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VM131 Approaches in Media Studies

Oct 2, 2023

### *They/Them* Film Form Analysis

The short film *They/Them* depicts a non-binary teenager's journey to acceptance from themselves and others. The opening scene powerfully introduces the story, and focuses solely on the main character, Ash. It focuses on Ash reciting a poem about enjoying being a girl, and makes clear their obvious discomfort. It is clearly not the beginning of their self-discovery, but also not the very end, and this sequence is a compelling moment to draw the viewer into the story. There are few obvious elements that give this scene such an impact, but upon closer analysis, the director of the short has implemented several purposeful choices to grab the audience's attention. These choices include elements of *mise-en-scène* (the setup of the scene), camera framing, and sound production.

The *mise-en-scène* of the opening contains several subtle details, such as set pieces and character appearance, that connote to the story of Ash figuring out their gender identity. The *mise-en-scène* as a whole is very minimalistic so as not to distract the viewer from the main idea. The very first shot in the short is of Ash from behind, staring at their bedroom wall. It is completely bare, other than two pictures; one of a man and one of a woman, while Ash sits between the two. This conveys the immediate thematic idea of gender, setting the precedent for the plot of the rest of the film. The next few shots depict the bedroom and furniture, all of which is plain white; there are no objects of any color to denote gender. It looks somewhat odd that an

otherwise poetic teenager's bedroom contains no color or decorations apart from the two pictures. Ash themselves wear a long shirt and pants that are more or less gender neutral; their only stereotypically feminine trait is their long straightened hair. They don't wear makeup, but dark circles (likely done with stage makeup) around their eyes to show their exhaustion from staying up all night agonizing over their identity. The dark circles persist throughout the rest of the scenes occurring that day. Apart from the desk, the other set piece given special focus is the mirror on the other side of the room, in which Ash continues the poem they were reading at the desk. There is much symbolism behind the use of the mirror, likely since it represents Ash's agony of seeing themselves as someone they are not. It places emphasis on Ash's self-perception for the viewer to keep in mind throughout the rest of the film.

The scene's message, however, is not only conveyed through the *mise-en-scène*; the camera angles and framing add emphasis to the aforementioned elements to gain the audience's focus on them. The film starts with a medium shot of the wall with the pictures of a man and woman, then cuts to close ups of Ash writing in their journal so the viewer can read the words as they say them out loud. Soon after, the mirror shot is a medium close up, focused on Ash's face as they recite the words again. The audio and visual presentation of the poem reveals its significance as a summary of the main idea; that as beautiful as being a girl may appear, and as many times as they try to affirm this, Ash simply cannot relate to it. These closer shots allow the viewer to focus solely on Ash and their words. All three main shots— the desk, the medium-long shot of Ash walking across the room, and the mirror— show the room at drastically different angles and distances, but it is clear to the audience that all of them occur in the same room. It is obvious because the cameras follow what is known as the 180-degree rule; all shots are taken within 180 degrees of each other. The edges of each frame blend together so that it can be easily

recognized that each occurs in the same space. In this case, following the 180-degree rule makes it clear that the mirror, curtains, bed, and desk are in the same room, and that Ash never leaves it during the scene. Like the *mise-en-scène*, these techniques make it obvious to the audience where Ash is and what is happening, so they can focus their attention on the story itself and consider the theme.

The same can be said for the sound production in the film. Again, it is quite minimalistic, with no music apart from the introduction. All sound in this scene, except for the quiet intro music, is diegetic; Ash hears everything the audience can. The intro music cuts abruptly when they rip out the page from their notebook and throw it on the ground. While Ash cannot hear the music, it signifies to the audience the intensity of their conflicting feelings about gender. The only instance of any blurred distinction of sound is when they first read the poem out of the notebook. The camera is shooting a close up of the page so that Ash's face is unseen while they speak; this makes it difficult to tell whether the diegetic sound is internal (their inner voice) or external (spoken out loud). However, when they repeated the poem in front of the mirror, it is clearly external as their face is now visible and their mouth can be seen moving. The use of mainly diegetic sound is, once again, meant to focus the audience's attention on Ash and their want to understand their gender identity.

The purpose of this short is mainly to offer insight into the experience of genderqueer people, and the production team employs these minimalistic techniques to garner the attention of the viewer and concentrate on the meaning. Through the scene setup, sound, and camera angles, the opening acts as a hook to captivate the audience and set the premise for later scenes (the same poem from the beginning is read in full length in front of a class at the end, for instance). There were several approaches to film form for this short that could have been equally effective

attention-grabbers, but these particular choices were especially effective in their elimination of any possible distractions from the thematic idea of gender identity.