

Unrealized childhoods, from east to west essay sample



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A Thematic Study of Juno and The Kite Runner

2007 marked a great year for films, and two of the most notable couldn't be more different from each other. *Juno*, directed by Jason Reitman and the controversial Diablo Cody—with the film supposedly a parody of her own life—takes place in suburban America, complete with the kitschy stereotype of mac-and-cheese families and overstuffed furniture. While it engages in tone and language of the most exemplary wit and sarcasm, the issue of a pregnant adolescent is all too serious and alarming. *The Kite Runner*, based on the successful novel by Khaled Hosseini and directed by Marc Forster, is a moving story of friendship and loyalty set against the political and cultural upheaval of Afghanistan. Devoid of humor and heavy in emotion, the film embodies the plight of Afghans forced to leave their country to heed the call of safety.

Theme

The two films, literally worlds apart, tackle the common theme of childhood, one that is abruptly cut. In *The Kite Runner*, the friendship of the two young boys Amir and Hassan are brought to the forefront, often affected by the reality of their disparate social status. Amir, being the son of a wealthy and respected man, fails to defend his friend's unwavering commitment to their friendship, succumbs to societal pressure, and consciously attempts to flee from the harsh sight he had witnessed. Hassan, true to his word and loyal to the end, chooses not to judge Amir and his decisions. The violence that had happened to Hassan as he was raped by a gang of privileged teens, seen clear as day by Amir, signaled the end of their childhood—as well as their

friendship. Amir tries to make amends years later, by rescuing Hassan's child left in war-torn Afghanistan. On the other hand, Juno MacGuff's adolescence was also terminated by her fleeting decision to have sex with her friend, which eventually leads to pregnancy. But unlike Amir, Juno refuses to go with the default solution for teenage pregnancies—immediate abortion—and chooses to keep the baby and put it up for adoption.

Two thematically similar propositions, with two varied reactions. Juno, being older but not quite an adult, showed more maturity than all the other people in her life; an extraordinary characteristic maintained throughout her exposition, bringing a kind of wisdom hardly seen in most kids her age. Her character was utterly enjoyable and believable, born out of the successful script and superb acting of newcomer Ellen Page; but it leads one to think if there are indeed teenagers who can achieve the same level of profundity.

The boy Amir, as developed in the novel and in the film, appears to be more typical of a child raised as a brat and discovers that his beloved father favors his best friend more than him. This gives more logic to his reaction to Hassan's rape, almost as if he believed his friend deserved it, at the same time consumed him with guilt that he would take against the poor boy till adulthood.

Drama

Both films have outstanding drama elements—particularly in set and art direction. Juno had completely believable scenes, mainly through the detailed recreation of a typical American suburban community. None of the standard production design of teen-oriented films are present, compared to

the pink and shiny packaging of teen star Lindsay Lohan's *Mean Girls* (Waters, 2004), or, on a suburban theme, the pretty picket-fenced streets of *Desperate Housewives* (Cherry, 2004-2007). It is really more of a tongue-in-cheek portrayal of American pop culture and its nuances, from the dark wood paneling to the clunky, humongous cars used. Only the soon-to-be adoptive parents, only to emphasize their personalities, had homes that appear of standard classic design. Even the school set is imperfect, and the students are shown in far-from-hip fashions, like Juno's nondescript hoodie-and-sweatpants uniform and her friend Paulie's outdated sports attire that looks like a throwback to the 1970s. These all connote familiarity and ordinariness, essential to establish the transition from youth to adulthood.

The Kite Runner also invested in authentic locations, sets and props, probably even more so. The depiction of old-world Afghanistan, during its heyday as the prominent Middle Eastern country before the Taliban regime, is captured through wide, sandy roads and merchants selling colorful tapestry unique to the culture. Kite-running, the symbolic activity in the story, makes use of handsome kites far in style from their Western counterparts. Amir's house, grand and situated in a compound, is typical of his family's stature; while the quarters of Hassan and his father appears bare and basic, set a few yards away from the main house. The changes in locations—from Afghanistan to America and back—are true to the times indicated, by showing Amir and his father adjusting to American culture, starting with their significantly smaller home. Amir's return to Afghanistan, now ravaged and gray, provides the emotional juxtaposition to the market-

like and colorful atmosphere of the old—as well as the abrupt shift from childhood to the premature onset of adult expectations.

Editing

In truth, and perhaps because of the nature and objectives of the film, *Juno* does not make use of innovative editing. Or maybe, its innovation is in its simplicity and straightforward execution of the process, to match the chronological exposition of emotion, rather than events. In a world where high-budget films like James Cameron's *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997) are lauded for its action-packed scenes and fast-paced editing, a film like *Juno* comes out like a breath of fresh air. Editing usually serves as eye candy, to make the viewer sit up and watch every moment, but it can also take a calmer mode and attract the audience with its sheer courage for excellence in simplicity, clean lines, and steady rhythm.

Several segments of *The Kite Runner*, because of the story's need, rely mostly on editing skills. The kite-running event starts the tone, by demonstrating a sport unfamiliar to most viewers. Like the strange quidditch game in the *Harry Potter* (2001-2007) films, frames and sequences in kite-running are designed to mimic the actual pace—starting out slow, with frames showing the size of the event, building up with shorter, faster clips that depict the excitement and tension of the final challenge. Another scene is the definitive rape of Hassan, where the horror and violence are clearly communicated through a sequence of frames at various angles, even incorporating the inevitable presence of Amir. The last sample scene, most akin to Hollywood-style editing, is that of Amir's rescue of Assef, Hassan's

child. Again, physical violence is the message to be conveyed, and this is done quite typically with a standard fight scene. Their escape from Assef's prison is documented by interspersing Amir and Assef running, with the Taliban realizing the turn of events thus shooting at them with high-powered guns.

The two editing styles of the two films both stress the theme, albeit differently. Youth can be left quietly, without much fanfare; but it can also be heralded by action scenes symbolic of the change, like running, escaping, and even rape.

Conclusion

Culture, language, location and action are always catalysts for change, even in films that set out to be identified in these terms. Youth and its representations are universal, and the emotions that go with it are common to all. The two films' depiction of the loss of youth, whether intentional or not, relate logically with the techniques used in both drama and editing. These are designed purposely for the viewers' mind and heart, to elicit the effects proposed by the films objectives. That *Juno* and *The Kite Runner* emerged as two of the best films of 2007 is proof of its success.

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