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Slacking, Dazed and Rocking: A Study of Richard Linklater

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

(Slacking, Dazed and Rocking: A Study of Richard Linklater)

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Abstract

The purpose of this capstone is to examine a filmmaker's work to better understand the artist as well as look at an underappreciated filmmaker. Richard Linklater is that filmmaker. Several of his films are popular, others less so. By exploring his filmography, it can be determined whether he's a true artist deserving of more attention from the filmmaking community as well as general audiences. After examining Linklater's films, not only were there recurring thematic elements that cemented his artistic dominance, but there's a feeling of evolution as he ages. The research of this project was conducted through watching Linklater's films and accessing interviews and literature surrounding his work.

Key Words: Richard Linklater, films, artist

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Slacking, Dazed and Rocking: A Study of Richard Linklater

French film critics of the 1960s developed a revolutionary way of studying film by creating the theory of an “Auteur Filmmaker.” In this theory, an “auteur” (French for author) is “the single dominant personality behind a work of film art, a creative personality whose imprint should be discernible throughout the body of his or her films.”¹

An artist’s imprint can mean any number of things including overall visual style, recurring types of stories, character archetypes and frequent collaborators such as actors, writers, composers, editors and so on. As an example, Steven Spielberg often tells stories about ordinary people put into situations of extreme imagination and scale whether it’s three men fighting a shark in *Jaws*, an archeologist outsmarting Nazis for a Biblical relic in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or several soldiers searching for a missing soldier in *Saving Private Ryan*. Spielberg also has an assortment of friends and colleagues who work on several of his films including editor Michael Kahn, cinematographer Janusz Kamiński, composer John Williams and actor Tom Hanks. As all of these recurring elements keep appearing in films directed by Spielberg, it becomes more obvious that he displays the consistent creative dominance and imprint that would qualify him as an auteur.

¹ Chown, Jeffrey. *Hollywood Auteur: Francis Ford Coppola*. Santa Barbara, CA. Prager, Inc. 1988.

Despite the filmmaker putting in all of the effort, they don't have the authority to label themselves auteurs. That responsibility lies with film critics and scholars. Critics argue that auteurs are the greatest and most noteworthy artists in their field. Sometimes, but not always, the distinction of being an auteur can be rewarded with strong box office results, critical awards or both. The most noted auteurs include filmmakers like Stanley Kubrick, Alfred Hitchcock, Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola. Being an auteur can also be a profitable marketing tool. Alfred Hitchcock is the best example of this because, whenever a film of his came out, his name was always first on the film's poster and in its trailer. Audiences would go to the theater because the film was directed by Hitchcock, not because it starred popular Hollywood actors like Jimmy Stewart, Cary Grant or Grace Kelly.

Becoming an auteur is a long and difficult process. No one starts off their career as an auteur. It's a title that has to be bestowed upon them. Just as Don Quixote's delusional thinking didn't make him a knight, a filmmaker's view of themselves doesn't make them an auteur. One can be deemed an auteur after making numerous films which have been subjected to intense critical interpretation.

There are also filmmakers who have not yet been deemed worthy of the label despite doing everything to earn it with their artistry and career success. This thesis asserts that American filmmaker Richard Linklater is worthy of the auteur label. Growing up in Texas during the 1970s and spending his twenties in the 1980s in Austin, Texas, Linklater's odds of becoming a successful filmmaker were a longshot at best. Linklater came of age when filmmaking equipment was becoming more accessible and many young filmmakers, some of which couldn't afford the film schools that birthed the "New Hollywood" of the 1970s, were starting to form their own contributions to independent cinema. While it would be safe to assume that Linklater

could never be a successful filmmaker outside the industry, he has found a way. “A lot of people thought ‘oh you’d have to go to New York or L.A.’ to do what I do but I was like ‘No I’m just gonna make it work here.’”²

Richard Linklater was just starting to become a filmmaker during the time of The Sundance Film Festival, a film festival first started in 1984 which showcases independent films and got his big break there alongside many other filmmakers. These names defined the cinema of the 1990s and many of them continue to make films. People like Quentin Tarantino (*Reservoir Dogs* (1993), *Pulp Fiction* (1994)), Steven Soderbergh (*Sex, Lies and Videotape* (1989), *Erin Brockovich* (2000)), Robert Rodriguez (*El Mariachi* (1992), *Sin City* (2005)) and Kevin Smith (*Clerks* (1994), *Mallrats* (1995)) all got their start at Sundance with alongside Linklater.

After making a popular film called *Slacker* in 1990, Linklater has continued to make films for the past 30 years and has left his unique mark on American cinema. Several of his films are iconic while others have fallen by the wayside. They all have value because he approaches so many genres, both commercial and obscure, with his own laid-back charm, as Pulitzer Prize winning film critic Roger Ebert has pointed out:

Richard Linklater is one of the best directors we have. He makes commercial films. He makes wry films that are applied sociology. He makes quirky comedies. He makes bold experimental films. He makes period films. Above all, Linklater is a man who doesn’t like to be bored and doesn’t want to bore us. You can tell that from his films. He’s intensely interested in his subjects.³

² Vanity Fair. (2019, August 15). *Richard Linklater Breaks Down His Career, from Dazed and Confused to Boyhood* [Video] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5SmvHcgI8A>

³ Ebert, Roger. “Waking Life.” *The Great Movies III*, The University of Chicago Press, 2010, pp. 379-382.

But if we are to consider Linklater an auteur filmmaker, it's not enough to look at a few of his films, but rather this analysis requires a review of all of them. To classify him as an auteur, there must be a thorough analysis of his filmography. When exploring through all twenty-one of his films, one finds that there are recurring elements that make the viewer aware that these films are made by the same person with a consistent creative imprint. Those three key elements are location, underachieving characters and time.

Linklater's films must be viewed through the lens of those three thematic elements which can be applied to all of his films. For the sake of time and clarity, this paper will examine six of his films: *Slacker* (1990), *Dazed and Confused* (1993), *School of Rock* (2003), *Bad News Bears* (2005), *The Before Trilogy* (1995, 2004 and 2013) and *Boyhood* (2014). While *The Before Trilogy* is made up of three films, they work as a whole by telling the story of the same two characters over a period of nearly twenty years. These six films were chosen because they are his most popular and iconic films in terms of both critical review and audience approval. They also best represent the style that makes Linklater unique as a filmmaker. They also represent three essential eras of his career: his early work of the 1990s (*Slacker* and *Dazed and Confused*), his middle work of the 2000s (*School of Rock* and *Bad News Bears*) and his most recent films of the 2010s (*The Before Trilogy* and *Boyhood*).

Linklater and Location: *Slacker* and *Dazed and Confused*

Out of his twenty-one films, Linklater's home of Austin, Texas has been the setting for twelve of them. Linklater has a profound love for setting and that especially shows in his early films *Slacker* (1990) and *Dazed and Confused* (1993).

Slacker is practically a love letter to the city of Austin. Its plot is essentially a series of interconnected scenes featuring quirky characters engaging in conversations. The film feels like Linklater is introducing us to the strange-goings-on of his hometown. In fact, the film starts off with Linklater getting out of a bus, getting into a cab and explaining how every decision we make has an alternate choice. When we choose one option, the other one splits into a different timeline suggesting that there's an infinite number of timelines available in our lives.

The story doesn't remain with Linklater's character. When he reaches his destination, it continues with another person, and then another. And on and on it goes. Many colorful people are shown including a JFK conspiracy theorist, anarchists and UFO believers. Throughout the film is an underlying dedication from Richard Linklater. Linklater's perception of the value of one location and quirky characters transformed Austin into a town which harbored and supported a community of filmmakers. Linklater proved that a successful film could be made outside of the studio system in the streets of Texas.

Slacker's stream-of-consciousness narrative belies the planning that went into its production. In a college town where student films often were started and then abandoned, Linklater would surprise many with his dedication and organization. Years later, he would refer to the experience as "chaos by design."⁴

The film is like a relay race, passing the story from one character to the next. It's not quite an anthology because none of the conversations face any resolution. Its main focus is on quirky dialogue with which Linklater is fascinated.

People say that you don't talk about a character and an experience, you show that experience but I never approached cinema like that. I always thought people talking was

⁴ Macor, Allison. *Chainsaws, Slackers and Spy Kids: Thirty Years of Filmmaking in Austin, Texas*. University of Texas Press, 2010.

so evocative and what they're describing, it has a double effect. Not only does it conjure what they're talking about in the viewer's mind because you're not showing it, to me it's more interesting. Not only do you get the essence of them and what they're saying but also what they're talking about.⁵

Without a main protagonist, the attention of the audience lies in the setting. *Slacker* looks at Austin with complete awe and Linklater shows the city in all of its facets. The city's more aesthetically pleasing locations are shown as well as its run-down areas. Linklater doesn't hold back when depicting Austin and does so with complete honesty. To his camera, all of Austin is important in the film.

The crew worked quickly, keenly aware that they didn't have "permission" to be shooting on the street although in the late 1980s it was relatively easy to film without permits in Austin. At Liberty Lunch, the crew gathered to shoot what would become one of the film's most talked-about sequences. At the time Austin's downtown area remained fairly deserted during the day, which made for easy filming. The shuttered businesses and empty warehouses were ghostly reminders of the economic recession that still gripped the city and much of the rest of the country in 1989.⁶

If *Slacker* was a love letter to Austin in its entirety, *Dazed and Confused* is the opposite. It depicts Linklater's contempt towards his time as a teenager in Austin with high school being the primary villain. *Slacker* shows Texas at a point where Linklater had freedom as a young adult and is set in a location where his creativity was allowed to blossom: Austin in the 1980s. *Dazed and Confused* is set in a place where Linklater's creativity was hindered and societal norms were

⁵ Outstanding Screenplays. (2021, July 1). *10 Screenwriting Tips from Richard Linklater on how he wrote The Before Trilogy and Boyhood* [Video] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6p7GzVAnZls>

⁶ Macor, Allison. *Chainsaws, Slackers and Spy Kids: Thirty Years of Filmmaking in Austin, Texas*. University of Texas Press, 2010.

rigidly emphasized: American High Schools of the 1970s. Linklater made the film to be a defiant statement against his adolescence and, more importantly, against people who used their authority to keep the youth of America in their place.

I saw *Dazed and Confused* as a story about authority trying to rein in youthful passion.

That's what it felt like to be young: there's old people in your face, fucking with who you are. That's what growing up is. It doesn't change much when you're older, but when you're on the losing side of that, the disempowered side, it sucks.⁷

Linklater despised high school and this is apparent from his characters. Protagonist Randy "Pink" Floyd, played by Jason London, is a disaffected 1990s slacker archetype trapped in 1976. He is looking towards senior year and sees that all of high school and its pageantry is meaningless. Pink appears to be the only one that truly understands the stupidity of hazing rituals and football championships and embraces the slacker lifestyle. Pink also acknowledges the pure lunacy of cliques by befriending everyone: the stoners, the intellectuals, the athletes and the freshmen. Like the audience watching *Slacker*, Pink moves from place to place, encountering different teenagers with different life experiences. When he's on the football field with his friends, reflecting on all of the good times they've had in high school, he notes that high school can be fun but "If I have to look back on these years as the best years of my life, remind me to kill myself."

Like *Slacker*, *Dazed and Confused* doesn't contain a strong plot and is more focused on the conversations of its characters. Along with philosophical thoughts about the future, there are lighthearted discussions including a theory presented by Slater, played by Rory Chochrane, that the Founding Fathers grew marijuana as a cash crop and were obsessed with extraterrestrials.

⁷ Maerz, Melissa. *Alright, Alright, Alright: The Oral History of Richard Linklater's Dazed and Confused*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2020.

The ensemble cast of characters have basic wants or none at all in the case of characters like Wooderson, played by Matthew McConaughey. They just appear and laze about, cruising the streets, smoking marijuana and searching for a good time.

The biggest decision that any of these characters face is whether or not Pink will sign the pledge to abstain from drugs when he plays football in the fall. None of these characters are facing any major life choices because they have nothing to look forward to. Most of them are either eighth graders becoming freshmen or juniors becoming seniors, neither of which inspire any complex choices in the film.

Ironically, *Dazed and Confused* was marketed to producers as *American Graffiti* for a new generation. Both films are wildly different in scale. While both films take place over one night, star teenagers cruising and contain soundtracks of classic rock songs, the characters of *American Graffiti* face important choices. They have to choose whether or not to leave town and go to college. That decision is still on the horizon for the characters in *Dazed and Confused*.

Once again, it's the location that makes the biggest impact on the film: both as a source of entertainment and confinement. These characters find solace in both each other and in intimate places where the teenagers feel they can be themselves. The Emporium, a recreation center where the teenagers play pool and drink beer, serves as a simple distraction. The Football Field, where they smoke joints as a protest against "The Man," serves as a place for philosophical discussion. The Moon Tower, where they hold a rebellious "beer bust," is unapologetically representative of Austin because, while most cities have street lights, Austin is the only city in the world to have large, working towers which illuminate larger areas of the city.⁸ Once again,

⁸ Prince, Jackson. "The Complete Guide to Austin's Moonlight Towers." *The Austinot*, The Austin, 26 Mar. 2018, <https://austinot.com/austin-moon-towers>.

Linklater creates a world where teenagers exist entirely on their own and it just happens to be at the place that makes Austin stand out from the rest of the world in its own way.

In the film, Linklater's big message is that the Texas of *Dazed and Confused* isn't a liberating environment like in *Slacker*. The characters of *Dazed and Confused* are stuck and all they can do, to paraphrase Pink's friend Don, played by Sasha Jensen, is their best when they're "stuck in this place." This place is all that they have.

Throughout Linklater's films, there's a heavy reliance on location. He always brings the feel of Austin to his stories because of the unique nature of the city. It is a place to attract the unusual and creative. "I would describe Austin as the kind of place, if you grow up in a small town in Texas or in the South, and you're different. It's that place to escape."⁹

Sometimes this feeling is literal, with Linklater showing the Lone Star State in different times and styles including in Depression-era farm country in *The Newton Boys* (1998), a gossiping community in *Bernie* (2011) and a college campus in *Everybody Wants Some!!* (2016). This quirky nature isn't just limited to his films set in Texas. Even in the European cities of *The Before Trilogy*, there's a feeling of Austin with quirky characters and intimate shops spread throughout.

Linklater and Underachieving Characters: *School of Rock* and *Bad News Bears*

As Linklater's career continued, his films became less about meandering storylines and quirky bits of dialogue and more focused on characters. The characters of many Linklater films aren't noble heroes and they aren't anti-heroes either. They are underachieving protagonists who represent the slackers that Linklater knew throughout his life. These kinds of characters are best

⁹ Vanity Fair. (2019, August 15). *Richard Linklater Breaks Down His Career, from Dazed and Confused to Boyhood* [Video] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5SmvHcg18A>

seen in two films from the middle portion of Richard Linklater's career: *School of Rock* (2003) and *Bad News Bears* (2005). The films are the most commercial of Linklater's filmography and are more accessible to mainstream audiences than *Slacker* and *Dazed and Confused*, which seemingly have no stakes. They also invoke nostalgia from the audience. *School of Rock* focuses on a love for classic rock, featuring a soundtrack with songs by Led Zeppelin, David Bowie and Stevie Nicks, while *Bad News Bears* is a remake of the 1976 film starring Walter Matthau.

Both films center on characters resembling Linklater's 1990s slackers. Instead of wandering around and exchanging conversations, the main characters are becoming more emotionally mature. In *School of Rock*, Dewey Finn, played by Jack Black, starts off as a rock musician who can't afford to pay rent to his friend Ned Schneebly, played by the film's writer Mike White, who works as a substitute teacher. Dewey seemingly has no job and is being pressured by Ned's girlfriend, played by Sarah Silverman, to get a job or move out. In an act of desperation, Dewey impersonates Ned to become a substitute teacher for a group of students in a prestigious private school.

With no teaching experience and a group of repressed, overachieving students, Dewey teaches them the only thing he knows: rock music. He unlocks the students' passion for music and forms a band with them called The School of Rock. Subsequently, all of the time he spends with the kids unlocks his passion and makes him realize that he can not only be a rock performer but pass on his passion to the next generation. By the end of the film, he starts an after-school program, teaching children about music while continuing to work with his first group of students.

Despite being considered a family film, *School of Rock* constantly emphasizes revolution with the students that rock music's main purpose is to "stick it to the man."¹⁰ While there are

¹⁰ Stone, Rob. *The Cinema of Richard Linklater: Walk, Don't Run*. Columbia University Press, 2018.

more commercial elements to the film, there's still the theme of rebellion that has consistently appeared throughout Linklater's filmography.

While *Bad News Bears* contains less deception, its protagonist still feels part of the same archetype as Dewey Finn. Morris Buttermaker, played by Billy Bob Thornton, is a former MLB pitcher who was fired from the Seattle Mariners for getting into a fight with an umpire. Now a washed-up alcoholic, Buttermaker is hired to coach a Little League team composed of kids who are terrible at baseball and who are often looked down upon by their peers. He teaches them the fundamentals of the game, makes them become a functioning unit and even rebuilds a fractured relationship with his twelve-year-old daughter, played by Sammi Kane Kraft.

Both *School of Rock* and *Bad News Bears* center on people who start their stories in a pathetic state but work with the next generation through unorthodox methods. By doing so, their youthful energy resurges and brings out the best in themselves. On paper, the characters of Dewey Finn and Morris Buttermaker are seemingly abhorrent with Finn essentially kidnapping the children to perform their big concert while Buttermaker is a perverse, foul-mouthed coach who drinks regularly in front of his underage team. However, there is a likability to them which is based on how they legitimately care about kids that have been written off as either pure academic snobs or unremarkable children with no athleticism. Both of those assumptions are thrust upon them by judgmental adults, further connecting these films to the rebellion of Linklater's earlier work.

These films also say something different about slackers than Linklater's films of the 1990s. In *Slacker* and *Dazed and Confused*, the characters are young and can afford to be slackers. It's a natural stage of life to be wandering about, unsure of the future and resistant to the status quo when you're young. When you're in your thirties and forties, it's time to grow up and

actually contribute to society which is what *School of Rock* and *Bad News Bears* are all about. However, there is still a slacker edge to these characters because they don't win. The School of Rock doesn't win The Battle of the Bands and The Bears don't win the championship game, but they feel good about how far they've come. Like Rocky Balboa and other cinematic underdogs, what matters is that they went the distance.

By achieving something, even if it's just internally, they distance themselves from the films of Linklater's early career by transforming the slacker lifestyle. In 1996, Linklater's film *SubUrbia* is as savage an attack as any with all of the slacker protagonists being unlikable and unpleasant. At one point, a convenience store owner, played by Ajay Naidu, tells them that they've wasted their lives. Here, Linklater has put aside the wandering story aspect and begun to take an interest in characters written off by society while reaching for big goals. This is clear in Linklater's interpretation of Dewey Finn. Linklater commented in a recent interview: "Something in Jack's character I found very personal to me was the slacker, who society is looking down their nose at, as a non-productive person. But, in fact, he does have something to offer society."¹¹

Linklater and Time: *The Before Trilogy* and *Boyhood*

In the last ten years, one of Linklater's key themes has come to fruition: time. Linklater is obsessed with time and how it affects people whether it be in a single day or stretched out over a long period. The only filmmaker whose obsession with time rivals Linklater's is Christopher Nolan, who approaches time from a scientific perspective. Nolan's films, like *Inception* (2010) and *Tenet* (2020), are full of rules and are methodical whenever time is concerned. Linklater's

¹¹ Vanity Fair. (2019, August 15). *Richard Linklater Breaks Down His Career, from Dazed and Confused to Boyhood* [Video] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5SmvHcgl8A>

approach is that of a philosopher, more centered on the big picture and ideas within his film narratives. His patient style of filmmaking results in four big films concerning the passage of time: *Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004), *Before Midnight* (2013) and *Boyhood* (2014).

The Before Trilogy takes place over three days in the course of 18 years. In 1995, Jesse, and Celine, played by Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy, meet while on a train bound for Vienna. They strike up a one night romance and depart the next morning, planning to meet in six months. However, they never returned to meet each other. Nine years later, in Paris, Jesse is now a famous writer and he meets Celine at a book signing. Over one afternoon, they reignite their romance and realize that they should stay together this time. Nine years later, they are now married with twin girls and Jesse's son from a previous marriage. While on summer vacation in Greece, they contemplate their marriage and if they even still love each other.

Each of these films, released nearly a decade apart, stand on their own and handle different ideas of love. The films address how love blossoms, how it matures, how it crumbles and how it gets restored. Until *Before Sunset* came out, film viewers had different theories as to whether Jesse and Celine would keep their arrangement to meet six months later at the end of *Before Sunrise*. According to critic Dennis Lim:

The open ending of *Before Sunrise* existed for years as a Rorschach test, separating romantics from cynics and fueling countless post-movie discussions about the fate of Jesse and Celine, who came to attain the status of characters with a life outside their fiction.¹²

When the three films come together, it makes for a truly compelling romantic narrative. It's the story of a couple both over a short and long period of time. In terms of actual time, *The*

¹² Lim, Dennis. "The Before Trilogy: Time Regained." The Criterion Collection, 2017, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4445-the-before-trilogy-time-regained>.

Before Trilogy only takes place over three days with each day being nine years apart. Throughout the history of film, this kind of story has existed with romances being drawn out over extended periods of time in films like *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (Fincher 2008), *When Harry Met Sally* (Reiner 1989), *Gone With The Wind* (Fleming 1939) and *The Notebook* (Cassavettes 2004). However, *The Before Trilogy* is unlike any of those films because they were made in the corresponding decade. *When Harry Met Sally* may take place over 12 years, but it was shot like any other film which does have some consequences on its believability. Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan don't resemble college students at the start of the film, even though they're supposed to be in their twenties. Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy are able to play characters in their 20s, 30s and 40s. All they had to do was wait nearly two decades for production. Because of the realism and the fact that the characters age between the films, *The Before Trilogy* is a more engrossing form of romance because the characters are aging with their audience and creating a series of films with which people of different ages can connect with.

The Before Trilogy gains its unique emotional force from being, in the fullest sense, a love story, a rare, knowing engagement with both the fantasies and the realities of romance. Especially for those who have aged along with them, these films ask to be read reflexively, which is to say personally.¹³

For Linklater, the story of Jesse and Celine was incredibly personal for him and both leading actors. With each film, Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy contributed to the screenplay enough to be credited as co-writers of *Before Sunset* and *Before Midnight*. Their ideas and their relationships heavily contributed to the series.

¹³ Lim, Dennis. "The Before Trilogy: Time Regained." The Criterion Collection, 2017, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4445-the-before-trilogy-time-regained>.

The Before Trilogy may have been a risk but each third of this story is an individual film with a beginning, middle and end. Each film could be watched on its own. *Boyhood*, on the other hand, was a massive risk for Linklater in terms of filmmaking. The title of the film is self-evident. A boy named Mason, played by Ellar Coltrane, grows up over the course of 14 years and begins to gradually discover who he is and what he wants from life. Accompanying Mason on this journey are his father Mason Sr., mother Olivia and older sister Samantha, played by Ethan Hawke, Patricia Arquette and Lorelei Linklater respectively.

Not only was Linklater telling a story set over 12 years, a modest decrease from *The Before Trilogy*, but he was filming it in segments steadily over 12 years without a completed script. Instead of having the entire story planned, he would only produce a smaller story for one year, shoot it with the actors and then repeat the process annually. As the characters aged, so did the actors and their development directly melded with the evolving story.

In *Boyhood*, Linklater displays respect for his audience by allowing them to interact with the story. Instead of displaying a complete life story, like a standard biographical film, *Boyhood* is chronological fragments of Mason's life. They are important moments that shape him and the people around him but not all of them have on-screen resolution. The film shows Mason's mother meet, marry and divorce her husband who is a psychology professor, played by Marco Perella, and who becomes an abusive alcoholic over the course of their marriage. Their wedding and their divorce is never shown. It is only depicted in events outside and in-between them. The audience must deduce what is going on.

In a cinematic game of connect-the-dots, the audience is able to understand what happened without getting a full sense of exposition. Linklater also doesn't use titles to show what year it is. The audience has to pay attention to things like Mason's hairstyle, where the family is

living and what events are happening around them including the invasion of Iraq, the release of *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* and the 2008 election of Barack Obama. The film appears to be a series of non-essential events in someone's life as opposed to all of the traditional "moments" that shape a person's life. Linklater deliberately made the film "a collection of, kind of, lesser moments."¹⁴

Then the ending comes and that boy staring up at the clouds at the film's beginning has grown up, but is still in a very similar place: with the entire world wide open before him. It all comes together as a cohesive portrayal of life. "The first shot, under the title, shows clouds-in-blue-sky, the contemplation of which may be director Richard Linklater's nearest-to-hand metaphor for the idea that no matter how you interpret the world, it merely is, and goes on oblivious."¹⁵

It's in *Boyhood* that we gain an insight into Linklater's growth as a filmmaker and person. While his youthful energy belongs to characters like Mason and Samantha (the family children), Linklater's development as an adult is reflected in Mason Sr. and Olivia. Each of these adults represent a battle going on inside of Linklater, a compromise between the hard-working, financially stricken Linklater and the artistic, care-free filmmaker. Linklater is making a film about a boy growing up, based in part on his own memories of childhood. This kind of artistic endeavor is a long way away from the man who made *Slacker* in terms of time and opportunity. It's more self-reflective.

Boyhood isn't the only time Linklater will take on such a grand scale of filmmaking.

Currently, he's making an adaptation of the Stephen Sondheim musical *Merrily We Roll Along*

¹⁴ Outstanding Screenplays. (2021, July 1). *10 Screenwriting Tips from Richard Linklater on how he wrote The Before Trilogy and Boyhood* [Video]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6p7GzVAnZls>

¹⁵ Lethem, Jonathan. "The Moment Seizes You." *The Criterion Collection*, 2016, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4246-boyhood-the-moment-seizes-you>.

which takes place over the course of 20 years and is told in reverse chronological order. Like *Boyhood*, the film will be shot in real time. It won't be released until at least 2040.

Conclusions

It's not just setting, underachieving characters and complex timelines that affect Linklater's films. They affect Linklater as well. By studying his entire filmography, there's an understanding of his philosophy and how he's grown as a person. He has admitted to getting better with every passing year, especially when making *Boyhood*.

When we got to the end, the momentum every year, the last three or four years, just increased. You could feel the gravitational pull of the end, the landing point was coming. Each year got better and better. Every year, we turned to each other and said "This is the best year ever."¹⁶

Linklater started off as a slacker, unsure of where to go in life. He picked up a camera and made a film and more films after that. A few of these films have become famous and he's been trying to stay part of this industry ever since while building a community of filmmakers and film scholars in Austin.

Linklater's reaction to his success was a lot like writer-director Bill Wittliff's a decade earlier. Linklater chose to stay in Austin, creating Detour Filmproduction in a two-story house just north of the University of Texas and shooting subsequent features like *Dazed and Confused* and *The Newton Boys* in and around his home base. It was a decision that would transform the Austin film community in ways large and small, from increasing the national profile of the city's film scene thanks to Linklater pals and frequent visitors like

¹⁶ Vanity Fair. (2019, August 15). *Richard Linklater Breaks Down His Career, from Dazed and Confused to Boyhood* [Video] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5SmvHcgl8A>

Tarantino and actor Ethan Hawke, to convincing directors like Soderbergh to shoot in Austin and hire local crews for projects like *The Underneath*.¹⁷

Linklater lives outside of Hollywood with his own production company, maintaining creative freedom in Austin. This independence has come at a cost. Some of Linklater's films like *The Newton Boys*, *Bad News Bears* and *Me and Orson Welles* (2008) all did poorly at the box office. Others didn't even achieve widespread distribution despite the fact that they were made by a filmmaker with five Academy Award nominations. When Martin Scorsese is making a film, it will get distributed. When Spike Lee makes a film, it will get distributed. Linklater still struggles to get people to view his work, even for a film like *Bernie*, which is in the commercially viable genre of true crime, starring actors Jack Black, Matthew McCoungahey and Shirley MacClaine. With all of these elements, Linklater still couldn't convince people to invest in his film.

Linklater collaborated with a dozen or more producers and executive producers for *Bernie* in 2010 but ended up with no international distribution. Linklater said, "You know, I've often been in that position like, okay you get the film made but you know you're not necessarily set up for success with the people you're dealing with."¹⁸

Another of Linklater's most iconic films, *Dazed and Confused*, didn't do very well at the box office. In its theatrical run, it grossed 7.9 million dollars on a budget of 6.9 million¹⁹, only gaining the following it has through the success of home video. However, the film has been preserved in the Criterion Collection, an organization that preserves and distributes films of

¹⁷ Macor, Allison. *Chainsaws, Slackers and Spy Kids: Thirty Years of Filmmaking in Austin, Texas*. University of Texas Press, 2010.

¹⁸ Stone, Rob. *The Cinema of Richard Linklater: Walk, Don't Run*. Columbia University Press, 2018.

¹⁹ "Dazed and Confused: Box Office Grosses." Box Office Mojo, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r11095534081/weekend/>

importance, as well as films that have become beloved by cinephiles and scholars. *Dazed and Confused* is a film that Quentin Tarantino called one of the twelve greatest films ever made in his “Sight and Sounds Poll”. The film spawned the careers of actors like Ben Affleck, Joey Lauren Adams, Anthony Rapp and Matthew McConaughey, who referenced the film in his speech after winning an Oscar for *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013). Despite these accolades, it still failed to do well in its box office run.

In spite of Linklater not always getting distribution or strong box office, he’s still found ways to contribute to film culture. As the founder of the Austin Film Society and a continuous voice in the film community, he has brought significant attention to the state capital of Texas. Very early on in Linklater’s career, Austin became a filmmaking town alongside Los Angeles and New York.

As Linklater and his inexperienced crew became more organized and professional during the making of *Dazed*, longtime members of the Austin film community seemed anything but as they battled to establish competing film festivals. *Dazed and Confused*’s 1993 release coincided with the Austin Chronicle’s launching of the South by Southwest Film Conference and Festival and the creation of the Austin Film Festival by relative newcomers Barbara Morgan and Marsha Milam. Both festivals would become nationally respected and have since come to define Austin’s ability to attract top industry talent and host world premieres of the latest independent and studio films.²⁰

Linklater’s work has inspired other filmmakers to join the industry and keep it in their hometowns instead of venturing to Los Angeles or New York. One of them was fellow 1990s filmmaker Kevin Smith. After watching *Slacker*, the New Jersey native was convinced to come

²⁰ Macor, Allison. *Chainsaws, Slackers and Spy Kids: Thirty Years of Filmmaking in Austin, Texas*. University of Texas Press, 2010.

up with \$23,000, the same budget *Slacker* had, and make his low-budget debut film *Clerks* (1994). He continues to praise Linklater's 1990 film as his main source of inspiration.

That's the movie that pushed me. It was like 'Oh, my God.' The whole ride home I'm like 'look how simple it is. It's like there's nothing going on, it's dialogue, I can do this.' This is the movie because it is approachable. I can do this.²¹

While he may not have the box office of Tarantino or the Oscars of Soderbergh, he still is in the film scene, carving his own path as a filmmaker. Linklater is most assuredly an auteur filmmaker who has used his independence and life experiences to be the creatively dominant force behind his films. He frequently works with actors like Matthew McConaughey and Ethan Hawke along with cinematographer Lee Daniels and editor Sandra Adair. However, Linklater's mark as an auteur isn't just an accumulation of variables like cast and crew. It's all about the ties that bind each of his films together on a thematic level. His films have the unmistakable feeling of Richard Linklater because he infuses so much of himself into every production. The films aren't just an extension of him. They are him.

²¹ Pierson, John. *Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes: A Guided Tour Across A Decade Of American Independent Cinema*. University of Texas Press, 1995.

Richard Linklater Complete Filmography:

Year	Film	Writer(s)
1988	It's Impossible to Learn to Plow by Reading Books	Richard Linklater
1990	Slacker	Richard Linklater
1993	Dazed and Confused	Richard Linklater
1995	Before Sunrise	Richard Linklater Kim Krizan
1996	SubUrbia	Eric Bogosian
1998	The Newton Boys	Richard Linklater Claude Stanush Clark Lee Walker
2001	Waking Life	Richard Linklater
2001	Tape	Stephen Belber
2003	School of Rock	Mike White
2004	Before Sunset	Richard Linklater Ethan Hawke Julie Delpy
2005	Bad News Bears	Glenn Ficarra John Requa
2006	A Scanner Darkly	Richard Linklater
2006	Fast Food Nation	Richard Linklater Eric Schlosser
2008	Me and Orson Welles	Holly Gent Vincent Palmo Jr.
2011	Bernie	Richard Linklater Skip Hollandsworth
2013	Before Midnight	Richard Linklater Ethan Hawke Julie Delpy
2014	Boyhood	Richard Linklater

2016	Everybody Wants Some!!	Richard Linklater
2017	Last Flag Flying	Richard Linklater Darryl Ponicsan
2019	Where'd You Go, Bernadette	Richard Linklater Holly Gent Vincent Palmo Jr.
2022	Apollo 10½: A Space Age Childhood	Richard Linklater

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