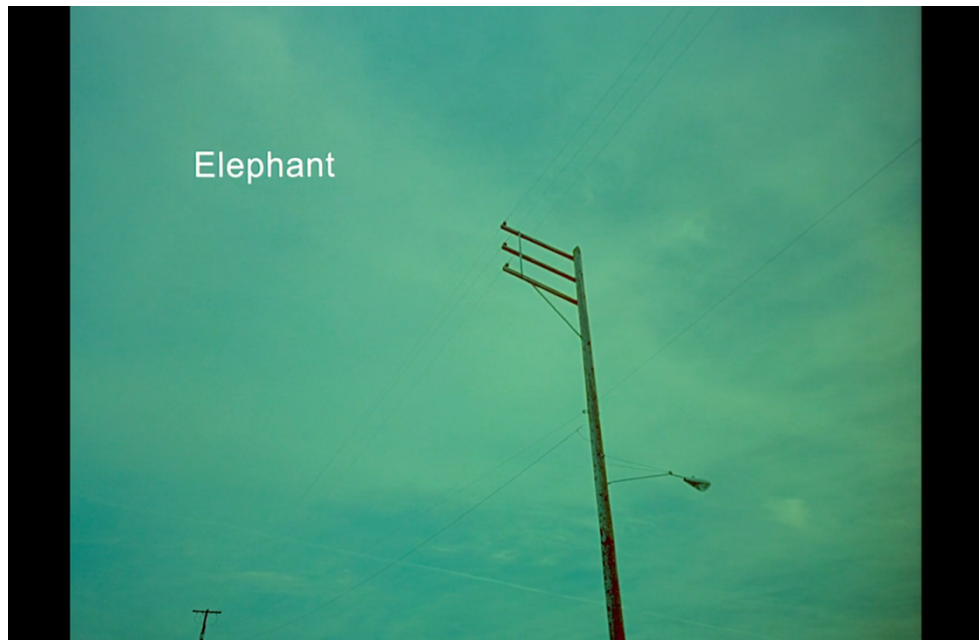


Figure 77. A shot of cloudy sky from the opening credits of *Elephant*

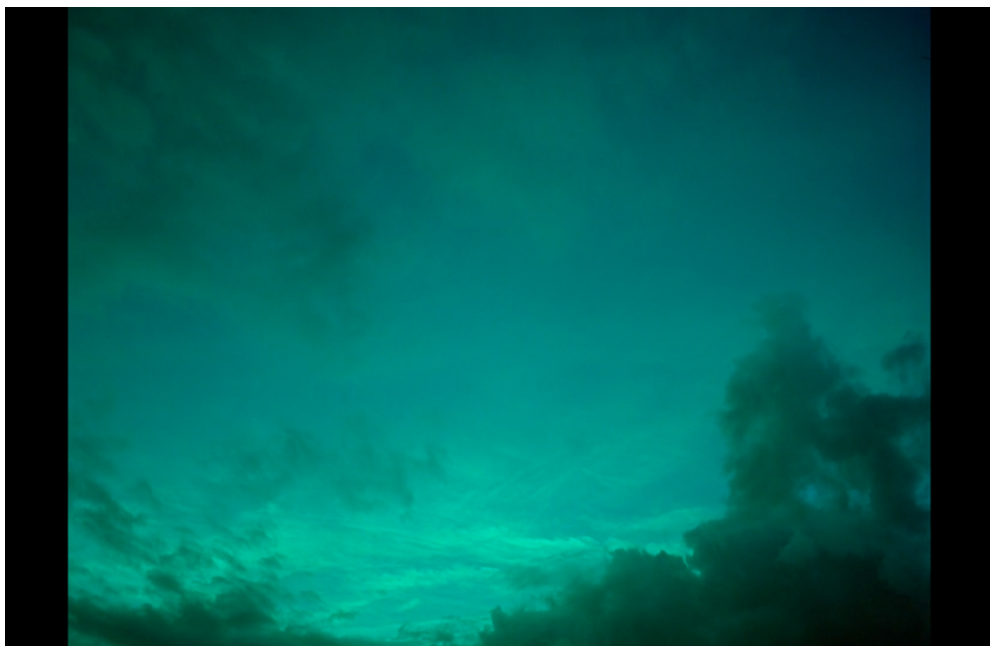


Figure 78. Another shot of the cloudy sky, *Elephant*



Figure 79. One of the students looking at the sky and clouds before being killed in the library later on, *Elephant*

Drawing on Aries, I have positioned adolescence as an emerging third identity pole, that came to recognition by the early twentieth century. Moreover, American independent cinema's coming into being, as conceptualised by contemporary film scholars and writers as well as filmmakers, started off in the mid twentieth century, and benefitted a lot from the demands of young audiences.²⁷ While the narrative choices of American independent cinema reflected the issues being experienced by the youth of America, narrational techniques and choices were also shaped by the social/financial setting and the changing perspectives of the emerging auteur directors of the independent scene. According to scholars like Geoff King, Janet Steiger (Staiger, 2012, p. 15-27), and Michael Z. Newman (Newman, 2011, p. 71-82), one of the distinguishing elements of independent cinema is its dependence on alternative

²⁷ By the first half of the twentieth century, in the United States of America, children of the immigrants who formed part of the workforce gained some financial means and enjoyed cinema as leisure. They were a heterogenous group composed of different ethnicities and genders, also with a different taste in films they consumed. Major production studios of the 1950s distributed only a handful of films that would appeal to the newly emerging teen audiences. These films held adult perspectives and mostly defined juvenile delinquency as a social problem. Smaller studios targeted teenage audiences and developed a particular type of entertainment, namely the 'teen-pic', "a particular type of exploitation picture that took several forms and ushered these independents to a new era of low-budget filmmaking". Juvenile delinquency and young audiences with diverse ethnicities become two important pillars of American independent filmmaking around the 1950s, which fully bloomed around the 1980s and the 1990s. The new consumer group and developing independent film industry reflected contemporary struggles such as the downfall of the American dream and the dissolution of the traditional family.

narrative techniques. Janet Steiger suggests that the “emphasis on certain methods of creating verisimilitude, and ambiguity and intertextuality in narrative and narration” (2012, p. 23) are some of the core characteristics of independent cinema that help distinguish it from classical Hollywood. Newman differentiates independent cinema’s adaptation of “the ambiguity between objective and subjective narration” (2011, pp. 192-193) from the 1960s art cinema’s subjective narratives (e.g. Bergman’s *Persona* (1966)). He suggests that independent cinema has a unique “temporal reordering” that gives a “game-form” to some examples of indie cinema and adds that this can lead the audience to “read ambiguity as play” (Newman, 2011, pp. 192-193). The narrative approach that distinguishes independent cinema from classical productions can be differentiated through its use of ambiguity and non-linearity, while the stories delivered also stand out from classical narratives. Harder-to-digest issues such as teenage pregnancy, paedophilia, the impact of neoliberal policies, dysfunctional families and the generational dissonance between immigrant parents and their children, the discrimination faced by minority communities, and personal struggles such as isolation, paranoia, and addiction are some of the prominent ones. Such topics contribute to the state of crisis Geoff King attributes to independent cinema’s personality.

Mulvey considers advances in technology, such as digital recording and home editing possibilities, and their effects on the binary filmic relation between life and death. She points to the millennium, although an arbitrary moment, as the point of “resonance of change” (2006, p. 23), as a time of crisis, resonating with Backman Rogers’ conceptualisation of crisis and how film as a body also becomes a surface reflecting characters in crisis in American independent cinema around the millennium. According to Mulvey, new technologies allow the film’s timeline to be paused, replayed, and open to random access; the spectator can visit any moment of the film randomly, without reversing, travelling forward and backward on a timeline, without rewinds and fast forwards²⁸. The ideas she explores are mostly related to how this new configuration of the timeline changes the relationship between the film and the

²⁸ I think it is worth noting that social media, the use of gadgets and the surface presentations of the platforms people use, bring another dimension to time, which is oriented on a vertical axis rather than a horizontal one. Searching for someone/something on social media or other online platforms involves an experience of “going down the timeline”. The perception of time as linear (i.e. a “line”) remains, but instead of a horizontal back-and-forth movement between the past and the future or ‘now’, the past is downwards and the present/future is upwards.

dynamics of meaning making. Both Geoff King (2009, p. 22) and Sherry Ortner (2013, p. 96) point to the entry of home video into the American market in the 1980s as one of the reasons behind the rise of American independent cinema's popularity and growth. The film distribution networks were widened, the audiences were able to reach more niche examples, and settings of consumption changed drastically compared to in-theatre watching. Film, when consumed at home on video, became something that could be paused and rewound. The pace of the frames could be controlled by the viewer. The duration of the film was now flexible, and the sequences and scenes could be reordered. The aftermath of this technological and sociological change left its traces on American independent cinema too.²⁹

Elephant and *We need to Talk about Kevin*, although the latter's status as an independent film is debatable, both depict adolescent turmoil resulting in death and carry a temporal scheme that is interrupted by the trauma of death caused by their teen protagonists. *We Need to Talk about Kevin* depicts the distorting power of death through the repetition of a curtain shot that intervenes with the "today" of Eva's story. I have previously carried out an analysis of this repeated shot, in relation to Mary Ann Doane's conceptualisation of death as ur-event in film. I have considered the repetition of the shot as indexical in two ways: it separates the "now" and "then" of the timeline and it carries a *Nachtraeglichkeit* effect by attributing meaning to events taking place before and after the killings. The first curtain shot in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is placed within the opening scene in the film, to be followed by a bird's eye view, a wide shot from the tomato festival in Spain. The dominance of the colour red, and the squirming movement of the bodies make it hard for the viewers to decode where and when they are on the narrative timeline. The wide shot is followed by a medium shot, then a close-up of Eva, covered in a blood-like red fluid, being carried on various shoulders in the crowd, like the Christ on the cross. The following cut brings the viewer to Eva's small house, with red paint thrown on the windows, that casts a red light onto the sofa she is sleeping on. The curtains from the opening sequence have a cold colour palette, dominantly blue and white. The following festival sequence contrasts sharply with its abundance of red, while inside the small house there is a combination of the

²⁹ Films like *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001) and *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001) are some examples of Michael Z. Newman's description of films with "temporal reordering" that are ambivalent between subjectivity and objectivity in narration.

two opposing colour palettes. The opening of the film thus presents three different points in time within its first four minutes. The colour coding bears the function of leading the viewer's attention to some extent. Making meaning while connecting the marked-out temporalities, between each of which there may be ten years, is not an easily and immediately achievable task for the consumer of these images to carry out. This immediate demand from the viewer keeps the narrative open to interpretation and makes the viewer a part of the meaning-making process. Such temporal disorganisation is an example of the confused subjectivity and objectivity which Newman proposes as a technique and identifying trait of independent cinema.

The opening of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* works as an establishing introduction, in the sense that the main matter to introduce is the uncertainty and the confusion present throughout the film. This manner of delivery contradicts classical narrative styles, which present a location and/or a character in the opening as the main locus of the narrative. Independent films that deliver chaotic stories of characters in crisis tend to rely on complicated narratives. The broken chain of events results in a distortion in causality. By confusing the timeline and mixing up the most prominent ur-event with a memory from 'the past' and a regular morning from 'the now', the film treats each moment as equally meaningful or equally insignificant, in a way combining both Doane's and Schoonover's propositions of temporality and significance in film. Minimising the role causality plays as a connecting bind, encourages an active audience.³⁰ Regarding technological developments, this empowered audience can revisit the earlier scenes by rewinding, pause a shot and thus turn the animated stillness of cinema back into a frozen image and decide on the duration. This unique audience of independent cinema has control over the film both by their contribution to meaning making and by their control of the timeline. Mulvey's foundational comparison between photography and film in relation to death, truth and motion deserves a revisit in this sense. The animated image, which gives the illusion of "happening at this

³⁰ Janet Staiger suggests "the indies' implicit viewing procedures seek an emotional and, for the most part, intellectual engagement with the film" (2012, p. 23.). Hence, the audiences of independent cinema are considered to be a smarter, more educated demographic. Jeffrey Sconce in his description of "new American smart film" describes the audience of smart independent movies' as a "target market of younger, more educated, 'bohemian' audiences who frequent the artplexes" (2002, p. 351). The audiences for hard-to-digest films are considered to be more experienced in meaning-making, compared to the audiences of more mainstream films.

moment” can be paused, and thus brought to a state of death, which can then be extended on demand, to be brought back to life and motion again as desired. The uncanniness of cinema becomes multidimensional considering the architecture and consumption methods of independent cinema.

Before concluding this discussion on the connections between American independent cinema, deviant adolescence and wayward temporality, I will once again revisit Elisabeth Freeman’s ideas on queer temporality which have helped shape this project throughout. Freeman pins the emergence of the standard two-hour film and cinema as a medium, onto an era of “a reorganization of the social along temporal lines” (1996, p. xviii) and thereby connects the production mechanism of film and the assembly line. Her framework is parallel to Doane’s conceptualisation which I opened this section with. She proposes that the institutionalization of mass cinema depended “on the corollary to organized labour time – organized leisure time” (Freeman, 1996, p. xviii); the social arrangement of time such as workdays and days off, and the construction of a production-oriented time, cultivated the social experience of cinema. Here, the gaze becomes a bind among the viewers in this shared social setting by means of “shared temporality” (Freeman, 1996, p. xviii). According to Freeman, the audience is connected, or “bound” by shared temporality and the labour of viewing. Freeman then adds, “to pause on a given image, to repeat an image over and over, or to double an existing film in a remake or reshoot become productively queer ways to ‘desocialize’ that gaze and intervene on the historical condition of seeing itself” (1996, p. xviii). The viewer’s capacity to manipulate the temporal organisation of the film functions as a bind³¹: a connective tissue made of experience, as well as meaning-making efforts. Freeman’s ideas regarding unproductivity and slowness, along with her interest in centring the body as the main tool in the perception of time, recall Schoonover’s “wastrels of time”. Moreover, the returns, repetitions, delays and prolongations that create the new structures and binds give way to queer possibilities. As the linear, progressive movement of the film can be interrupted and controlled by the new

³¹ Elisabeth Freeman in her book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010) offers alternate formulations of time and experiencing temporality that rely on bodily experiences, that are more pleasurable than painful. She works on moments across different points in time that have connections through bodies and corporeal experiences. This formation of time, which she calls “binds”, is a queer political engagement, that is separated from capitalism and the requirements of modern productivity-based perceptions of time. Previous chapters delved into Freeman’s ideas in relatively more depth, including “time binds”.

possibilities surrounding film viewing, more wayward interpretations and experiential modes surface. The repetitions and returns both within the film and those which are results of someone's remote control, resembling ticks, slips of the tongue and bodily symptoms can be a means of decoding a past underneath the effects of crisis and trauma.³² I consider them to be returns to the scenes of crimes. In *Elephant*, the viewer is repeatedly brought back to the moment before the killings; three different characters are followed to the moment that their paths intersect in the hallway, in front of the library. Time passes for the viewer, only to then arrive back at a previous moment. The suddenly bursting flashbacks in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* represent attempts to comprehend trauma demonstrated through the bodily symptoms of the film. As much as traumatic past events become binds that resurface and recall, pleasure and connections also become binds.

I suggest that post-millennial American independent cinema, shaped by the technological advances and the crises it stemmed from, benefits heavily from the use of non-linear, elusive temporal schemes, especially when depicting youth, children and adolescents, who are identities experiencing crisis due to the changing definitions attributed to them. The story and meaning are collective constructs that emerge with the contribution of the viewer, where objectivity and subjectivity are enmeshed. Moreover, wayward adolescence contains the turmoil and unrest related to the in-between state of being able to move but being expected to hold back. By containing motion and stillness simultaneously, wayward adolescence is similar to the uncanniness Mulvey assigns to film. Films depicting such adolescents in relation to death mediate non-linear uses of time efficiently, as seen in the case studies of this chapter.

4.4. Conclusion

This final chapter of the project analysed two films with adolescent protagonists who are queered by criminal deviance. *Elephant* and *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

³² *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (Steven Soderbergh, 1989), the film which is considered to have initiated the categorisation of American independent cinema is a good example to how both the story and the technical mediums at hand capacitates the viewer to return to the same images over and over again, sometimes with a fixation that is a result of loss and trauma.

depict/recount school shootings in the aftermath of Columbine, which brought adolescent deviance to the spotlight in the United States. Both films refrain from providing reasons as to why young people have a desire for killing at schools and instead stress that it is not possible to find a reason and an indisputable motive for killing. These films carry the protagonists selected for the corpus to an age that is closer to adulthood and also present more complicated temporal orderings compared with the previous films. The categorisation of the protagonists as children or non-adults was harder compared to the preceding examples, not only due to age but also due to the acts they committed. The major difference between criminal adolescents and innocent or sexual children is in the possession and execution of agency. The agency to commit crimes queered the protagonists of this final chapter more than their ambiguous sexuality, because they disturb the reproductive futurity and capitalist social construct by killing children at institutions deemed safe and fundamental. The chapter also made a point of the simultaneous emergence of adolescence, homosexuality and serial killers. The killer who kills habitually only for the pleasure of killing is similar to the homosexual of Edelman, who has sex only for the pleasure of having sex. They both threaten normativity by damaging an idea of futurity that relies on longevity and reproduction. I conclude that the simultaneous emergence of categorisations related to specific types of deviance is a result of changing attitudes towards normativity. The 'normal' which is built on a 'proper' family life, safety, and a politics that aims to protect the sacralised muted child at the core of this structure, is changing.

Whereas the previous chapter showed where the lines between child and adult become blurred with the introduction of sex, this chapter incorporated death which is staged in the institutionalised spheres of schools and family. Childhood and death are considered to be almost contradicting notions, as Aries' study on the approach to death in the twentieth century proposed. Consequently, having death delivered by children/adolescents results in a shift in the possessor of control. Adolescents who commit crimes take agency and control away from the adult, which further challenges the identity crisis the relational identities child and adult are involved in, with the emergence of non-normative childhoods. The films' cinematography and stylistic devices supported this shift and the confusion that came with the reordering of norms. The timelines of the case studies in this chapter are more confusing, with circular

movements in one case, and in the other with sudden interruptions of images in the form of memories.

In Chapter 2, I focused on the ways by which remembering through the body functioned both for the character and the viewer. The forward and backward movements on a timeline, sustained by flashbacks, were the core elements in my analysis of “sexual children”. Chapter 1 examined how indies with innocent child protagonists presented linear timelines with “time capsules” that loosen the adult-child binary. This chapter tackled the elusive state of trauma, delivered through film. The narrational structures and stylistic choices of the case studies in this chapter stage confusion that is diffused into the cartography of events as well as being arrested in a state. Doane and Mulvey’s theories regarding the role of death, as ur-event and as a connection between the still image and the moving image, paved the way for my analysis. I have come to the conclusion that the binary positionings of the child and adult are being challenged more and more, and consequently this binary is being dissolved in a way that is reflected in both the stories that are canonical components of post-millennial American independent cinema, as well as the cinematic apparatuses American independent film picks to deliver such stories.

I have proposed that American independent cinema and adolescence have a shared vein of rebellion against structured authority. While from its beginning, the narrative choices of American independent cinema reflected the issues being experienced by the youth of America, narrational techniques and choices were also shaped by the social/financial setting and the changing perspectives of the emerging auteur directors of the independent scene. These were mostly young men, who could not find themselves a fitting habitat in the studio network, and so ventured into making smaller budget films free from the control of the large studios. I think it is possible to consider these young men and women as the rebelling youth/adolescence against the traditional studio system. The new young auteurs of independent American cinema, who were in financial, social, inter-generational struggles and crises, created their own vision by unique stylistic choices that are now the broad narrational tools American independent cinema implements. Therefore, I see post-millennial American independent cinema as an apt medium for opening the discussion about changing notions of normativity.

CONCLUSION

This thesis interrogates the connections and parallels between wayward temporal structures in film and the newly emerging, wayward queer child protagonists in American independent cinema. The selected corpus presents examples from post-millennial American independent cinema because the growing interest in the non-normative child is presented relatively more often in this canon. Different stylistic and narrative choices adopted by independent cinema enable a rich array of wayward temporal organisations in film. The selected films demonstrate characteristics that represent different registers of style, narrative and representation within the American independent cinema and stage different types of non-normative childhoods. The project overall is divided into three sections with each presenting a distinct mode of childhood that falls outside of traditional conceptualisations. Each chapter is dedicated to a different phase (or age group) in childhood, which is examined through a diptych structure of two films as case studies, accommodating distinct elements that queer their protagonists as children and adults. The two films selected for each chapter share similarities in how the queering element or event is reflected in the temporal organisation of the films. Hence, the categorisation of age groups, the queering motives and the disruptive use of time in film gave me the opportunity to neatly carve three fields of investigation.

The first chapter, ‘Innocent Children’, focused on a younger age group with more traditional characteristics of ‘classical’ childhood. The innocence of the protagonists, regarding the amount of knowledge they are allowed access to, and the agency they have or lack were the central motives. The films in this chapter, *The Florida Project* and *Little Miss Sunshine*, had linear timelines, complementing the relatively normative representations of childhood. Financial capability under neoliberal governance was one of the foundational elements of American independent cinema, considering that the first independents were produced with shoe-string budgets and without the support of big studios or governmental funds. The films in this chapter depicted how children in financially limited families that must resort to alternative means, navigate modern American life and how childhood in this setting is affected. My analysis indicated that while the child protagonists of the films were ‘queered’ by the lack of means, the adults, who are positioned within a relational binary identity, were infantilised. The

chapter also points out two circumstances that enabled the adults and the children to transform their roles, both of which are considered through their specifically national (i.e. USA) affiliations with popular media representation. Theme parks and children's beauty pageants took up important space in the stories. I concluded how these play with the norms of temporal relations and constitute 'time capsules' in which adults and children can step out of the normative regulations of temporality and identity.

The second chapter, 'Sexual Children', featured an age group that was slightly older than the one addressed in Chapter 1. The thesis, at this point, moved away from the traditional conceptualisation of the child, strongly tied to innocence and separated from sexuality. The protagonists in the second chapter were children with homosexual desires, which they acted on. The alignment of Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 gave me the opportunity to juxtapose innocent children with sexual children and enabled me to support my claims about the newly emerging queer child, and how this child is becoming more visible as well as more agentic. The films in Chapter 2, *Mysterious Skin* and *We the Animals*, implemented forward and backward movements on a linear timeline, supported by flashbacks and voice-over narrations. The act of remembering and the capacity of the body to remember through pleasure as well as pain were central themes. I concluded that the body of the film, like the body of the sexual protagonists, keeps a record of sensuality through the repetition of scenes, ruptures in the linear progression, and the intimacy established by the close-ups, colour coding and visual symbols. The temporality of the films in this chapter reflected a wayward flow, both for the protagonists and the film itself. Agency, which is not given to the innocent child, is granted to the sexual child. This is made evident in the protagonists' voice-over deliveries of personal histories, by which they gain control of their own stories. The relationship between the sexual child and the adult in these films is more complicated than the one in the case studies of Chapter 1. I analysed how the child with sexual desires and agency is eroticised by the adult gaze, and how the case studies depict the eroticised child. I implemented the most prominent theory on gaze, namely Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" (Mulvey, 1975) and investigated whether the mechanics between the adult and the child are similar to the ones between man/masculine and woman/feminine. I have concluded that talking about a child's gaze, as an oppositional gaze to the adult's, is not possible, considering that the notion of gaze involves literacy, practice, and professionalisation which are not possible for children to lead and

establish as practitioners. Regarding the adult-child binary, this chapter and its sexually charged, queer protagonists and the adults surrounding these children provided instances in which the binary relationality between the adult and the child is blurred. The chapter argued that distinct polarised identities lose their distinctive features, and each finds themselves in a crisis with the emergence of the queer child.

Chapter 3, 'Criminal Adolescents', thematised adolescence and death. The protagonists of the films analysed in this final chapter, *Elephant* and *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, were older than those in Chapter 1 and 2, but more importantly, the introduction of adolescence into the adult-child binary in these films has transformative effects on the filmic treatment of childhood, criminality, and temporality. The adolescent protagonists in the chapter were queered by the criminal tendencies that they embody, which consequently introduces death into the conceptualisation of hopeful futurity carried on the shoulders of the child. The chapter's case studies showcase how agency changes hands when criminality and deviant adolescence are involved. The films had school shootings at their core, and raised questions about the reasons and motives behind adolescent criminal acts at institutions regarded as safe for children. The search for an explanation that precedes the act, which is nevertheless defined by the act that comes after it, influenced the temporal organisation of the films. Whereas the previous chapter presented films with a linear timeline and back-and-forth movements along it, this chapter presented examples that employ disruptive, repetitive, circular, 'hard' or impossible-to-map timelines. I address how such temporalities coincide with the emergence of queerness and adolescent criminality (in the form of serial-killing) in these films, which refuse to rationalise and/or redeem the act of the criminal protagonist. How these threaten the normative, safe and regulated understanding of life in terms of growing, reproducing, maturing, and dying in a progressive order was also discussed. I claim that the emergence of the queer child in cinema, the resulting crisis in the adult-child binary and the alternative perspectives on time and temporality reflect a change in contemporary approaches to essentialist, binary, and normative understandings of life, experiences and states of being.

Overall, the thesis demonstrated how fragile the normative conceptualisations of identity are in the selected examples of post-millennial American independent cinema. The thesis takes childhood as its focus because childhood is a very hard-to-define

category, which is instrumentalised for political agendas. The child is sacralised because it - as a constructed identity - is believed to embody futurity, hope, and nostalgia for lost innocence. The child becomes an 'immaculate' conceptualisation. The protection and safety of this imagined child is a priority above the reality of children who are subjected to negligence, abuse and various forms of discrimination. The construct of the 'immaculate' child is mostly articulated through representations of white children, that are desexualised, deprived of agency and muted. The immaculate child is leaving its high throne to make space for different types of children.

I began this project after noticing a recurring motive in films with child protagonists that target adult audiences: the films, in most cases, in an attempt to reflect the "childish" perception of the adult world, use stylistic devices that stand outside the register of the rest of the film. Alternatively, a significant number of examples rely on aesthetic choices, such as magical realism, that will keep the viewer in doubt about whether the events are reconstructed by the imagination of the child or not. A few well-known examples are *Die Blechtrommel* (Volker Schlöndorff, 1979), *Fanny and Alexander* (Ingmar Bergman, 1982), and *Pan's Labyrinth* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006). The traditional normative conceptualisation of the child contrasts with the adult to such an extent that the point of views of these binary identities are depicted through differentiating stylistic choices in most instances. A child's gaze is an industrial hence theoretical impossibility and yet practically attributed to child characters, by adult filmmakers. The fantasy-like non-adult perspective is also evident with mentally challenged, intoxicated, temporarily insane, and unreliable characters. In a way, these are also placed in opposition to the normative adult in the binary formulation. By taking the queer child as the focal point, this thesis examined how independent cinema represents non-normative child characters through wayward, unordinary stylistic approaches, including adult characters that are not considered fully mature or normative.

The queer child, who is arguably an oxymoron in a more traditional, innocent conceptualisation of the child, challenges binary reasoning by disrupting and reversing the mechanics of progress; the child is considered to lack adult capabilities and is expected to receive these capabilities in time during the progression to adulthood. The child is constructed with a fundamental lack of sexuality and agency as well as

knowledge. The queer children in this project were not only queered by sexuality. Agency, capacity, knowledge, and criminality were also key ‘queering’ elements in the corpus. The children who gained such capacities before reaching adulthood, as well as the adults who lacked such capabilities challenge the reliability of progression through experience and time. The belief in a linearly progressing temporal dynamic becomes disputable. The reflections of changing perceptions regarding time and temporality are traced in the thesis. These shifting paradigms run in parallel with the emergence and perception of queerness in children. I conclude that time as an irreversible, progressive, linear notion is changing, along with the normative, stagnant conceptualisations of identity and the examples of American independent cinema picked for this project indicate this change.

American independent cinema is a fruitful field for tracing the aforementioned changes. It is debatable whether it can be called a genre of its own; therefore, I prefer the word “scene”. Initially, budget limitations and improvements in technology that enable individuals to film anywhere and edit with simple equipment at home were creating the possibility of making films outside the big studio set-ups, which cradled independent cinema. The freedom gained by rejecting the control of studio powers created certain limitations, which, I would argue, were transformed into advantages overall; limited financial resources forced the filmmakers to take on alternative means in every aspect including narrational choices and gave them the freedom to create without aiming to satisfy a general audience. Hence, non-normative identities found more chances to appear on screen, especially positive representations; moreover, the stories of these characters were subjected to alternative representational methods which were formerly reserved for incapable, unreliable, deviant individuals within the studio system.

I was repeatedly confronted by binary logics throughout the project, including when comparing independent filmmaking to the studio system, in an attempt to define and differentiate American independent cinema. This oppositional reasoning for defining American independent cinema is utilised by scholars as well, as mentioned in Chapter 2 (Newman, 2011). The same reasoning is evident in discussions regarding normative versus non-normative identities, western-white childhoods versus ‘other’-‘racialised’ childhoods, and normative versus queer understandings of time and temporality. Unfortunately, this project is also, at times, constrained and contained by binary

formulations. Moving away from binary and polarised reasoning is an evolving process, which will eventually give way to multi-dimensional ways of thinking. This project's approach to the adult-child binary is an attempt at including different childhoods and adulthoods into the binary reasoning and thereby reconfiguring it as a continuum.

As much as the traditional conceptualisation of the child is transforming with newly emerging queer children, there are other childhoods that expand the rigid limitations on childhood. Some of the other childhoods that also require attention but did not receive visibility within this project are those of children of colour. Non-white children are considered to be outside the traditional perception of the western conceptualisation of the innocent, angelic child. These children also find more screen presence in postmillennial contexts of global cinema. There is an evident change regarding the perception of the innocent child as white, which can be traced in re-makes of well-known films with leads who are children and people of colour: *Annie* (Will Gluck, 2014) and *The Little Mermaid* (Rob Marshall, 2023) are two such examples. *Pariah* (Dee Rees, 2011), *The Fits* (Anna Rose Holmer, 2015), and *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016) are independent productions that show the experiences of contemporary American queer adolescents and children of colour. One other production, although made for TV by Netflix, is worthy of a mention because it depicts children of colour who are scientists and interested in time-travel. The trope of children of colour who are successful in educational fields is relatively rare, as stories of "other" childhoods tend to be about underserved communities. Moreover, giving control of time to children without adult supervision is uncommon in the sci-fi genre, of which the movie series *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985) is the prime example. *See You Yesterday* (Stefon Bristol, 2019) has Spike Lee as one of its producers and thematises a police officer killing an unarmed black civilian. The film is exceptional in many aspects including its depiction of unconventional adolescents in a setting that is directly related to a politically charged debate that was going on at the time.

Representing political crisis and conflict through the eyes of a child is usually carried out through retrospection: the child is placed in the setting of a conflict that is resolved, or a war that is settled and concluded in peace, e.g. *Beasts of No Nation* (Cary Joji Fukunaga, 2015), *First They Killed My Father* (Angelina Jolie, 2018), and *Jojo Rabbit* (Taika Waititi, 2019). It is sad to acknowledge that ongoing political crises and wars

harm real children but screening contemporary conflicts is not a possibility, even for news outlets at times. An exception to this is the climate crisis. The approaching catastrophe is still a future event, although there are various political agendas related to it and heated debates taking place about it in the present. Considering that the destructive climax of the crisis lies in the future, the children who will be the adults to experience it should be among the active participants of the discussion in this case. There are post-millennial productions that centre the climate crisis, and many have children in the cast: *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004) may be the most famous to date, while another more recent example is *Don't Look Up* (Adam McKay, 2021). One of the most interesting examples of this category is *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Benh Zeitlin, 2012), which not only depicts a queer child protagonist of colour in a post-apocalyptic environmental crisis but is also a good example of another emerging figure: the “wild child”.

Wildness is another queering element for the child, which is receiving more attention within the post-millennial canon. Halberstam's most recent work, published while this thesis was being written, is titled *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020). *Wild Things* brings together research and analysis of archives, novels, paintings, ballets, children's books etc. to offer a different perspective into the historical relations between wildness and queerness. One part of the book focuses on Maurice Sendak's children's book *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). Children, considered to be unrational, not-yet-civilised beings, share similarities with the savage. Wildness is inherent to the savage, and the child separates both from the normative and queers them. There is a growing interest in the ‘wildness’ of the child on screen as well, e.g. *Where the Wild Things Are* (Spike Jonze, 2009), *Life of Pi* (Ang Lee, 2012), *When Animals Dream* (Jonas, Alexander Arnby, 2014), *Raw* (Julia Ducournau, 2016), and *Bird* (Andrea Arnold, 2024). I believe the next step to follow, to broaden and to develop the arguments presented in this thesis would be research and analysis that centres the wild, non-white child at its core.

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