

Casually Reconciling Dreams and Reality In the Everyday: The Art of Climactic Avoidance In Films That Deal With Bummer Summers.

Two contemporary American films, both of which are centered around the occurrence of a bummer summer, take an extremely purposeful approach to their treatment and release of dramatic tensions, one which is decidedly contrary to the traditional cinematic model of a dramatic climax.

Dramatic tension is an extremely basic component of many films, it is a tension that is built through scenes over the course of the story, and often built within scenes as well. For the sake of this piece I would like to define certain ways in which a film can release that tension. As necessitated by my current desire to focus in on these topics these definitions will be reductive, please understand that I see that as a temporary state, these are definitions for the sake of this essay only.

The first way in which a film can release tension is through an explosion. A dramatic tension is often caused by our having a hope and a fear for the main character. One of these winning is what I call an explosion, either the hope or the fear occurs, an epic win or an epic fail. Full success or blowin' it. The next way we will call an implosion. An implosion is when we learn that there our hope and fears either were unjustified all along, or no longer apply. There was no reason to be afraid or hopeful in the first place. The third way is what I am interested in exploring in this essay. I will call it Climactic Avoidance, and in my attempts to define and better understand the use of Climactic Avoidance in contemporary American cinema I will

Climactic Avoidance is when the film simply avoids answering our question. This can either happen by the filmmaker choosing to turn the camera away from the dramatic tension, a temporal jump in the editing occurs and the situation which we feared is simply in our past, or it can occur when the film gives us what should be an answer, but what is decidedly ambiguous. In both situations we are forced to make assumptions, assumptions that usually are made based on clues we are given, often subjective interpretations of the clues. The answers are created in viewers mind but are not made on facts which would necessarily hold up in court.

The first scene of Zach Weintraub's seminal *Bummer Summer* will serve as an excellent example for us to better understand these phenomena. The film begins in a medium-shot of a boy sitting at a desk of sorts leaning on a school backpack. He is playing with what appears to be a switchblade, which occupies a prominent position in the foreground of the frame. An immediate dramatic tension is apparent. We fear this innocuous looking child might cause bodily-harm to himself or others with a weapon. We hope that no one gets hurt, that he doesn't try something he will regret. The tension implodes when he begins to comb his hair with what looked like a switchblade and we realize that there was not actually a weapon in his hands at all. Our fears were unjustified.

That being said the tension does not entirely subside. As we see scenes of him wandering through an empty school we are still watching this character through a lens of dangerous suspicion. We are set on guard especially because of the context - school violence, from one child to others, is an understood phenomenon that acts as a encased phrase of visual language in our society.

Climactic Avoidance is used when the film suddenly cuts away from the school to some sort of ranch with horses. The film stole us out of the situation in which our tension was focused, and moved us forward in time to a new place. The tension didn't explode, and it did not really implode, we simply stopped looking and can only make an assumption. I believe most people in this situation will assume that nothing violent occurred, although that is very much an assumption we are forced to make, not a fact that we definitively learn.

The important thing to note here about Climactic Avoidance is that it forces the audience to actively fill in gaps. While the size of the gaps and the amount of clues that the audience is given may vary wildly, it is most certainly an active process that the audience goes through, one in which guesses are made.

The majority of the first act of *Bummer Summer*, besides the inciting incident where Isaac and his brother are reunited with Lila, is focused around the relationship between Isaac and his girlfriend Maya. This relationship is explored fairly thoroughly, we see them interacting in several locations and situations, and are introduced pretty clearly to some basic issues in their relationship. A basic dramatic tension is developed, we hope and fear for their relationship. In this particular instance I believe it is very subjective and may differ quite a bit among viewers whether they hope the couple stays together or hope they separate. But the fact that a separation is possible is clearly defined through their interpersonal tensions in the scenes in the backseat of the car, where they are eating fries, and where they are eating senior freezy's.

Three consecutive scenes are given to us in which we might expect our dramatic question to be answered, but in which the answer is at worst absent, at best fuzzy, and almost certainly ambiguous to some degree. The first scene takes place in an extremely wide, nighttime shot of a parking lot entirely empty except for one car in which Isaac and

Maya seem to be having some sort of argument, but from which we can hear nothing. The second scene involves Isaac in his home calling his brother to ask if he can join them on their road trip, in which we infer that something has happened in the relationship between him and Maya, but learn nothing else. The final scene of this trifecta takes place in the car after Ben has retrieved Isaac from the bus station. Here we expect to finally receive an answer, as Ben asks point blank if something happened between Isaac and Maya. Mackinley Robinson's celebratedly nuanced performance in this scene, however, leaves us unsure if he is emotionally choking on tears, or completely ambivalent to the entire situation. Not only are his answers short and ambiguous in and of themselves, but due to the performance we cannot be certain if his answers are bold-faced lies or simple truths.

To highlight to ambiguity of this situation I would point to an oft-quoted interpretation by film-theorist Robert Malone. In his interpretation of these scenes Malone infers that Isaac must have murdered Maya. Again, due to the use of Climactic Avoidance, the answer to the dramatic tension that has been building over the course of twenty minutes is very much subjective. We are given clues upon which we must create an answer for ourselves, forcing us to consciously or sub-consciously put together the clues from our view of the protagonist, possibly to put ourself in his shoes, so to speak, and identify with his experience. Whether he killed his girlfriend, dumped her, was dumped by her, stopped talking, or simply doesn't feel hopeful about the relationship is up to the viewer, the film simply accepts that we will no longer see Isaac and Maya and moves us forward into the three-person road-trip that will make up the rest of the movie.

What then is the overall effect of Climactic Avoidance, beyond causing an increase in brain activity in the audience? In the cases of *Bummer Summer* I would argue that the technique is used primarily to open the protagonist's situation to allow us to more quickly identify with him. It does this both by avoiding specifics that might alienate us from the situation, but also through the very act of causing us to make assumptions we are forced to think more deeply about the characters' situations.

Judy Moody and the NOT Bummer Summer is a new film that is not technically a sequel to *Bummer Summer*, it is in fact an adaptation of a youth novel series. That being said, *Judy* shares similarities with *Bummer Summer* in its formal use of the technique of Climactic Avoidance, although to a slightly different end. It also shares similarities in the subject matter of a bummer summer. Its use of Climactic Avoidance is necessarily linked to its rather complicated and wholly inter-connected plot, so I will necessarily delve into much detail about plot-specifics at this point.

Judy Moody, like Weintraub's *BumSum*, begins on the last day of school. In Judy's whatever-grade class their beloved teacher Mr. Todd transfixes his students with a banjo-accompanied folk-ish tune revealing that he will be somewhere cold this summer and there would be a reward for any students that find him. The film then moves into a fairly straightforward first act in which we learn that Judy, our protagonist whose past experiences with summers involve them being boring, has decided to take fate into her own hands and make this summer NOT a bummer by setting up a competition of daring acts between her friends based on achieving "thrill points". Learning that her two best friends, Amy and Rocky (with whom she seems to share a delightfully ambiguous quasi-romantic interest) will be going away for the summer, leaving her at home with only the undesirable, four-eyed Frank, puts a kink in her plans from which she quickly recovers thanks to the internet's ability to bring people together and starts the competition virtually (each friend is to complete daring acts in their own location and communicate successes via email).

The second act of the film is made up mostly of a series of dramatic tensions and explosions of epic failure as Judy and the every-scared Frank continually attempt daring acts which they fail to accomplish, primarily due to Frank's suffocating wussiness. This narrative is punctuated by random searches for Mr. Todd in unlikely places, as well as several dramatic animated imagination sequences which I will explore more fully shortly. Judy's frustration with Frank grows until the end of the second act when she explodes at him, causing his angry retort in which he calls her a "fun-sponge" that sucks the fun out of summer with her competitiveness. This rift in their relationship as caused by our protagonists rather extreme world-view on competition as a necessary component of summer-fun creates a natural and cinematically-familiar dramatic tension - will our main character abandon her dogmatism in order to salvage her relationship with her friend? We might hope they become friends again and fear they will not.

They separate at this point, and despite this challenge to her beliefs, Judy continues on her quest for thrill-points by allying with her younger brother Stink in his search for Bigfoot (who has been in the news recently with many reported sightings), triggered by her third animation-fantasy in which a multitude of news stations were excitedly reporting on her coming out of the forest holding hands with Bigfoot, after which the mayor publicly congratulates her and renames the town Judy Moodyville.

Public recognition for her awesomeness is one of the main themes of the three imagination-sequences, the other theme being the closely related desire to be more awesome than her friend and possibly love interest Rocky. In the first imagination the way in which she is more awesome than Rocky is directly noted by the imagined news-crew reporting on her daring act of tightrope across the Niagra Falls (cued by her attempts to tightrope across the creek in her backyard, which she did upon receiving notice that Rocky was learning to tightrope at circus-camp, where he was spending the summer). The second sequence takes place when she learns that Rocky, at circus camp, was learning to

saw people in half. In this sequence a circus emcee first introduces Rocky as "magnificent", and then goes on to introduce Judy as "more-magnificent, because Rocky is just her assistant".

When it becomes clear to us that in her mind her only hope of winning this competition that she so desperately wants to win is to actually catch Bigfoot, a dramatic tension is formed. There are, naturally, multiple tensions that one could experience, but there are two distinct tensions that I noticed. One is whether or not Judy will catch Bigfoot, we might hope that she will and fear that she won't. It seems quite obvious, however, from the way in which the Bigfoot-clues have been discussed in the course of the film that Bigfoot, in this film-world, really doesn't exist. If we ingest that information as such, then the tension that is formed is "Judy is not going to catch Bigfoot, I hope she takes this disappointment well, I fear she will get depressed and do something rash". Similarly a tension has been forming, bigger than that regarding the specific event of catching Bigfoot, regarding Judy's desire for public recognition for awesomeness, which we know she will not achieve in the way she seems to imagine it, but which we hope she will maybe achieve in some way, and in any case not be too disappointed.

The search for Bigfoot culminates in a frantic across-town car chase that starts when Bigfoot, of whom we see just enough to be confident it's a man in a costume, jumps into an ice cream truck, which Judy and company hurriedly follows. Half-way through the chase the News van joins in the pursuit, giving us the thought that Judy might get some news-recognition even though this is obviously not a real sasquatch-creature.

When they do catch up to the truck, along with the news-team, in a scooby-doo-esque climax Bigfoot takes off his mask to reveal that he is actually Zeke, Stink's role-model and head of the Bigfoot Believer Society. He then claims he was hired by the ice-cream truck driver to help drum up business. We switch to a POV of the news-camera to see the reporter mentioning that this is another failed Bigfoot-catching attempt and ending not he question of "will Bigfoot be found?". Here we are forced to infer by the fact that we only see the reporter in the news camera's POV, that Judy did not actually make it on camera. At the moment of our dramatic tension bursting we are given fairly-ambiguous information, and not even a shot of Judy's face to get a glimpse as to how she reacts. We must guess, put ourselves in her shoes, infer based on our understanding of her character.

Rather than simply cutting out of the scene, the film executes this climactic avoidance by introducing the Ice-Cream truck driver, the one and only Mr. Todd, who immediately gives Judy her prize for finding him, two tickets to the circus (where Rocky will be performing as the culmination of his circus-camp training). This search for Mr. Todd, a search that never had very high stakes or commanded much dramatic tension in the course of the movie, ends in an explosion that is not satisfying in-and-of itself, but rather acts as a mask to force us to contemplate the ambiguity of the real tension (Judy's failure to both catch Bigfoot, get thrill points, AND get any sort of recognition for awesomeness - despite running over one of her best, if not most appreciated, friends in the mean time).

We cut immediately to the circus, where Judy has apparently invited Frank, in a display of friendship, to join her. Frank thanks her for the ticket, but no mention of apology, lesson-learned, or either character changing their opinion about thrill-points and the nature of competition is displayed. We are forced to guess whether or not they have actually reconciled their differences, or whether they have decided to be cordial, but not besties.

At the circus the announcer asks for a volunteer for the cutting-in-half-of-a-person trick. Judy volunteers and is reunited with Rocky on stage. They briefly mention that they missed each other, but beyond that the epic tension of her competitiveness with him is completely left ambiguous as she seemingly happily submits to be cut in half by Rocky, to the applause of the crowd. An exact reversal of the situation in her second imagination sequence, we are left to guess the effects this has on her as the film quickly cuts away to the closing sequence in which Judy says goodbye to her Aunt Opel, who was staying with them for the summer.

Unlike *Bummer Summer* which uses Climactic Avoidance primarily in the beginning and middle of the film as a way to bring us into the head of the characters and relate to them, *Judy Moody and the NOT Bummer Summer* is using Climactic Avoidance as a method of avoiding the heavy-handed moral-emparting moments typically associated with its genre. While several simple and complex moral situations are explored in the film (Judy's relationship with Frank, as well as her relationship with Rocky, and desire for public justification and respect), and the questions are brought up quite clearly in the above-outlined scenes, it is during the individual climaxes of these question-inducing dramatic tensions that one would expect moral judgement from the side of the filmmaker to fall upon the audience. Through withholding a climax to these dramatic tensions *Judy* is able to highlight these moral questions without giving judgement, and is able to stick to an extremely palatable and traditional formal structure for ninety-five percent of its running time.

Thus we see that there are many different uses of Climactic Avoidance by contemporary filmmakers, but all of the uses are decidedly awesome.