

Considering Societal, Psychological, and Geographical Borders in Dayton & Faris's 2006 film *Little Miss Sunshine*

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When considering borders and boundaries, our initial interpretation often responds with a recognition of the geographical borders which divide and organize our world. However, often overlooked are the psychological and societal borders experienced by individuals and the ways in which these kinds of boundaries define our lives. Borders and boundaries of all forms are encountered in the 2006 road movie *Little Miss Sunshine*, directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris. As Ann Brigham notes, “Road stories themselves are plotted around unsettling processes: the crossing of borders, the courting and conquering of distance, the reinvention of identity, and the access, negotiation, and disruption of spaces” (8). This essay will consider the complex borders navigated by the Hoover family as they journey from Albuquerque, New Mexico to Redondo Bay, California

in search of the *Little Miss Sunshine* beauty pageant. As a road narrative, the film covers extensive geographical distance, emblemized by the yellow VW campervan the Hoover family travels in. But the Hoovers are a family of misfits, all experiencing their own psychological barriers and suffering under the societal boundaries of social class hierarchy and patriarchy. Thus, as a film embedded in mobility, this essay will also consider the ways in which boundaries are transgressed as well as responding to the resilience exhibited by individuals when faced with challenging circumstances.

There is little doubt of the vital and complex significance of borders in the 21st century. In a time of political unrest, national intolerance and suspicion, and increasing migration, the contradictory existence of geographical boundaries is emphasized. As Marc Silberman and his fellow authors explain, “The contradictory yet simultaneous functions of walls,

borders and boundaries – to divide and connect, to exclude and include, to shield and constrain – are fundamental to all cultures” (1). These kinds of barriers exist simultaneously with other borders, like the mental and social boundaries which establish our perceptions of the world and the relationships we construct. Our lives are determined by borders and boundaries, and yet perhaps less salient in our minds are the societal and psychological borders sub-consciously defining the choices we make and the opportunities with which we are presented.

In Dayton and Faris’s 2006 film *Little Miss Sunshine*, the characters from the Hoover family encounter borders on many levels, from the borders created by social class hierarchies, to the psychological boundaries that are perpetuated from within the family dynamic. Thus, when the Hoover family take to the road in quest of seven-year-old Olive Hoover’s *Little Miss Sunshine* beauty pageant, the characters cross both geographical and metaphorical borders, and overcome the many boundaries placed before them. These border crossings become imperative in the personal development of these characters, as by the end of the film, each family member is reaffirmed of their purpose and place in the world. Simultaneously, the collective impact of these border crossings is demonstrated in the strengthened familial unity of the Hoover family. The crossings this essay will analyze designate *Little Miss Sunshine* as a film about defiance, growth, and overcoming adversity.

As a road narrative, *Little Miss Sunshine* is, by proxy, a film about the traversing of borders and boundaries. From the outset, the journey even in theory poses numerous challenges about who will participate in the trip, what vehicle will be used, and the resources needed for this kind of travel. In a tense scene at the beginning of the film, the family debate how to navigate and overcome the various borders placed before them. The financial requirements of flying from Albuquerque to California ensure that road travel is the necessary mode of transport. However, it is the requirement that the entire family of six participate in the journey – Grandpa Edwin helped Olive rehearse, Frank is on suicide watch, Dwayne is too young to be left home alone, and Sheryl “can’t drive a shift” – which ensures that the iconic yellow VW campervan is the vehicle of choice (Dayton and Faris). Once on the road, the hurdles the Hoover family encounter on their journey only multiply. From very early on in the film, the old campervan is a source of precarity with its engine, horn, and door breaking at various periods and thus preventing Olive from reaching the beauty pageant. Even as the family reaches California, the location presented in *Little Miss Sunshine* deeply contrasts traditional interpretations of the state as one of freedom and opportunity. Dayton and Farris present an environment polluted with freeway network links as concrete bridges cut across the open sky. This overwhelming man-made infrastructure encourages a return to Silberman et al’s ideas of the contradictory nature of borders. These highways are

intended for travel and connection and yet appear intimidating and hostile.



California Freeway Network.



Richard drives through the barrier to the beauty pageant hotel car park.

Further, when the Hoovers near their destination of Redondo Beach, the beauty pageant hotel is illustrated again as a site of hostility. The difficulty of finding the hotel, leading to Richard driving the van along footpaths, through chain barriers, and even breaking through the car park entrance barriers again symbolizes the both mental and physical borders crossed in order to reach the pageant. However, it is the traversing of these boundaries which in many ways breaks down the borders the family members have created between one another and creates a sense of family unity absent at the beginning of the film. The family's solution to the broken van – to push start the vehicle and then run and jump in while the van moves – actually acts as a distinctly positive, bonding experience for the family.

Dayton and Faris illustrate this in Frank's elated reaction to the successful operation:

“No one gets left behind! Outstanding soldier, outstanding!”



Family joy after successfully push-starting the bus. (See full scene [here](#).)

Here we observe Frank's first experience of joy in the film, an emotional state far from his own struggle with depression and a consequential suicide attempt. *Little Miss Sunshine* thus indicates the distinct sense of achievement when borders are crossed and boundaries are ruptured. The push-starting of the car throughout the film then forms a cinematic motif of bonding and connection between the family, but also of the physical struggle between individuals and the limitations placed on them seemingly by fate.

These borders also illustrate that the family are in many ways resigned to circumstances beyond their control, but also that as a family of misfits, they are predisposed to facing additional boundaries in life. These are characters struggling to find their place in the world, to be valued and to be respected. As Jill Dolan articulates, “Olive intuitively feels her own confusion and incipient despair at the choices that land in our laps, whether or not we want them there, at the vagaries of life over which we have so little control, biologically or politically” (1). Thus, the following will focus on the borders encountered by three out of six main characters in the film: Dwayne, Frank, and Olive.

Dwayne

Dwayne Hoover, a mute-by-choice teenager, is Sheryl's son from a previous marriage. As a character, he is socially awkward and extremely isolated, perhaps as a result of the fragile genetic bond he shares with his family. He is detached from his step-father Richard and step-grandfather Edwin, and, to an extent, from his half-sister, Olive. Interestingly, he

experiences an almost instant connection with Uncle Frank, a family member who perhaps feels more stable and central within a traditional family to Dwayne.



Dwayne's notepad.

Dwayne undeniably constructs a border between himself and others. His adolescence ensures he pushes away his family and his refusal to maintain relationships with others, as he states “All I ask is that you leave me alone” (Dayton and Faris). As Finamore illustrates, “Dwayne seems to typify the plight of the contemporary angst-ridden adolescent” (124). But it is the non-verbal border created by Dwayne which ensures his isolation from the world. He takes a vow of silence to prove his discipline until he achieves his dream of becoming a fighter pilot. His refusal to verbally communicate ensures a boundary between himself and others. Dwayne instead relies on the non-conventional method of communication: writing short responses on a notepad. This method is thus inherently restrictive and ensures that Dwayne’s ability to convey language and emotion is limited. Dwayne is a victim of the borders of his own creation.

Dwayne’s vow of silence is essential in ensuring the audience’s recognition of how critical his dream of flying jets is to his character. Thus, there is a sudden, devastating moment of realization when it is revealed that Dwayne will not be able to fly. In the scene, Frank, Olive, and Dwayne read a pamphlet with vision tests, one of which is a color blindness test. It soon becomes clear that Dwayne is color blind, and Frank instantly realizes “You can’t fly jets if you’re color blind.” Dayton and Faris employ a hand-held camera in the scene, mimicking the shaking, nauseating motion of the bus. Additionally, the scene takes place shortly after the van’s horn has broken, ensuring that the infuriating, whining

horn sound illustrates hysteria. Dwayne experiences a psychological breakdown in the van, banging against the doors and ceiling in an attempt to escape the confines of the bus. Color-blindness becomes a completely unpreventable border between Dwayne and his dreams.



Dwayne's breakdown scene. (See full scene [here.](#))

But *Little Miss Sunshine* is a film about navigating boundaries and the refusal to be confined by the borders placed in our paths. After his breakdown, Dwayne becomes more open, mostly as a result of increased articulation, thus creating a stronger connection with his family and deeper understanding of the great lengths individuals will go to for the ones they love. In turn, he becomes less isolated and actively includes himself in the family. In fact, it is in the scene following Dwayne's emotional breakdown that we witness the first

instance in which he experiences physical contact with another character, when Olive hugs him. The emotional and physical border he experiences between himself and the coldness of the world is fractured by the warm touch of his little sister.



Olive comforts Dwayne.

Frank

Like Dwayne, Frank Ginsburg is also a character who experiences isolation and constructs barriers between himself and others. Frank, a disgraced and heartbroken academic, joins the Hoover family to enable his sister, Sheryl, to take care of him after his suicide attempt. Frank is thus restrained by the psychological borders of mental illness, but is also stigmatized due to his sexuality, and, in a way, due to his academic status which at first impedes him in relating to others. But, as someone who has attempted suicide, Frank loses consent over the boundaries around him. When he enters the Hoover household, he is not allowed to be left alone and has to share a bedroom with Dwayne. As Sheryl reminds him, “Leave the door open, that’s important” (Dayton and Faris). The physical boundary of the door is ruptured, and Frank loses access to his dignity and any agency over his privacy. This is only heightened when the family endeavors on their road trip, where it seems every waking minute is spent in the close vicinity of Richard, Edwin, Sheryl, Dwayne and Olive on the bus. The close proximity of others to Frank forces the boundaries he has built between himself and others to ebb away. Frank quickly gains a new lease on life, like in the euphoric moments when the van is hurtling down the highway and the family all manage to jump in on time. Further, it is in the final parts of the film, when the Hoovers finally reach the pageant, that we see Frank as the first of the family to jump out of the van (with the door comically falling off in his hand) and run into the pageant hotel for Olive. Here, we witness

Frank's sense of purpose and the determination he possesses to reach the goal of the road trip. As a character, Frank has undergone a significant development on the road journey and crossed the internalized borders of heartbreak and self-deprecation.



Frank races to the pageant.

Olive

One character provides the motivation behind all the miles, all the motels, and the many borders crossed on the Hoover's road journey: Olive Hoover. Olive, the adored daughter, granddaughter, sister, and niece is the centring, collective point of the family. However, Olive also faces borders in her attempts to achieve her dream of becoming a beauty pageant winner. Aside from the narrative borders experienced on the road, Olive is also restrained by the borders of girlhood, with issues of self-image and bodily insecurity heightened to extremes within the beauty pageant environment. These societal borders which prevent Olive from establishing and maintaining a strong sense of self and self-image are only consolidated by her father Richard's damaging words of advice relating to his daughter's body. When the Hoovers stop at a diner for breakfast, Olive orders waffles and ice cream. Richard responds:

“Olive, can I tell you a little something about ice cream? Well, ice cream is made from cream, which comes from cow's milk, and cream has a lot of fat in it...Well, when you eat ice cream the fat in the ice cream becomes fat in your body...So, if you eat a lot of ice cream, you might become fat, and if you don't, you're going to stay nice and skinny sweetie.” (Dayton and Faris)

Richard employs damaging rhetoric on an impressionable and vulnerable seven-year-old girl,

ensuring lifelong questioning of her relationship with food and her body. As Alison Happel and Jennifer Esposito explain, “It appears Richard is trying to help discipline Olive’s body so that she performs a femininity that is sanctioned by the dominant culture” (6). She will constantly be confined by her father’s words and come to view her body and appetite as a barrier between her and success and love. Thankfully, the rest of the family are quick to deconstruct this harmful rhetoric, as Sheryl states “It’s ok to be skinny, and it’s ok to be fat if that’s what you want to be. Whatever you want, it’s ok.” (Dayton and Faris)



Olive orders waffles and ice cream at the diner. (See full scene [here](#).)

At the *Little Miss Sunshine* pageant, we see Olive struggling to place herself within this uncharted territory. She struggles to maintain the sense of self she previously possessed when viewing the other child contestants, whose physical figures sit in a liminal space between children, glamour models, and Barbie dolls. Olive begins to perceive her body within the beauty pageant gaze which, attuned to the male gaze, perpetuates a view that the female body should be regulated to a certain standard, which Olive’s pre-pubescent body obviously does not.



Olive judges her figure in the mirror at the beauty pageant.

Furthermore, when Olive dances, she becomes again confined by the profoundly complex and ludicrous boundaries of beauty pageantry, where young girls are sexualized within the realm of objectification but rejected when they are seen to take agency over their own bodily expression. As Dolan notes, “Olive dances with enthusiasm and joy, unaware that her moves borrow from a sexual vocabulary that signifies the sexual commodification and availability of women, particularly, for a male gaze” (1).

Despite their best efforts, Olive also faces borders as a result of her family dynamic. Regardless of the extreme lengths they go to in order to help Olive reach the *Little Miss Sunshine* pageant, there is no denying that the Hoovers could never fully cross over into the bizarre and ostentatious world of pageantry. Olive is both restrained and encouraged by the overbearing advice of her father, but even Richard realizes his overly simplified advice that “there’s two kinds of people in this world, there’s winners and there’s losers. Okay, you know what the difference is? Winners don’t give up,” is helpless within the ‘strictly codified’ world of the pageants (Robinson and Davies 353). Even the quite minimal class barriers Olive faces – in a diner she asks Sheryl “How much can we spend?” – are heightened when contrasted with the excess of the pageantry world. Olive’s simple leotard costume and ponytail looks pitiful next to the ostentatious outfits of the other girls. Ultimately, Olive crosses borders and overcomes the boundaries placed before her through the deep-rooted support and encouragement of her family. Not only do they help her get to California, but they encourage her to the very end, even joining her on stage in a final mark of defiance against the harsh and ceaseless world which grants the Hoovers no favors.



Olive at the Little Miss Sunshine pageant. (See full scene [here](#).)

Little Miss Sunshine is finalized as a film about the borders we face as individuals and the great depths we go to to cross them in the penultimate scene of the film. For the first time, we witness Olive’s performance. It is a dance routine she has been rehearsing with her grandfather, the content of which is yet unknown to her family. Olive’s performance turns out to be a scandalous burlesque dance routine taught to her by Edwin. Despite

the obvious sexualization of the other contestants, it is perhaps the agency which Olive unknowingly obtains over her sexual expression which transgresses the deeply codified beauty queen world. The dance routine is thus met with dismay and Olive is heckled, but in a wholesome and poignant finale, the family join Olive on stage. The characters themselves become borders between Olive and the “mainstream world of success and efficacy, warped, ambitious, spiteful and lonely” (Beck 30).



Olive's final performance at the Little Miss Sunshine pageant. (See full scene [here](#).)

As this essay has illustrated, *Little Miss Sunshine* exhibits the crossing of borders at an individual level. But it is the conditions in which these borders are crossed that illustrates the significance of the family dynamic in this film, as the personal journeys the characters undertake are supported by the presence of the unconditional love of their family. Personal development is facilitated by the family, and thus, each border crossing, geographical,

psychological or societal, consolidates the emotional ties that hold the family together. Olive is empowered by the realization that the most important judgement comes from those who love her. Dwayne is reintroduced to the familial love he previously rejected. Frank is reawakened to the unchallengeable love of his family after the pain of romantic heartbreak. In *Little Miss Sunshine*, the resilience each character shows is essential for the crossing of borders of all forms. As Eppler and Hutchings define, “Resilience is the process of coping with and overcoming adversity, finding purpose in the face of suffering, and preparing for the future with a focus on interconnections and personal strengths” (1463). As the Hoover family start the 700-mile drive back to Albuquerque, the yellow VW campervan provides the powerful symbol of this resilience, of the traversing of boundaries and the refusal to accept the adversities placed before them.



The Hoovers travel back to Albuquerque in their VW Van..

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