

In-Between Spaces: An Exploration of Transitional Space as  
a device for Childhood Transformation in film.

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## Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Design for Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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## Abstract

Transitional spaces are the connecting places that join disparate locations together, used every day but their relevance is often overlooked. Hallways, staircases, bridges, doors, etc. - built with the sole purpose of transportation from one place to another, we often forget to look past the utility of these spaces and explore them as settings in their own right. This thesis explores the qualities of transitional spaces and argues for their significance as a filmic metaphor for childhood transformation. When coming- of-age feels like a journey between youth and maturity, the path in-between can feel endless. The growing-up process is subjective to individual experience, so to know when one has 'arrived' at adulthood is unclear. To those in the midst of development, their journey has begun but the abstracted nature of the destination keeps them in a seemingly perpetual transitional space.

Using semiotic analysis, with reference to film theory and visual and material culture, this thesis examines 5 films with child protagonists that make use of interstitial spaces to explore the psyche of the characters, categorised by the relationship to reality displayed by the filmic settings – reality based with supernatural elements, entirely reality based, and entirely fantastical - *The Shining* (1980), *The Florida Project* (2017), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) , and *Alice in Wonderland* (2010). Using Michael Kaern's translation of Georg Simmel's *Brücke und Tür*, I apply Simmel's theories to the interstitial spaces of these films to assess their qualities and determine their impact on the characters occupying these spaces. While this area is under-researched, this study proves the impression of in-between spaces on filmic narrative and demonstrates a rationale for their use as a device to explore themes of childhood transition.

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# Introduction

Transitional space can mean many things. It can be a space that itself acts as a transition from indoors to outdoors or vice versa, a threshold as such. It can also be an in-between space connecting – yet separating – two disparate locations. This place is usually a structural component of a larger whole, such as a staircase or a hallway of a building. However, there can be transitional spaces within larger transitional spaces, such as a mode of transport - a car, for example, existing as a literal transitional space within the context of a larger in-between space – a road which connects multiple locations.

I propose that the design of a transitional space impacts not only the behaviours that are carried out in that space, but can impact the behaviour that is then carried forward into the subsequent spaces. For example, the layout and ambience of a hallway can affect the mood of a person using it to go from room to room. Essentially, the atmosphere of the hallway is carried forward into a room with the person who enters it, at least temporarily. Similar to somebody ‘bringing in the cold’ when entering into a warm house from being outside in the snow, I imagine a cloud of hallway energy enveloping a newcomer to the space when they first walk in the living room door. Eventually it dissipates, but it undeniably changes the climate of the room for at least a few minutes.

Academic discussion of these ‘in-between’ spaces seems to be minimal, even in architectural studies: ‘The word “corridor” is among the rarest in the books on vernacular architecture, reflecting both the neglect that they have received, and their passing function.’ (Olivier, 1997, p.414) One of the rare pieces of literature going into detail about a form of transitional space – the corridor – opens with an introduction detailing the complete lack of research on the area. These spaces are largely overlooked, and under-designed. Perhaps they are

seen as less significant because of their primary function of delivering people from one more-important place to another. In day-to-day life, the utility of transitional space is the priority, and infrequently are aesthetics considered. Even less frequent is any discussion of such places in regards to their design. These in-between spaces are seen as mere infrastructure, which ‘seldom sustains mindful attention, manifesting instead the stuff of an unremarked substrate simply servicing the basics of everyday life’. (Angelil et al., 2017, p.14)

However, production design, the supervision of the ‘overall look’ of a film, is consistently used to reflect outwardly the inner world of a film’s protagonist(s). (Tashiro, 1998) Because of this, the design of every physical place in a film is very intentional and usually holds more symbolic significance than just a direct representation of a real world setting. To design a film setting, one must delve into the mind of the characters that occupy that space and determine how they would affect their environment. In turn, the psyche of the main characters is projected onto the physical landscape. Hence why the design of transitional spaces in film *cannot* be overlooked.

When every design choice is used to visually carry forward the narrative, we must assume that what may look like lack of design, is actually *intentional* design. A mundane and characterless hallway, for example, in the context of a film is a considered choice to advance the story or our knowledge of a character, as opposed to in real life where an identical hallway appears bland from sheer disregard of it as an important space. Despite this, it is just as hard if not more difficult to find any academic sources discussing transitional spaces in film. There is an abundance of literature pertaining to production design in general, but similar to real life, there is a lack of discussion about the in-between spaces, despite the rich symbolism that these places can provide.

Although not widely discussed *for* their use of these places, there are many films that employ transitional space as a metaphor to explore psychological

transition. This is especially effective when used to represent internal transformation experienced by a child. Often when in the process of ‘growing up’, we are cloudy on what that actually looks like. From a child’s perspective, they have no real concept of what it means to be an adult, and have a skewed idea of what it looks like to have ‘arrived’ at adulthood. Looking at the growth process as a journey, being *stuck* in transitional space becomes a perfect metaphor for childhood years. We know we’re going somewhere, but can’t quite picture it. It’s hard to know exactly where we will end up, and can feel like we are stuck in the in-between period waiting for something definite to come along to signal to us that we have finally arrived, we are finally grown up. Our journey has begun, but the abstracted nature of the destination keeps us in a seemingly perpetual transitional space. With growth and maturity being an individual, personal experience, one can only say reflexively when they have *reached* adulthood. It’s not that there is no end to the transitional period between childhood and adulthood, but that end can only be truly perceived in hindsight.

I have narrowed my focus to such films that revolve around child protagonists who occupy (a) transitional space. Whether used as a metaphor for maturing, or as a metaphor for internal transformation, the child in the transitional space proves to hold a potent message about the experience of growth. Using semiotic analysis, methods of material and visual culture, and with reference to film theory I will dissect the usage of transitional space in chosen films and its correlation to the internal journey of the young protagonists. I will also apply sociological works such as Georg Simmel’s *The Bridge and the Door* to my analysis to categorise qualities of transitional spaces and differentiate their effects.

# Chapter One:

## The Bridge, the Door and the Hallway

Georg Simmel's theory of the Bridge and the Door can be used to analyse the attributes of a transitional space. Michael Kaern introduces and translates Simmel's theory, in particular his theory of relativism outlined in *Die Philosophie des Geldes (The Philosophy of Money)*:

“Whatever an object is to us, it is what it is to us because of and in relation to, another object. Objects exist to us only by virtue of another existing...this is the mode of operation of our mind with which it [the mind] creates the world.”

(Simmel, 1958. Translated by Kaern, 1994, p.401)

To Simmel, everything exists within the context of other things. There is nothing in isolation, no absolute truth. Everything is connected. He says that two opposing truths exist – that things must be related in some way to be separate. That by perceiving two seemingly ‘unrelated’ things we are observing the space in between them, of all the things that make them different, or separate. In doing so, by observing this through-line of separation, we are actually linking them together. They are related, but through a certain relation we view them as separate. The opposite is also true, “Things must first be separate in order to be together.” (Simmel, 1958. Translated by Kaern, 1994, p.402) Quite obviously, two things must first be separate to be related to one another, the very act of relation distinguishes two separate objects that share similarities. Following this train of thought, it becomes very clear that everything truly is connected. Even disparate objects are connected by what makes them different from each other.

Kaern makes note of a communication between Simmel and Edmund Husserl in which he stated that ‘the relativising function (our ability to construct

relations between things) is as far as he's concerned "the foundation of our mind." (Simmel 1911)' (Kaern, 1994, p.402). Simmel claims that it is an especially human achievement to create paths. To link one location to another physically and visibly, objectively linking the places even if they were already subjectively linked before. According to Simmel, only humans preserve the journey *between* places, and where this human desire to relate transcends into a more creative and curious realm is with the bridge. The creation of the bridge reinforces yet also pushes the boundaries of our will to relate, or to connect disparate objects. Instead of seeing a body of water separating two pieces of land and concluding the land is separate, we envision something that might connect them. The bridge is a tangible representation of our deep understanding of connectedness.

The bridge has connotations of harmony and togetherness, softer in its existence than the more confronting nature of the door. Its finality in either state – open or closed, yet mutable in the sense that it's way of being is ever changing. The door seems to have endless possibilities, yet the bridge offers two options: from A to B or vice versa. When one enters or leaves through a door, their path could take any form. The transformation happens just by stepping across the threshold into or out of a new space. If the bridge symbolises a human desire to connect disparate places, a door symbolises the creation of a boundary, or a separation of a place. Different to the boundary of a wall, a door symbolises a boundary through which one has opportunity and freedom.

'The door schematizes two strong possibilities, which sharply classify two types of daydream. At times, it is closed, bolted, padlocked. At others, it is open, that is to say, wide open.' (Bachelard, 1994, p.222)

Bachelard also notes that while the door has determinate states of being, open or closed, it can also be left ajar, possessing an element of the unknown or unexpected.

However, I don't view the theories of the bridge and the door to be strictly related to their respective architecture. I think the essence of a transitional space can possess qualities of either bridge, or door, or both. A hallway in itself could either be designed to allow for free-flowing movement, with an air of curiosity and wonderment. It could also have a design that feels more authoritarian or strict, that its one purpose is to be moved through and as quickly as possible. I think we can use the theories of the bridge and the door to analyse transitional space, to discover what qualities it holds and in turn how it affects the behaviour of the people who use it.

### The Shining

Kubrick's *The Shining* is probably the most renowned instance of transitional space on film. The horror takes place in the remote Overlook hotel, where our main character Jack has moved with his wife and son to work as a caretaker. During their stay, they are the only people in the hotel due to it being off-season. This allows son Danny to roam the hotel freely and curiously. In his interview for the job, Jack was told that the previous caretaker was driven mad by the isolation, and murdered his wife and two daughters in a craze. Unfazed, Jack took the job anyway, but throughout the movie we see some sort of sinister presence take over Jack, driving him to a similar insanity.

In this movie, we spend a substantial amount of time in transitional space – whether through Danny exploring the corridors on his bike, or Jack hurtling through the halls in a murderous rage. Kubrick uses the interstitial spaces of the hotel in a way that makes us feel Jack's descent into madness. The innovation of the Steadicam allowed for camera movements audiences had not yet seen. Paul Sunderland details the gaze of the camera as 'panoptic', referencing Foucault's panopticism.

‘The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad; in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen.’  
(Foucault, 1991, p.195)

Sunderland outlines the ability of the Steadicam to pursue our characters, moving anywhere in space while maintaining the subject of its observation in a perfectly-framed shot. (Sunderland, 2014) The camera takes on a life of its own in this case. The way it follows Danny around, always close behind without being seen, is as though it is the very gaze of ‘the shining’ that we view the action through.



Figure 1. Danny cycling through the hallways of The Overlook Hotel. The Shining (Kubrick, 1980)

Each corner Danny turns on his bike, we are on edge with the threat of what could be hiding behind it. The hallways are long and winding and feel never ending. Our eyes are always drawn to the end of the hallway, wondering what is going to be waiting for us when we reach it. The lines created by the shape of the hallways feel eternal, like the horror that seemingly has no end. (Williams, 2018) This use of the corridor to evoke horror keeps the viewer in a perpetual

state of suspense, eliciting the perfect shock when we finally turn the corner and are faced with the nightmare we hoped to avoid. As illustrated by Roger Luckhurst in his book *Corridors: Passages of Modernity*, previous to *The Shining*, horror movies largely relied on the 'verticality' of space to demonstrate the psyche of the characters, the house being a 'stratified metaphor of the conscious and unconscious mind'. (Luckhurst, 2019, p. 9) This shift of horror unfolding horizontally rather than vertically allows for a different projection of the human mind. Rather than seeing fear induced in layers stacked on top of each other, the possibility of terror spreads out all around us, potentially around every corner or through every door. It is this *potential* for horror that can be more terrifying than the certainty that stairs provide. In Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the audience is on the edge of their seats as the detective climbs the stairs 'to his doom' (Luckhurst, 2019, p.9), but this works because the audience *expects* disaster to strike when he reaches the top. What Kubrick achieves in *The Shining* corridor scenes is an eternal dread in his audience, as it is much harder to anticipate just when the fear is going to strike.

We can still, however, look at the architecture of the Overlook hotel as a metaphor for the mind and consciousness. Looking at the in-between space of the corridor as a reflection of Danny's unique mind. He is told by the hotel's chef that he has a gift called the 'shining', allowing the young boy to see or communicate with things that other people can't sense. As Danny pedals around the halls of the hotel, the more supernatural occurrences we encounter. Danny exploring the pathways in between the rooms of the hotel can be taken as a visual representation of him exploring his own mind, uncovering more oddities as he advances into the depths of his psychic abilities. In one scene in particular, we see Danny make his way through the labyrinth of corridors to be stopped in his tracks by reaching a dead end, in which stands the ghostly twins.

This is not the first time Danny has seen the twins, they briefly entered a room he was playing in earlier in the film, to soon turn back out the door and down the

hallway. It is almost as if they were leading him out of the safety of the 'known' and tempting him to explore the unknown hallways, symbolic for the depths of his mind. When he eventually meets them again in the hallway, it is as if Danny has stepped into their world. The in-between nature of the hallways they occupy is symbolic of the in-between nature of their existence, with the twins being spirits left roaming the hotel after their brutal murder. The hallways are their own personal purgatory, destined to stay in-between for eternity.



Figure 2. Danny encounters the twins in the hallway. *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980)

Danny's winding adventures could also be interpreted as a portrayal of Jack's descent into madness. His son Danny was told he has 'the shining', which explains his interactions with the ghosts of the hotel, yet Jack also has interactions with the hotel's spirits. Jack's version of 'the shining' however, seems to take over his brain like a disease. We see it happening gradually at first, but the horrors of the hotel seem to burrow deeper and deeper into his mind as the movie progresses. Throughout the film we interchange between the recurring motif of Danny pedaling through the hallways, and scenes of Jack descending further under the guise of the hotel. It is almost as if the hotel is a

metaphor for Jack's mind, and Danny on his bike represents the spread of this 'disease'.

The hallways of *The Shining* possess the quality of 'the door', with endless opportunities around each corner, and behind every literal door. Where this inherently seems like a liberating premise, in the context of the film it evokes terror. Our mind can run wild with anxieties of what's around the corner, of what exists just beyond our perception. In this case, the space cannot hold the qualities of 'the bridge' where we usually know where the journey is taking us. The darkness of the Overlook Hotel runs deep and in layers, it is impossible to see your way out. The building – a hotel – is a transitional space in itself. Hotels are transitory in nature, with people staying for a short period of time, as a holiday, or as a place to stay while they embark on further adventure. The fact our main characters stay put, stagnant, in this transitory setting, living in a space meant to be ephemeral, lends to the madness that ensues.

## Chapter Two:

### Formative Ages in Transitional Spaces - The Only Way out is Through.

The visual of a small child in a transitional space can bring about discomfort, if intended to. The hallways of *The Shining* wouldn't have felt so all-consuming if not displayed in comparison to the small frame of an innocent 6 year old. *The Shining* used this approach to evoke horror in the audience, with Danny being used as *part* of the visual metaphor to service the overall climate of fear. Danny acts as the mode of delivery for action to the audience. We are one with him, following him around the hotel to unveil the horrors that lurk. The use of transitional space can be reflective of our protagonist's inner world at times, but mostly serves as a general indicator of horror. I would argue that the Overlook Hotel itself is near-personified, with the audience learning far more about *its* psyche than any of the characters that inhabit it.

The relationship between growing up and being grown up is a transitional one, that can be very well displayed on screen through the visual metaphor of transitional space. We can explore the inner workings of a child's experience with change and a lack of control over where they are heading. Growing up is a transitional period imposed on us that can feel claustrophobic and confusing, not dissimilar to the hallways in *The Shining*. *The Florida Project* and *Little Miss Sunshine* explore the theme of coming-of-age taking place in in-between spaces. What differentiates the child's point of view (POV) in these movies to that of *The Shining* is that the setting aids understanding of the inner workings of the child, and not the other way around. The role of Danny in *The Shining* was to present the intricacies of the space to the viewer, whereas in the following films the opposite is true.

Growing up, while it comes upon an individual, can feel instead like it's the rest of the world that's changing. From the perspective of a child, they are who they always have been, but suddenly the rules are changing. There are new expectations, limitations, responsibilities thrust onto children as they grow. From the outside-in, society imposes its constraints onto a once-free child. Considering this in relation to the point of view of the child in cinema, it makes sense to explore coming-of-age in a setting reflective of transition. We experience the tetchy impatience of our characters to either grow up, or stay put, as we receive visual reminders of the physical state of transition that persists for them. Whether they like it or not, their journey has begun, and it can be an uncomfortable one.

### The Florida Project



Figure 3. Moonee and Scooty sit against the wall whilst playing outside. The Florida Project (Baker, 2017)

The Florida Project is a movie that I would argue completely takes place in a transitional space. The movie centres around 6-year-old Moonee and her 20-something year old mother Halley. They live in a budget motel in Florida close to

Disneyland, and the picture revolves around the lives of the 'hidden homeless' who live paycheck to paycheck just down the road from the self-proclaimed 'happiest place on earth'. (Johnson, 2017) The film is from Moonee's perspective, and we see the reality of living in temporary accommodation, permanently, through the innocent eyes of a child. Motels, like hotels, are transitional by nature, their purpose being to have a place to stay as you're 'passing through'. For Moonee and her mother, they're trying to make a home out of a pit-stop, 'a temporary, provisional solution to the problem of accommodation', that for them is unending. (Childs, 2023, para. 3) Important to note also is not only the pit-stop nature of the motel, but the context that it is purpose built for motor travellers, motel literally meaning motor hotel. Therefore, the 'characters' status as carless passengers and walkers further signifies their marginalization.' (Childs, 2023, para.7)

The film largely makes use of the interstitial spaces of the motel and surrounding areas such as the corridors, stairwells, car parks, paths and roads as the children's own personal playground. As noted by Childs, we often see dirt paths carved out through 'shortcuts' the children take in between different locations. (Childs, 2023) Again, we see the impact of children growing up in a place meant to be moved through by cars. It makes our characters feel even more 'stuck', as we see locations others move through not just with ease, but also with speed. The location they live in isn't intended for long term residents, and so there is a lack of infrastructure *for* walking. However, as the kids live in one small room with their families, they have adopted the outer environment as their living space by necessity. Needing a place to play, outdoors is where they spend most of their time.



Figure 4. The two families spend time together on the stairwell of their motel. *The Florida Project* (Baker, 2017)

In this movie we actually see more of the communal ‘in-between’ areas than we do of their private spaces. In this scene on the stairs we see the two mother and child duos sharing just about everything. Moonee and Scooty are taking turns on the ‘iPad’, while their mothers share a drink – all while sharing steps of the shared space of their building. Such is the life of these families, nothing is really theirs alone, everything is part of a communal experience. There is great beauty in this sense of community, when motels and transitional spaces in general are usually quite isolating places to be. While designed to be used by multiple people at once, hallways, stairs, motels alike are also designed with individuality in mind.

In the early days of motels, when the clientele consisted of upper-middle class families, “privacy underlay the dominant motel model, which was a freestanding house that shared no facilities with others unless the occupant preferred otherwise”. (Jakle, 1996, p.232) However, after the second world war, the attention of the motel owner became fixated on maximising profit. Rooms became standardised and constructed with cheaper materials. No longer was the motel concerned with trying to make its guests feel ‘at home’, but was more focused on evoking a feeling of novelty in its customers through its contrast *from* the home. This shift from privacy to novelty creates a strange

dynamic in the modern American motel. The structure of the building usually supports singularity and separateness between guests, still upholding ideals of privacy, but lacking the furnishings that once implied the comfort and safety of home. The design of these spaces doesn't usually lend to the starting of conversations, let alone do they allow for the nurturing of relationships. However, for the likes of Moonee and Halley, and Scooty and his mother, they've gotten stuck here. For the likes of these families, they have found themselves trying to settle down in a place that intentionally tries to be anything *but* a home. Design choices that were made to appeal to consumers, such as the paint colours which were to be "striking" and "gay", not "homey and restful", reinforce to the Motel lodgers that this place is not their own. (Jakle, 1996, p.247) They have no choice but to at least attempt to foster a community in a state of transition. With no real communal areas, and their personal rooms being severely cramped, they resort to making conversation on the stairway – regardless of the fact it is designed to be moved through.

The tone of the film is quite playful on the surface, because of the child's POV but also because of the colourful setting. We can see the children's imagination projected onto the outdoor spaces they occupy. We immediately understand the landscape in relation to Disney, and can appreciate the attempt at whimsy that is being made by the pastel buildings and over-the-top novelty gift shops. That novelty entangled with the dreary reality they exist in however, creates more-so a feeling of melancholy than magic. To Moonee however, it doesn't seem that she knows any better. The innocence she possesses allows us to see the sad environment of almost-magic through childlike curiosity, or at least indifference.

Inextricable from the location's proximity to Disney is the separation of the two 'worlds'. When Disneyland was being constructed, a '20-foot high berm' was built surrounding the entire place. ' "I don't want the public to see the real world they live in while they're in the park," Walt Disney observed.' (Sklar, 1969, p.19)

This segregation of the park from what exists around it only emphasises the exclusion of our characters from the ‘magic’ on their doorstep. This film is an interesting example of what we can find when we direct our gaze on physical spaces that we otherwise neglect to notice. The fact that the spaces occupied by Moonee and her friends are generally used by people moving *through* them, lends to the feeling of the children being *left behind*. If you are stuck in transition forever, is it actually a form of stasis?



Figure 5. The group of friends play in their ‘castle’. *The Florida Project* (Baker, 2017)

The motel symbolises a transition from childhood innocence into something else. Though still by all accounts a child, Moonee is forced to mature beyond her years because of her circumstances. The events of this movie mark a distinct moment in her life that by the end of the movie we can recognise she will never again be the same. In the final scenes, child services show up to take Moonee away. She is now faced with being separated from her mother, her home, and her friends. She also must grapple with trying to understand what is going on, and why her mother is being separated from her. She is too innocent to understand, but yet it is happening to her anyway. It is usually children who face hard circumstances such as this that have to mature much faster than children raised in happy, healthy environments. While Moonee is only 6, she is undergoing a transition into a sort of independence she is too young for. It is

safe to assume that under the care of someone new she will show hostility and indignation. This will create a sort of isolation in her life that cannot be undone. Her life will forever be split between the before and after of her separation from her mother and the crumbling of the only world she's ever known. We see more and more examples of Halley's dysfunctional motherhood as the film progresses. In a way, we are holding Moonee's hand in her transition from innocence, and are undergoing the same transition as we learn more about her mother.

In this instance, both the transitional setting of the story and its playful design are combined to symbolise our main character's internal experience. A motel doesn't explicitly symbolise transition, it represents a pause in the journey of a larger transition from one place to another. Symbolically, the motel is indicative of a break. This has different implications on the story of Moonee than it would for her mother. Presumably, Halley knows a life outside of the motel. Perhaps she never knew stability, but she knows that it exists and is the norm. For Moonee, this is the first stop on her journey. For her, this isn't a stop in the road but has been the only road she's ever known. For her, the motel isn't the transitional space. The transition is whatever lies in between the motel and the rest of her life.

### Little Miss Sunshine

*Little Miss Sunshine* uses a road trip as its medium through which our protagonist Olive and her family experience transformation. The road being inherently transitional in nature, is representative in this film of the young girl's coming-of-age. Like in *The Florida Project*, we are faced with a dysfunctional family, but where they differ is that in *Little Miss Sunshine*, the onus is on the *family* to experience personal growth. Where *The Florida Project* begins with a tone of hope and adventure, and slowly unravels to reveal the bleak reality of the situation – *Little Miss Sunshine* follows an exact opposite trajectory. We are

introduced to the Hoover family and immediately faced with all of their problems. We meet a stressed Sheryl, married to unsuccessful Richard, on her way to pick up her brother Frank who has just had a failed suicide attempt. We come home to a morose teen son Dwayne who has taken a vow of silence, and grandfather Edwin who we are shown off-the-bat has a drug problem. Finally, we meet 7 year old Olive, who Frank remarks is 'almost a real person'. A group of social outcasts, beaten down by the world – young Olive seems to be the only one who still dares to dream – probably just because she doesn't know any better.



Figure 6. The family sits for a tense dinner in *Little Miss Sunshine* (Faris and Dayton, 2006)

Once we are introduced to all of the characters, we endure a tense dinner with the family where Olive is told that Uncle Frank tried to kill himself. Notable about the layout of the home is its open-plan design. The front door opens straight into the living room, which leads straight into the kitchen, which leads to a semi-office space for Richard. The house is busy and cluttered, and the lack of in-between spaces separating their communal rooms works to make the house feel chaotic and disorganised. Both as a member of this household and as an observer we get no sense of pause to catch our breath. We are thrown straight into the action, like Frank, who probably needs a moment to gather himself, but instead must instantly face the disarray. Brought to the house on

suicide watch, he is greeted by chaos as he crosses the threshold into his new reality. The only transitional spaces we see are small hallways leading to their private bedrooms. In the context of this movie, and with no other in-between spaces, these short hallways prove to amplify the disconnect between the individuals of the family. When they are together, they encroach on each other's space in discordance, forcing them to isolate, seeking refuge from the mayhem.

The movie depicts the family's trip across-country to have Olive compete in the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant. They all cram into a rickety Volkswagen van and embark on their journey, and hence begins their transition. The van is both symbolic of the family themselves, as well as being a container for the group, enclosing them together in tight quarters for a prolonged period. The van is a metaphor, while also being the literal driving force for change. When the group embark on their journey, it doesn't take long for the van to break down. A mechanic tells them they can still get the van to start, but only in 3<sup>rd</sup> gear, leading to the family having to get behind the van and push to start it each time they make a pit-stop. One by one they must run alongside the van and jump in while it's on the move. The failure of the van to start on its own is representative of the dysfunction of their family dynamic, with stilted communication and tension the norm for the group. However, the need for the family to put aside their differences and work together each time to get the van on the road is a metaphor for their need to work together in general to uplift one another.



Figure 7. The Family set off en-route to California for the titular Little Miss Sunshine competition. *Little Miss Sunshine* (Faris and Dayton, 2006)

The design of the van itself is also important in fostering connection between the characters. The middle seat of the van leaves space at the side for access to move through, and we see this come into play when Edwin comes forward from the back of the van to console Richard after he loses out on his book deal. The layered arrangement means that we have 2 family members in each row of seats, but with the front and back seats allowing space in between characters. This is not only helpful for the camera and composition, but reinforces the emotional distance between characters. With Olive being the smallest, she always sits in the shorter middle seat, but this also works to visually communicate the way she can foster a closeness with her kin that the others have become hardened to. Olive physically being in the centre shows how she emotionally holds the family together.

The group reach the end of their first day of driving and stop off for the night at a motel – transferring from the mobile transitional space of the vehicle to a stationary but transitory accommodation, as previously mentioned. Similar to in the van, the group splits into three, with two in each room as there had been two in each row of seats. Sheryl and Richard in one, Frank and Dwayne in another, and Olive and Edwin in the last. There is conflict and tension in both

rooms apart from the one that houses Olive and her grandfather. Notably, their room stands out visually from the others, accentuating the difference in atmosphere. The other rooms consist of monotonous colours, mainly browns and creams, whereas Olive's room is purple with accents of colour. It seems to us at this stage that Olive sees the world in colour whereas her older family members have lost that childlike whimsy and optimism. They have let themselves be dulled down by the hardships of life.

Edwin goes on to overdose in the motel, and we next see the family in a hospital waiting room, which arguably is also a transitional space. They are stuck waiting to eventually be told that he has passed away. The waiting room being a physical yet metaphorical in-between place, in-between knowing Edwin to be alive, and hearing news of his death. The waiting room working as a buffer between the trajectory they were on, and the new path ahead of them with a newly deceased family member.

As we are almost at the hotel where the Little Miss Sunshine pageant takes place, Dwayne discovers that he is colourblind. With a dream of becoming a pilot, Frank breaks the news to him that this will prevent him from fulfilling his wish. This leads Dwayne to burst out of the van and break his vow of silence for the first time in 9 months. He continues to have a breakdown on the side of the road and won't get back inside the van. This is the deciding factor the family must face on a long road of obstacles that had the potential to derail their mission of getting Olive to the beauty pageant. To summarise some key pain points they have been faced with their gearstick breaking, forgetting Olive at the gas station, Edwin's death and being pulled over by a policeman with Edwin in the trunk as physical threats to their plans, as well as interpersonal conflict along the way. Their perseverance despite these circumstances may all have been for nothing if they can't get Dwayne back in the van.



Figure 8. Olive comforts her brother as the family pull over on the side of the road. *Little Miss Sunshine* (Faris and Dayton, 2006)

Despite the more serious event of their grandfather's death, this instance feels like it holds more weight in terms of deciding whether they will make it to the pageant or not. Whether to do with Richard's reminders of how little time they have left, or if it's a culmination of all they have had to face up until this point, we as viewers are just as unsure if the family will make it to the hotel at all. The composition of the van stopped in the middle of the road with Dwayne sat alone in the middle of an empty field really reinforce how in-between this moment is. Dwayne screams insults at the remaining adult members of his family and refuses to cooperate. That is until Olive tries her attempts to console him. Stepping down into the field where he sits, she says nothing but gives her brother a hug, and that is enough to soften him. Once again, we see how Olive is the force of connection that uplifts her family without even really trying. She is a symbol of innocence and hope that there is still pure goodness in this world. When they can't seem to do it for themselves, her family are able to carry on for her.

Their problematic encounters on the road are like multiple doors on a long bridge. The road takes on the qualities of Simmel's notion of a bridge as their purpose for embarking on the journey is to get from point A to point B. However,

the family are required to take multiple pitstops or detours on their pilgrimage, each that held the quality of a door. Like a door can be opened or closed, each stop on the road for the family had the potential to turn them around, or to keep going. Each place that they stopped on the road inherently had a transitional quality, as they were road-side establishments. They contain a heterotopic essence as real-life is semi-suspended when on the road. (a heterotopia, coined by Michel Foucault in 1967, is essentially a world within a world, a place where the general rules of society don't apply) Already so far from home, yet so far from your destination, one has no choice but to be fully present in the *state* of transition. Maybe this is what allowed the family to make unlikely choices in favour of reaching their destination no matter what. This detachment from what registers as 'normal life' allowed them to disconnect from what usually grounds them in the stories of who they are, and enabled them to grow.



Figure 9. The group run alongside the van preparing to jump in, as they must do each time they want to set off. *Little Miss Sunshine* (Faris and Dayton, 2006)

When we finally reach the hotel, a transitional space but also the destination space, we undergo a transformation that we didn't originally expect. The family are watching the beauty pageant run its course, and we notice a shift in their behaviour. It's as if for the first time they can see how inappropriate it is for little girls, especially their little girl, to compete and be judged by society's standards, and recognise that same sentiment for themselves. An air of acceptance pours over the group. I think they recognise that they will never be let into the exclusive social group of people they have been hoping to prove themselves worthy to their whole lives. I think they begin to realise they don't want to be part of this group anyway. The van acts as a metaphor for and also the physical catalyst for transformation, again proving the relevance of transitional space as a narrative device.

Olive is the last contestant on stage, and performs a dance to *Super Freak* by Rick James. The dance is much too mature for her age, but arguably so are the costumes and demeanours of the other little girls who graced the stage. The head judge doesn't see it this way and demands Olive gets off the stage, as it is unconventional and doesn't meet the predetermined standards. Instead, she is joined one by one by her family members as they jump on stage and dance with her. We see each and every one of the group throw their inhibitions away and rise up to support the little girl and make sure she knows she's not alone. After the pageant, the group head back to the van to return home.

Each time the family have jumped into the moving van before this, Olive is helped in by her grandfather, but at the end of the movie after the pageant, it is the first time we see Olive jump into the van alone. The Little Miss Sunshine pageant has changed something in them all. For Olive, she is beginning to mature – not by forcing herself to embody the physicality of a beauty queen, but from her family giving her the trust to be herself, she has made a step towards becoming her own embodied person. Although the film ends with the family still travelling in the van, its connotations of transition and transformation no longer

apply. We as viewers know that the family are returning home, and recognise that the 'transitional space' of the road fulfilled its purpose by getting the family to the pageant. The family's most earnest moments of transformation happened *off* the road, in-between periods of driving, and their growth was epitomised at their final stop of the hotel. When they return to the road, they are tracing back the way they came. It has lost its transitional quality along with its intrigue, as the way back home is a retreat to comfort rather than a time for expansion.

## Chapter Three:

### The Winding Staircase to Womanhood

Transitional space is an effective metaphor for the coming-of-age into girlhood. However, the transition into womanhood is something else entirely. Discussion about entry to womanhood is generally taboo and private in western cultures, often met with shame or embarrassment. The experience is shrouded in fear and confusion, and can be terribly isolating for those who go through it. The added complexities make it harder to fully encapsulate the feeling in a real-world setting. Because of the hush nature of the topic, a large percentage of the experience of this transition is internal. It's difficult to explore deeply private and personal thoughts and feelings on screen in a literal way. *Alice in Wonderland* in all its iterations makes use of transitional space to explore an internal transformation, but its fantastical setting allows for more complex themes to be explored. Tim Burton's live action adaptation in particular makes use of the nonsensical world to delve into the mind of a teenage Alice and project her emotions outwardly.

#### Alice in Wonderland

While *Little Miss Sunshine* as a coming-of-age story is a little far-fetched in terms of plot, it is grounded in reality and real-life settings. *Alice in Wonderland* is similarly centred around the maturing of a young girl, but takes place in a completely fantastical setting. Like the road in *Little Miss Sunshine*, Wonderland represents a transitional space that facilitates the growth of our main character. Not unlike the road also, there are transitional spaces within the larger transitional space of Wonderland. This nesting-doll effect of in-between spaces allows for smaller developments to build off of each other to

reach a final concrete transformation of the self before and after undergoing the journey.

In the 1951 Disney animation, we see Alice's journey really begin when she falls down the rabbit hole. She has entered the in-between world of Wonderland. To gain entry she must go through many literal transitional spaces, although they have already taken on the nonsensical properties of Wonderland. The design is topsy-turvy and disproportioned to outline the non-reality of the world. The various trials Alice must undergo to 'get in' to Wonderland are almost like tests of character. Each door she squeezes through symbolises the choice she's making to move forward and continue to chase curiosity – or more literally the white rabbit.

It is after some time in Wonderland that Alice has been wandering around with no particular sense of direction, just letting her curiosity guide her, that she begins to doubt herself. She begins to feel alone in this strange world and can't envision a way out. The designers make use of sprawling paths and mazes to illustrate her disorientation. While still using formations of transition to outline her journey, we have shifted from a heavy use of cramped architecture that feels claustrophobic to far-reaching settings that make Alice seem insignificant in relation to the landscape.



Figure 10. Alice running through the corridor. *Alice in Wonderland* (Geronimi et al, 1951)



Figure 11. Alice lost in the woods. *Alice in Wonderland* (Geronimi et al, 1951)

In Tim Burton's 2010 Live action adaptation of the Lewis Carroll novel, we are meeting Alice in a different context. Whereas the Disney adaptation deals with childhood transition, in this adaptation Alice is 19 and is facing her entrance to womanhood. At the start of the movie we see her in a carriage with her mother, who is scolding her for not wearing a corset. It is clear Alice doesn't want to be confined by the expectations of society. We later find out she is on the way to her own surprise engagement party. She is told to meet her prospective fiancé at the gazebo at the end of the garden, where we find her being asked for her hand in front of the entire party. Although she has foregone her restrictive corset, she now finds herself in a metaphorical prison of purity. The gazebo is perfectly classical, but getting a sense of who Alice is proves to us that this proposal is more of a death sentence. To the left we see a portrait artist already painting their picture. The couple are on show on a literal pedestal, the ideal being presented to the group. It is inconceivable to the society at large that this proposal could possibly be refused. Within the context of Victorian society, women didn't have any freedom or choice, their best bet being to marry a rich man with an esteemed title. Alice's feelings of being trapped are physically reconstructed in the gazebo around her.



Figure 12. Alice being proposed to by Hamish as the crowd watches on. *Alice in Wonderland* (Burton, 2010)

This is when Alice's attention is turned towards the white rabbit, who matches her gaze and gestures to his watch. Alice's anxiety comes to a head and she runs after him, following him to the rabbit hole at the base of a tree trunk, inevitably falling down it. Similar to the Disney adaptation, Alice must participate in a series of trials to gain entry into Wonderland – in this movie referred to as Underland - drinking different potions to alter her size. However, unlike the Disney version, this all takes place in one room. Another difference to the Disney adaptation is the manner in which Alice enters Wonderland itself. In the 1951 version, a giant Alice cried so heavily that when she drank the final shrinking potion, she was carried on a sea of her own tears through the keyhole of the final door, washing her up to the shores of Wonderland. In Burton's movie, Alice figures out how to use the potions to her advantage, allowing her to retrieve the key to open the door and walk across the threshold on her own two feet. When interviewed during the making of the film, Burton remarked about previous iterations of the story that Alice is "just kind of wandering through all of the encounters as just a sort of observer." (Boucher, 2008). The major difference in tone of the two movies is that Burton granted Alice autonomy, rather than being at the helm of her surroundings. It is clear to us from the start that whatever journey Alice undertakes, she is in control.

The actual entrance into Wonderland is a free-standing door atop a curved set of steps, leading to a wrought iron gate. There is a tree trunk here too, mimicking the one we saw at the opening to the rabbit hole, but which also signifies to us in a way that we have entered a different world. The area is surrounded by bright flowers that are almost luminous. While not very other-worldly in terms of design, the use of colour is such a stark change from the pastels of the Victorian 'reality'. This, in conjunction with the tree trunk, helps us arrive at the conclusion that this world is flipped on its head. The design in another context could be part of a real-world setting, but it is just enough of a contrast to Alice's world to prepare us for Wonderland. It is effective to visually disrupt gradually, rather than to land us and Alice into the thick of it straight

away. The essence of the transitional space is quite literal here, easing the change from one place to another. This is another aspect that differs from the 1951 film, where we are faced with a lot of the nonsense off-the-bat. Burton made use of literal transitional architecture to aid the movement from one world to another. We sense Alice's apprehension as she creeps down the steps, and are holding our breath with her as we anticipate what she is going to meet on the other side of the gate.

The entrance contains physical but also symbolic qualities of both the bridge and the door. (Kaern, 1994) We have been transported from one location to another in the sense of the bridge. The worlds are clearly separate, yet connected by the rabbit hole, and perhaps by Alice herself. However, when Alice opens the literal door out into the unknown, her journey becomes infinite before her. There is no knowing what will unfold, what path she will take or where she will end up. It is the symbol of the door that allows for adventure, but the connection of the worlds in this bridge-like manner, while not at the forefront of our minds, still brings comfort that there is some way home.



Figure 13. Alice enters Wonderland. *Alice in Wonderland* (Burton, 2010)

Similar to the 1951 animation, Burton's Alice comes across many strange characters on her travels, but this time she is seemingly there for a purpose rather than aimless wandering. She is told that she is destined to slay the Jabberwocky, a terrifying black dragon under control of the Red Queen. It is up to Alice to end the tyranny of the totalitarian queen and return Underland to the peaceful and harmonious ruling of the White Queen. She faces many a challenge on her journey, but ultimately fulfils her calling and beheads the dragon. I want to focus on the transitional spaces that inhabit the end of the movie, and analysing what they can tell us in comparison to those at the start of the film.

The queens commence battle on a chessboard-like landscape, at the top of which we see ruins that ascend with a spiral staircase. This is where Alice has her run-in with the Jabberwocky. Alice resembles Joan of Arc in a full suit of armour, a heavy contrast to the dresses we see her in throughout the movie. This is the last we will see of Alice in Underland, as when she slays the Jabberwocky she is granted a wish – she wishes to return home. It is of symbolic interest that we enter Wonderland on a staircase, and we also leave it on one. The visual connotations of transition correlate to the transitional state Alice is experiencing. When we acknowledge this, the differences between the design of the spaces becomes important to note. We can tell a lot about how Wonderland has changed our main character by the final imagery of Alice here. She stands strong, amongst stone ruins, which is of high visual contrast to most of the movie where we are encapsulated in a very 'natural' landscape of the flora and fauna of the world. This contrast, which Alice is a part of in her change of attire, reinforces her tie to Underland, and allows us to infer that Underland is an extension of Alice's inner world.

The obstacles Alice overcame up to this point were a representation of her internal conflict, projected onto the outer world. This being the case, we can tell how she has changed and grown through her trials and tribulations through the

rabbit hole. Surrounding her is a desolate, harsh, yet strong and powerful environment. Alice stands amongst ruins of a structure that has been changed by time, as has she. The ruined staircase has acquired imperfections and has been fractured, losing parts of itself – but if it could speak it would have stories to tell. It still stands strong, maintaining its foundation and purpose, but has history embedded in it. This is like how we view Alice in this moment. She has changed and grown, lived and learned, and she stands before us now as a woman rather than a girl. She is imperfect, but she is strong, and she still holds close to her the essence of who she is.

We see her here after she has slain the Jabberwocky, essentially defeating the queen by eliminating her power. Viewing wonderland as an outward extension of Alice's mind, we can transpose this physical battle to a mental one, likely symbolic of her defeat of society's oppressive expectations. Society being the Red Queen, and its power being the Jabberwocky. Alice doesn't need to vanquish the queen herself, taking away her agent of terror is enough. On a mental level for Alice, she doesn't need to excommunicate herself from society to be free of their expectations, she just needs to stand strong on her own integrity and cut herself free from what other people want for her. She has arrived at a place, physically and emotionally, where she isn't afraid to stand tall in her own power, and stand alone if that's what it takes to be herself.



Figure 14. Alice stands triumphant after battle. *Alice in Wonderland* (Burton, 2010)

When Alice goes back to the 'real world' she rejects Hamish's proposal and embarks on a new role as apprentice at her late father's company. The final scene shows her waving goodbye to her mother from the deck of a large ship. The ship, like the van in *Little Miss Sunshine* is transitional in nature, as it brings us from one place to another. However, unlike a van or road vehicle which contain the qualities of a bridge, albeit a bridge that contains doors, the ship is inherently transitional in the sense that the door is. When one embarks on a journey on the road, they follow the road to their destination. It is unlikely to divert off course, only by mistake, whereas the sea has no direct path to follow. One can plan their route and guide themselves to a chosen destination, sure, but the possibilities of the sea are endless.

As well as this, the sea is 'alive' in a way that a road isn't, and has a part to play in the conditions of your journey. Though one could say the same for a road, I would argue that it is fellow passengers on a road that diversify road journeys, and not the road itself. For a road is dead, dormant until driven upon, whereas the sea is ever changing. Such is the quality of a door, when one walks through it there is no limit to where they go next. Each possible path sprawls out in front of them in invisible ink, and whichever one they choose has its own set of

possibilities and so forth. The ship represents Alice's life sprawling out in front of her, her own set of possibilities limitless.

When the camera turns to focus on Alice, we see a blue butterfly land on her shoulder. She addresses it as Absolem, the caterpillar from wonderland that has now seemingly transformed into a butterfly. This is yet another metaphor for Alice's own growth and transformation, and the inclusion of an element from wonderland positioned in the real world shows us how the transformation Alice underwent in wonderland has been carried forward into the rest of her life. The design of the ship and its surroundings are quite dreary and prosaic in comparison to the magical world of wonderland, but the appearance of the butterfly shows us and Alice that there is still beauty to be found in reality.



Figure 15. Alice stands on board the boat that will bring her on her next adventure in *Alice in Wonderland* (Burton, 2010)

Although Alice has been changed by wonderland, and has had to face some hard truths, she has not been hardened by it. Though the butterfly is literally representative of Absolem, it also works as a metaphor for Alice's inner child. We know that Alice had been to Underland as a child, and had since forgotten about it until reminded by Absolem as he was entering his chrysalis. Absolem's return is a reminder to Alice to not forget about wonderland, and to not forget

about the child within her that remains curious and adventurous. The fact that she sees the butterfly at all proves to us that her perspective has forever changed, and she will carry herself forward in a way that honours the little girl she once was - and in a way - still is.

## Conclusion

This thesis uses Simmel's theories of relativism and the bridge and the door to determine attributes of transitional spaces in cinema, using this analysis to effectively break down the relationship between the built environment and the inner world of the child protagonists who move through these spaces. *The Shining* juxtaposes the character and the space, with this contrast acting as a two-way mirror between the setting and its young inhabitant. The domineering hallways embody the threat of the unknown, and their power seems to multiply when explored through the naïve focus of a child. The erraticism of the hotel isn't met with vigilance, but instead curiosity, and it's Danny's guilelessness that accentuates the Overlook's horror. Trapping his audience in a state of suspense, Kubrick utilises Simmel's notion of 'the door' in a way that overrules the moment of pause that a hallway can usually provide. Most doors in the hotel stay closed until acted upon by the curious Danny, activating the horror. The closed door symbolises possibility. Impossible to say what lies behind it, Kubrick exploits this principle to ensure that the only possibility is dread.

*The Florida Project* uses transitional space to make us aware of the *lack* of possibility for our protagonist. The inherently transitional motel is encircled by motorways where people are moving through the area at speed. Moonee's status of staying put emphasises the disparity between her and society at large. Like in *The Shining*, *The Florida Project* employs a juxtaposed position of our character to their surroundings to paint a picture of their vulnerability. Continually throughout the film, 7-year-old Moonee takes up residence in transitional spaces. Her actual 'home' is one of impermanence, and out of necessity she turns to the in-between spaces of her surroundings to call her own. This long-term habitancy is antithetical to the very nature of the places she is surrounded by. The film explores the disconcerting effect of staying put in a transitional space. Settings that usually hold connotations of progression,

instead hold a mirror to the lack there-of. The final scenes of the film tell the audience that Moonee will be separated from her mother and leaving the motel behind. It is only when Moonee *leaves* her residence of transition, that real transformation is in sight.

Similarly in *Little Miss Sunshine*, it is only when the family *stop* driving that we can see evidence of their development. This is not to say that the transitional space of the van did not contribute to the family's personal growth – it seems that the transformation only happened *because* of it – but the real proof of the changes only came about *after* the periods of physical transition. The van provided moments of quiet introspection and forced a sense of togetherness upon the family due to their prolonged physical proximity. With nowhere to hide, the group had to learn how to coexist. The car or van also provides a space for contemplation, looking out the window and watching the world go by. There is a unique meditative quality to sitting physically still but being transported to a different place, and literally seeing the places you pass be 'left behind'. If anything would signal the opportunity for transformation to our subconscious mind, it's this. The application of personal growth happening outside the proximity of the transitional space suggests that these places foster a subconscious transformation only made tangible when the transitional space has been departed.

*Alice in Wonderland* plays with this idea in an abstracted way. If we are to imagine Alice's journey in three parts, defined by her relationship to wonderland – before, during, and after – we see her development come into full effect once she has *left* the transitional world of wonderland. What the fantasy setting affords us is to see the worlds-within-worlds of transitional space within transitional space, and in Burton's adaptation especially we witness Alice's progression ripen in stages as she encounters different trials of the self. Looking at wonderland as a metaphor for her own self-discovery, we can explore the complexities of that journey through the unreal world. The pinnacle of Alice's personal growth is displayed when she leaves wonderland, entering back into

reality, where it seems as though time were frozen, but the change in her is apparent. Wonderland is the encapsulating transitional space that Alice must go through to bring about change in her reality. Similar to *Little Miss Sunshine*, Alice comes across many instances that hold the quality of 'the door', with each presenting an expanse of possibilities, but Alice's overarching journey into and out of wonderland is explained through the essence of 'the bridge'. For her, there is only one way in, and one way out. The end of her transformation is symbolised by the end of the 'bridge', she has left the space of transition and arrived at her destination - which happens to be where she set off from but this further proves to us that the journey was internal.

Transitional spaces are rarely seen as a location in their own right, and are overlooked in terms of design, usage in film as a legitimate space for narrative progression, and in literature discussing their design significance in real life and film alike. Hallways, for example, are largely viewed as facilitating passage between rooms. Our neglect of these connecting spaces can be indicative of our desire to feel as though we have 'reached' our destination - whether that destination is adulthood, or the living room. It can be an unpleasant experience to feel 'in-between', which is precisely why these spaces work so well to display the discomfort or 'growing pains' of childhood growth.

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