

Boyhood (2014)

Major Credits:

Writer and Director: Richard Linklater
Principal Cast: Ellar Coltrane (Mason), Patricia Arquette (Mom/Olivia), Ethan Hawke (Dad/Mason Sr.), Lorelei Linklater (Samantha), Zoe Graham (Sheena)
Cinematography: Lee Daniel, Shane F. Kelly
Editor: Sandra Adair

Production Background:

Filmed in thirty-nine days over the course of twelve years with the same cast, *Boyhood* remains unique in cinematic history. François Truffaut directed five features over twenty years starring Jean-Pierre L aud playing the same character, starting at age 14 with the classic *The 400 Blows* (1959); Michael Apter has produced a documentary every seven years following the same dozen or so people through nearly five decades in his *Up* series (*Seven Up—56 Up*; 1964-2012). But Truffaut’s Antoine Doinel films involve five discrete fictional stories, with only the protagonist providing continuity, and Apter’s non-fictional films offer only brief talking head interviews to catch up with the lives of the subjects after the passage of seven years. *Boyhood*, however, tells one continuous fictional narrative. It is a wonderful example of Truffaut’s conception of a great film that makes a risky “bet” (he was describing *Jules and Jim*); in Linklater’s case, it was that his star, Ellar Coltrane, would agree to continue the project each year (with his parents’ permission) and grow up to be the interesting young man—photogenic and intellectually appealing—that he becomes.

Cinematic Aspects:

1. Casting: Ethan Hawke appears in his ninth film directed by Linklater. His character nicely elides with his portrayal of Jesse in the three *Before* films—maturing from cocky, more or less carefree every-other-week dad to responsible father for a new family, even at the cost of trading his GTO for a minivan. In something of a comeback role, Patricia Arquette won virtually every major female acting award, including the Oscar.
2. Editing: The story moves seamlessly from one year to the next without title cards or dialogue marking the passing years. Besides the actors’ changing appearance (Hawke seems to have walked off the set of the *Before* series, which overlaps with *Boyhood*; Arquette’s weight fluctuates along with her changing hairstyles), the film portrays its era through dialogue references to events like the 2008 election and the ever-accelerating proliferation of electronic devices. Note, too, how Linklater does not typically cut a scene at the most dramatic moment, creating instead a series of denouements that give the feeling of real life (while risking our patience for the film’s duration).
3. Special Effects: *There are none.*

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does watching the duration of twelve years with the same actors—something like observing them through time-lapse photography—alter your perception of the film?
2. Although *Boyhood* is definitely a narrative—it tells a story (a child grows up)—the story itself barely has what we would call a plot. Absent the explosions, death and disease, or thrilling action sequences of most movies, how does the film hold your attention for so long? Put the question another way: how does *Boyhood* deconstruct the conventions of Reality-TV?
3. The title is “Boyhood,” but as much as the film is about a child growing up, it also might be entitled “Parenting.” Mason may still be too young to judge, but how do you assess Olivia and Mason Sr. as parents? How does their son reflect their influence?
4. Mason’s father serves as another example of Linklater’s interest in arrested male development; Olivia makes several bad decisions while trying to hold together her notion of family but still satisfy her personal needs. Despite his fecklessness and her misguided choices, how does the film ultimately validate and empathize with their lives?