

Richard Linklater: The Evolution of the Original Slacker

In this essay, I will be exploring the mind of the filmmaker, Richard Linklater. I will be interrogating three separate time periods and examining three films from Richard Linklater's filmography. With specific focus on how Richard Linklater breaks the convention of narrative, I will question whether Richard Linklater can truly be called an "auteur" and I examine how my three examples changed both the way we look at film and how I, personally, perceive film. Finally, I will compare myself as a filmmaker by an analysis of the selected films, Richard Linklater's career, and the learning that I can take for my next short film.

The first film that I will be analysing is the Director's first or, should I say, (technically) his second. Richard Linklater's first film was a test film called 'It's Impossible to Learn to Plow by Reading Books' (Linklater, 1988) in 1988. Then in 1991, his second film was released. It focussed on a random selection of people in Austin, never staying with any one individual for longer than a few minutes. It was made for \$23,000 dollars. This film was called 'Slacker' (Linklater, Slacker, 1991). The film along with 'Sex, Lies and Videotape' (Soderbergh, 1989) were branded as the start of the independent cinema scene of the 1990s.

Richard Linklater, a self taught filmmaker, has made a career by making films in his own way, ripping up the film "rule book" and throwing it away. As Joe Berkowitz examined in his article profiling Linklater, when it comes to narrative, Linklater is quoted as saying "The right narrative form on every movie is the thing I have to break. New forms have always been a part of my thinking. 'Could you ever tell a story this way? Why wouldn't that work?'" (Berkowitz, 2014). In examining 'Slacker', is this film an example of what Linklater wished to explore yet further, that is, 'Could you tell a story that had no central character but still made sense?' (Berkowitz, 2014). In my opinion, 'Slacker' is an embodiment of Linklater's philosophy, never spending more than a few minutes on a character before switching to another, and making a film without a lead character. The film covered topics such as social class, unemployment, government oppression, terrorism, alongside the seemingly humdrum and mundane – for example, whether or not a man should have stayed at a bus stop. As Linklater himself put it when making 'Slacker', "I'm not building a wall but making a brick" (Reynolds, 2017). As critic, David Bordwell, would also highlight, to use this form of narrative, the plot of 'Slacker' "would seem unintelligible or pointless" (Bordwell, 2006) when compared with the usual Hollywood narrative. So what is the narrative style of Linklater?

A key aspect of Linklater's style is the disregard of any formal narrative structure, use of conversations driving the plot to show the reality. The way Linklater sees the world is what he aims to get across to the audience. The recurring theme of the passing of time and the fragility of time is echoed throughout all of his work, and is a focal point of the conversations that take place. As John Truby states when discussing dialogue and plot themes: "It goes from dialogue about what the characters are doing to who the characters really are" (Truby, 2007) and this is the idea that drives the plot of 'Slacker'. Although rejected by Linklater (given the wide range of age groups within the film), for the 'generation X', Linklater became an undeclared voice of their generation, with 'Slacker' highlighting the disconnectedness and discomfort of their generation.

When it comes to his cinematic style, Linklater focuses on little camera movement and long takes. The camera tracks the characters; it does not track their state of mind. Linklater is trying to represent everyday life, the poetry of the everyday, the setting usually taking place within 24 hours to fully take into effect the normality of the everyday. It is my belief that this is why Linklater has become an icon of independent cinema. As critic Thomas A. Christie pin points while analysing 'Slacker' he stated that it had to be "seen to be experienced" (Christie, 2008). Who cares about plot or characterization, story or what makes a film when you create something so relatable and natural? The narrative gimmick of 'Slacker' add layers to the simple premise that reveals itself to the audience as they watch, the quick turnaround of characters adds layers to the predetermined period of time, giving emotional depth to the film.

The next film I analyse is 'Waking Life' (Linklater, Waking Life , 2001) which tracks a journey of existentialism through a lucid dream. So can you make a film that reflects a realistic reality in a surreal environment. One of the quotes from the film itself states "They say that dreams are only as long as they last. Couldn't the same thing be said about life?" (Linklater, Waking Life , 2001). It is this statement that drives the film. The film was shot entirely on digital video then it was handed to animator who used a rotoscope technique to create a dream like state. The cinematic style, unlike 'Slacker', changes. The camera is sometimes handheld or used to switch from one side of the room to the other. The animation is used to mimic the camerawork itself. As Linklater stated about the style "I want to tell a story in the right way. Technologies can help us in our human desire to express ourselves, to communicate and share our experiences" (Silverman, 2001). The narrative itself is in one continuous loop, as if it itself is like a dream.

'Waking Life' was the first example of long form experimental creativity which would be seen again in Linklater's 'Before Series' and 'Boyhood'. The film truly was as filmmaker, Tommy Paloota, stated, a way for Linklater to make a film "to be completely free and independent from the Hollywood system" (PBS, 2017). In fact, the Hollywood system was not an unusual form for Linklater to break as he had already shown this propensity with 'Slacker' and, as I have already discussed above, Linklater's desire was to break the Hollywood norm. The narrative of 'Waking Life' was a philosophical odyssey again switching from character to character very much like 'Slacker' albeit with more of a narrative. To Linklater 'Waking Life' was about the "interconnectedness of situations" (Tobias, 2001), while narrative wise it was "fun to make a narrative that's centered on ideas. You can hitch the ideas onto the narrative, and they work in the context of the movie" (Tobias, 2001). The linear narrative disappears and, at first glance, it would seem the film is nothing more than the ramblings from a philosophy seminar, however, in my view, the film is so much more. The use of the dream reality is used as an excuse to break narrative conventions. Each interaction and narrative moment is styled differently as a ruse for the illusion in which the lead character finally realises that he should just wake up.

After 'Waking Life', Linklater went through various stages of filmmaking. As Wollen states the "only limitation of an artist is the refusal to think of himself as such and his commitment to film as commercial entertainment" (Wollen, 1972, p. 168). Linklater did not limit himself as an artist. Linklater had no such limitation with 'School of Rock' (Linklater, School of Rock ,

2003) a critical darling and also his most commercially successful film, opening the door to the mainstream for Linklater. Linklater has never deliberately stayed away from mainstream films; he also did not deliberately limit himself to mainstream either. Linklater stated that “I’m lucky that I get to jump around, do a big-budget comedy and then a smaller film. I don’t even make a big distinction between them. No one believes this, but it’s the same. I’m the same person, trying to make it work. I just love being on a movie set. I like making movies.” (Papish, 2016).

The final example of Linklater’s work that I have chosen to examine is his film, ‘Boyhood’. In doing so, I also examine whether through this film plus just the few examples of his filmography, Linklater has become easily identifiable, making him an auteur. The film ‘Boyhood’ culminated in several years’ worth of filming while Linklater was also engaged on his other projects. It is a full circle on the mind of Richard Linklater and his most personal film to date. As critic Andre Bazin states “An auteur is someone who speaks from the first person” (Bazin, 1957). Therefore, while you could argue that Linklater’s work in ‘Boyhood’ fits that definition, you might struggle to see that in his other films as there are so many characters - who is Linklater in ‘Dazed and Confused’ (Linklater, Dazed and Confused , 1993) or ‘Tape’ (Linklater, Tape , 2001)or ‘Me and Orson Welles’ (Linklater, Me and Orson Welles , 2009) for instance? As Zac Efron, star of ‘Me and Orson Welles’, states in the documentary of Richard Linklater : “Rick learns one thing and then moves onto the next” (Wood, 2014). So in this case ‘Boyhood’ above all the rest are something that you can identify the most within and it is the clearest argument for Linklater being an auteur.

Richard Linklater would not describe himself as an auteur or even on the surface be seen as an auteur by many. In contrast, for Sarris an auteur is one where: “Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics for the style which will serve as his signature” (Sarris, 2004). In academic terms, therefore, Linklater falls into that category even though he does not stick to the same narrative style or the same visual style every time but rather displays a collective of various techniques and tricks that he has learnt throughout his career. For me, the best exploration of the auteur theory is Francois Truffaut’s. He states “A true film auteur is one who brings something genuinely personal to his subject instead of merely producing a tasteful, accurate but lifeless rendering of the original material” (Truffaut, 1954). This premise is as close as a filmmaker can get to sharing a bond with a fellow artist. That being said, Linklater himself states when making ‘Boyhood’: “If you make a film about childhood, you’ve got to pick a moment — you know, ‘The 400 Blows,’ Most childhoods aren’t like Truffaut’s, though. They have no single, representative dramatic stretch. They gain meaning across years and disparate moments.” (Berkowitz, 2014). Michael Apter, an English filmmaker, created a documentary series, revisiting several people from the age of 7 onwards, and is the closest thing that we have to what Linklater achieved in ‘Boyhood’.

So what is 'Boyhood'? Filmed over twelve years, 'Boyhood' (Linklater, Boyhood , 2014) chronicles quite simply what the title suggests, the life in real time of a boy's journey into manhood. The concept is no strange idea to Linklater, given the 'Before' series. In 'Before Sunset', Ethan Hawke's character quotes Thomas Wolfe when discussing his book when he states that the novelist says that "we are the sum of all the moments of our lives, and that, uh, anybody who sits down to write is gonna use the clay of their own life, that you can't avoid that." (Linklater, Before Sunrise & Before Sunset: Two Screenplays, 2005).

Linklater evidences his agreement with this quote by his practical method in 'Boyhood' in which Mason Jr is looking down at a decomposing dead bird. This scene is an integral moment of the power of cinema, referencing the film 'The Mirror' (Tarkovsky, 1975), which Tarkovsky states is his most personal film and reflects a specific meeting and mirror image of how his parents met. Linklater referenced his own childhood when making the film and that scene of the dead bird was a case of "trusting your audience" (Theoffcamerashow, 2016). How do you make the audience relate, in a Linklater approach that is through the poetry of the everyday? That bird symbolizing birth and death, is one such example, where in a small scene, a child tries to understand the world.

'Before Sunrise' (Linklater, Before Sunrise , 1995) chronicles a dream like romance when two people meet on the train after watching a couple argue. 'Before Sunset' (Linklater, Before Sunset , 2004) revolves around the longing for that night alongside life's responsibilities and 'Before Midnight' (Linklater, Before Midnight , 2013) goes full circle looking at the reality of relationships, when the couple from the romance become the couple arguing on the train. These films shot eight years after one another centred around a couple, examining the underlying reality of what a relationship is truly like. In the same way that Linklater wanted to capture the reality of the moments of a boy growing up, Linklater's 'Before' series was an attempt to show a genuine relationship on screen, being the culmination, as Wolfe states, of the sums of the moments that make us. That being said, David Sims in an article for the Atlantic states when it comes to narrative, Linklater made his: "Major progression into conventional storytelling" (Sims, 2015) with 'Before Sunrise'- could it be argued that Linklater was, actually, following the Hollywood norm despite himself?

So what about myself as a filmmaker? Last year I made a short film from a Stephen King short story entitled 'Stationary Bike' (King, 2008). It was a dream come true for me as a Stephen King life long fan. While I put everything into it, including my own personality and what I considered to be the "clay" of my own life, the film itself still feels fundamental, falling squarely within the genre conventions of a psychological thriller. 'Stationary Bike' was about building a relationship between the author and the auteur, and questioning whether they could live side by side. My project this year, in my final year, is entitled 'The Night We Met', and is about the choices that we make. Specifically, the choice of an old man at a train station who regretted never speaking to a girl at a school dance and the man he meets who has run away from his wedding and who questions the whole idea of marriage. They meet and discuss, in real time, the consequences of love and life.

In conclusion, does Richard Linklater break conventions with his films regarding narrative? What will I, as a filmmaker, take away from his career? Linklater does not follow any rules.

Story and character drive his films. So his narrative style is firstly how we can break the tradition of what we, as an audience, would perceive as a three act structure film and instead take the essence of our own life and how we can relate to what we see on screen with the everyday. In my life, I have not experienced true tragedy, I have had a good childhood, I have good relationships with family and friends. I have never been to war, never lived in poverty. I have been very lucky, however, I feel my life has drama and that biggest drama is connection. Human connection. I am interested in story and character; I want to create projects for which reflect how I feel about the world; I don't want money or fame; I want freedom and Linklater represents what I could be. Is my new project this year following in the footsteps of Linklater? Maybe it is....

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