Grace at Arm’s Length: The Cultural Importance of Utilizing “Expositive Puzzle” in Independent Film

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Many independent films provide a realistic interpretation of everyday events. Passive viewing techniques used by independent scriptwriters and filmmakers require active engagement from the viewer in order to interpret characters and/or events. The following proposes that the “expositive puzzle” is an example of these techniques. It uses the film *Short Term 12* in order to demonstrate how the “expositive puzzle” works and to encourage use in real-world interactions in order to avoid interaction based on stereotypes.

*Keywords:* Independent film, *Short Term 12*, character analysis, film viewing techniques, childhood abuse, emotional trauma, expositive puzzle

Indie films like *Pulp Fiction* and *Memento* force viewer engagement by telling a story out of chronological order. This chronological puzzle propels the viewer to actively engage by figuring out the timeline of events based on clues in the film. When viewers “figure out” the sequence of the events, it “offers its own rewards... and pleasures” (Newman, 2011, p. 183) that strongly contrast with the more passive techniques of conventional Hollywood film viewing.

In Hollywood films, a character may easily be able to be labeled with a certain persona based on their narrative. On the other hand, in independent films, a writer’s reluctance to overindulge the viewers with a character’s history pressures viewers to participate in the film, rather than simply watch it. *Short Term 12* is an example of another type of puzzle for the viewer to try to participate in “figuring out”. Rather than a chronological puzzle that needs to be solved (like *Pulp Fiction* or *Memento*), this film offers a puzzle in the form of character narrative. “Without the conventional motivation of character flashbacks cued by storytelling or memory” (Newman, 2011, p. 183), the audience is forced to get to know and analyze that character based on personality traits, dialogue, or reactions to traumatic events. When the audience must rely on the aforementioned clues, they then have to assess the character through their own interpretation rather than by predetermined stereotypes pertaining to a class designation.

*Short Term 12* utilizes this strategy through the main character, Grace, who keeps both her colleagues and the viewer at arm’s length. Because very little is revealed about her back story, viewers must use a parallel character (Jayden) to analyze Grace through this method of “expositive puzzle”. “Reading” characters in such a fashion increases visibility of marginalized groups of people in film as individuals, rather than part of a homogenous collective. This ongoing visibility creates exposure to these individuals (even if it is only in film) which can aid in the removal of associated stigma attached by people with little to no interaction with them.
The deliberate use of the narrative puzzle subtly forces the viewer into an encounter with a member of a marginalized group of people free of any preconceived notions. This absolves the viewer’s tendency to harbor expectations based on stereotypes so that the viewer must resolve any dissonance between stereotypes and Grace’s reality and see her as she is, not as she “should” be.

Use of this type of interaction between the film and the film’s audience creates a strategy to view people in day-to-day engagement as who they are—not what they are. American modern multicultural approach insists that we see a person as just that: a person. The filmmaker conscientiously employs this strategy in an attempt to illustrate that people do not categorically become a certain type of person simply because of the lifestyle that they’ve lived (whether that lifestyle was chosen or not).

In Hollywood films, a character may easily be able to be labeled by a certain stereotype based on their narrative (which is generally laid out for the viewer). On the other hand, in independent films (“independent” and “indie” will be used interchangeably in this analysis), a writer’s reluctance to overindulge the viewers with a character’s history pressures viewers to participate in the film, rather than simply watch it. The author postulates that *Short Term 12* and other films like it create another type of indie film for the viewer to try to participate in “figuring out”. Like the chronological puzzle, this expositive puzzle is a “reward” in and of itself when it is solved by the viewer. However, rather than a chronological puzzle that blatantly needs to be solved (like *Pulp Fiction* or *Memento*), this film offers a subtle puzzle in the form of character narrative. “Without the conventional motivation of character flashbacks cued by storytelling or memory” (p. 183), the audience is forced to get to know (or “figure out”) the characters based on an analysis of their reactions to events and personality traits.

*Short Term 12* utilizes this strategy through the main character, Grace, who keeps both her colleagues and the viewer at arm’s length. Because very little is revealed about her back story, viewers must use a parallel character (Jayden) to analyze Grace through this method of “expositive puzzle” (the words “expositive” and “narrative” will also be used interchangeably). The “intellectual engagement” (Staiger, 2012, p. 23) demanded of the audience by use of this technique forces a critical analysis of the characters. In addition to the proposition of the “expositive puzzle”, the author also asserts that there is cultural importance and the ability for real-world application in the analysis of characters based on that expositive puzzle. Through this type of character analysis, there can be increased visibility and understanding of marginalized groups of people (in this case, adults who have survived sexual abuse and foster care).

*Short Term 12* is a film that shadows its main character during an especially-pivotal week in her life. The viewing audience is introduced to Grace, the supervisor of a facility for abused children. She is a rule-follower, and acts of an enforcer of the facility’s policies and procedures without question. She has been at her job long enough to move up in the ranks to a supervisory position; we see through scenes that she has a good reputation with members of her work’s management teams. Through her daily social interaction, the audience can discern that she has also developed a strong rapport with the clients as well as her employees at this foster care facility. The film also follows Grace through approximately a week of her personal life. She has just discovered that she is pregnant, the man who molested her as a teenager is getting out of prison, and she has taken in a new client at the foster care facility that she works at who has unintentionally forced her into a position of reconciling the emotions stemming from his release. None of this information is spoon-fed to the audience, however, as it would be in a typical Hollywood film; rather it is through the analysis of bits of information that the viewing audience must discern this through the course of the film.
Throughout this episodic telling of Grace’s life, the audience sees from the beginning that Grace’s character is one of little emotional availability. This emotional availability (or lack thereof) may not be have traditionally been an issue in her life; we see Grace interact with her romantic partner (and employee), Mason, and discern that they have been together for years. However, learning that Grace is pregnant with Mason’s child allows the film’s audience to really get a sense for the emotional distance at which Grace holds even those people that think that they are close to her. For example, when she goes to the doctor to find out the results of her pregnancy test, she rides her bike there alone. Rather than talk to anyone (even the counselor at the doctor’s office) about it, her initial reaction is to schedule an abortion. When she gets home from the clinic, she does not talk to Mason about her day; she instead takes a long, scalding hot shower. After this overview of Grace’s day, we are made very aware that Grace has developed habits that isolate herself to the fullest extent possible.

Grace’s ability to isolate herself from her emotions completely changes when she is introduced to a new female intake, Jayden. Jayden is a somewhat privileged young lady, being allowed the opportunity to come to the facility because her father is a “friend of a friend”, according to an administrator of the facility. Grace is immediately drawn to this young lady, despite the fact that Jayden blatantly has little regard for rules and regulations. For example, we see Grace, who traditionally adheres very strictly to the rules of the facility, overlooking Jayden’s swearing because Grace finds the infraction “clever”.

Grace also helps Jayden get comfortable in her room, which Jayden wants to cover with pictures of male genitalia; Grace unwittingly helps her to discover loopholes in the rules by quipping that the pictures had better be scientific. During a scene later in the film, we see Jayden’s wall above her bed covered by anatomically-correct hand drawn pictures of penises (complete with labels of the different parts, just as Grace suggested). As Grace is an artist, also, she asks Jayden at this point to sit down and draw with her. It is during this scene that we learn that Grace, like Jayden, dealt with her traumatic childhood artistically. This similarity between characters is highlighted very strongly in this scene so that the viewer begins to notice (and perhaps even look for) likenesses in Grace and Jayden.

As we are following Grace throughout her week, we also get an idea of what frustrations Jayden is dealing with in her life that is fueling her need to make art. We see a young lady who commonly acts out of frustration, and whose stressors have become the dominating force of her life. Over the course of the film, viewers see Jayden run away from the facility and fight with the staff, among other acts of transgression that stem from her frustration.

One particular incident that evidences Jayden’s irritation occurs on her birthday. The first half of Jayden’s birthday is spent waiting for her father to pick her up from the facility; she sits quietly on the couch all day in anticipation of his arrival. When he fails to show up, Jayden storms off into her room and closes the door, which the facility prohibits. Grace demands that the door be opened, but Jayden refuses. Grace, Mason, and Nate force the door open, and then must physically deescalate the situation. While Mason and Nate sit shoulder-to-shoulder with Jayden, holding her hands so that she cannot hurt them—or herself – we find Grace attempting to talk her down.

It is through this series of events that more likenesses between the two characters are revealed. Jayden closes the door to her room when she gets frustrated in an attempt to isolate herself. This subtle behavior can be paralleled to Grace’s lifestyle of emotional solitude, which was explored previously. The audience also learns in this scene that Jayden is hurting herself physically in an attempt to deal with the emotional pain of her
current life situation. At this point, we as the audience also learn that Grace used to cut herself, too, when she lifts up her pant leg and shows multiple scars on her leg.

In this moment, the viewers begin to fully-understand the similarities between Grace and Jayden, and therefore begin to solve this “expositive puzzle”. This recognition of similitude allows the audience a glimpse into what Grace went through as a child victim of sexual abuse, how she began to hurt herself as a coping mechanism, and why the emotional distancing became vital to her living a “normal” life (as we have seen Jayden do). We are able to read Jayden as an exposition of Grace’s childhood, and Grace begins to understand that by isolating herself like Jayden has, she has not been hurting her attacker—rather, she’s been hurting herself. When Grace exposes her scars, suspicions are substantiated that Grace and Jayden are much more similar than the audience could have initially suspected. This scene then confirms for the viewing audience that Grace has emotional scars that mirror her physical ones, and that Grace and Jayden’s scars mirror each other’s.

Because Grace is confronted so blatantly with a representation of her childhood trauma, she is quickly being forced to reconcile her emotions. This causes her to mull over her decision to abort the baby. We find her in the bathtub, soaking in the possibility of being emotionally accessible to this baby (and, by proxy, to Mason). She is immersing herself in the option, rather than attempting to scrub the possibility away (as she did in the shower when she first found out she was pregnant). We see what could be construed as an attempt to stop isolating herself when she tells Mason about the baby, and he is overjoyed. Also in an attempt to be emotionally available to him, she begins riding to work in the car with him, rather than riding her bike alone. She accompanies Mason to a family function in which he informally proposes to her; she accepts and we think we begin to see Grace stop punishing herself and start to allow herself to feel joy.

All seems to be going well until Mason lets Grace know that the man who sexually violated her is getting out of prison. We see Grace regressing back into a victim’s mindset as she begins to pick the skin around her thumb until it bleeds (which she doesn’t even notice). This worried reaction of inflicting self-harm due to having to encounter her attacker again is one that we’ve seen before in Jayden, also.

In addition to Grace’s acts of physical self-injury, she begins to emotionally punish herself again through isolation. She begins to ride her bike to work as she did initially. She pushes Mason away by telling him she already has an appointment to abort the fetus and tells him that she cannot marry him. These distancing techniques, which are also evident in Jayden’s behavior, serve to further authenticate that Grace and Jayden can be seen as parallel characters.

The personality traits and behaviors that Grace and Jayden have exhibited in this film are illustrative of victims of sexual abuse. Substantiation of this can be found by delving into research focused on victims of childhood sexual trauma at the hands of a loved one. It reveals a common tendency for these victims to isolate themselves in an attempt to punish themselves. They feel that they are unworthy of love so much that they isolate. This emotional disconnection serves not only as a coping mechanism against past transgressions, but also as a defense mechanism against future emotional pain, as is evident in both characters. This emotional disconnection is responsible for the victims’ inability to maintain long-term relationships, as they are not emotionally accessible to those that love them. Victims of abuse have very casual relationships in an attempt to not allow people to see the depth of the pain that they feel, and often employ “avoidance strategies which are empirically associated with an inability to cope [with childhood trauma]”, including emotionally distancing and isolating themselves from others (Browne, 2002, p. 61). According to Sims and Garrison, who presented lists of residual emotional effects of childhood emotional and/or sexual trauma in “Childhood Sexual Abuse and
Intimate Relationships: A Support Group for Male Partners”, “[a]dult survivors often present with a long list of psychological symptoms including…self-abusive behavior…distrust, relationship difficulties, and sexual dysfunctions” (Sims & Garrison, 2014, p. 17). When a person embodies these personality traits, the scars from sexual abuse control their dialogue (or lack thereof) and that which becomes their visceral reaction.

It is blatant that Jayden embodies these characteristics that stem from sexual abuse. However, only when the audience uses Jayden as a parallel character to Grace can one see Jayden’s behaviors as clues that lead to the discovery of Grace’s life story. One can easily observe Grace’s physical isolation in her daily routine from the beginning of the film. However, it is not obvious from the beginning of the film why she is isolated. The notion that she may be a victim of sexual abuse is alluded to in the beginning of the film, but proof is only afforded in the form of an expositive trail of breadcrumbs that the viewer must follow throughout the movie. These breadcrumbs serve as an outline to illustrate the ways in which Grace can most definitely be seen as a “character emblematic of [the] social identity [of the average victim of sexual abuse]...” (Newman, 2011, p. 92). This trail of subtle clues allows us also to draw parallels between two characters’ behaviors, therefore engaging in said “narrative puzzle”. The participation in the puzzle allows one to hypothesize—and evidence said hypothesis—to assert that Grace and Jayden have very similar backgrounds and are parallel characters. Although she does exhibit these tendencies, one can speculate that Grace’s disengagement from her emotions has been what has allowed her to have a somewhat “normal” life, as she is very uncomfortable and unpredictable when she begins to feel emotional (as evidenced in the film several times).

Grace, however, does not embody these traits on such a blatant level. Her emotional disengagement characterizes a woman who is functioning socially on a very superficial level, but who is functioning, despite her traumatic childhood. Although her standoffishness is her dominant method of dealing with society, she is still an active member of society. Her aloofness exemplifies a sexual victim’s emotional distancing as an act of self-preservation, but the fact that her daily goings-on are not perpetuating cycles of abuse and victimization runs deeply oppositional to the dysfunctional stereotypes of these victims. The analysis of these characters affords viewers evidence that challenges stereotypes of unchangeable dysfunction in survivors of sexual abuse and the foster care system.

Verification of the appearance of these behaviors in victims of sexual abuse thereby allows Short Term 12 to be used as a text by which to analyze Grace’s character. Because of this film’s “operat[ion] under an ideology of realism [and] adherence to cultural verisimilitude” (Neale, 2012, p. 180), the audience is able to categorize this as a serious, realistic cinematic piece with to engage and interact with the expositive puzzle. Use of this type of interaction between the film and the film’s audience creates an strategy to view people in day-to-day engagement as who they are—not what they are. As we interact with new acquaintances on a day-to-day basis, we are not afforded the luxury of being handed a narrative of their life, as we are in a Hollywood film. We are forced to listen to them and make educated guesses based on those personality traits, dialogue, and reactions to situations—much the way that we must engage with the expositive puzzle of Short Term 12 and other films like it.

American modern multicultural approach insists that we see a person as just that: a person. The filmmaker conscientiously employs this puzzle approach in an attempt to illustrate that people do not categorically become a certain type of person simply because of the lifestyle that they’ve chosen (or that has chosen them). The subtle narrative complexity stemming from the lack of outright exposition allows a “discourse of authenticity” (Newman, 2011, p. 16) that puts emphasis on the character’s individual identity. This emphasis on character
identity allows explorations of the stereotypes of marginalized characters (again, in this case, adult survivors of sexual abuse and the foster care system) in order to “encourage discussion amongst critics and audiences alike” (Staiger, 2012, p. 22) based on the “verisimilitude [due to the] ambiguity and intertextuality in narrative” (p. 23).

Empirical research lends evidence to the fact that films can be utilized as a teaching tool. As Marcus and Jeremy (2007) found in “Tinsel Town as Teacher: Hollywood Film in the High School Classroom”, viewing films allows students to develop “…empathy for [and thereby, eventual understanding of] marginalized groups…and new historical…points of view” (p. 316). If easy accessibility to a character narrative in Hollywood film makes them ideal to use in a high school classroom setting, why not extrapolate on this approach for college humanities classes? If audience can begin to develop a practice to identify a person within a marginalized group, call the stereotypical behaviors to mind, then simultaneously reject these notions in favor of knowing the person on an individual basis, we stand a chance of deepening that multicultural approach in practice, not just in rhetoric.

This has strong potential for real-world application. Practicing this type of character analysis of realistic characters can easily be extended out into day-to-day life. This can be a method utilized in order to help see marginalized people as individuals, rather than part of a homogenous collective. This ongoing visibility creates exposure to these individuals (even if it is only in film initially) which can aid in the removal of stigma associated with marginalized groups by people who have had little to no interaction with them. The deliberate use of the narrative puzzle in indie films subtly forces the viewer into an encounter with a member of a marginalized group of people free of any preconceived notions. This absolves the viewer of the tendency to harbor expectations based on stereotypes so that the viewer must resolve any dissonance between said stereotypes and a person (or character’s) individual reality in order to see her as she is, not as she “should” be.

References