



Visual Construction of Identity in Coming-of-Age Films: A Comparative Analysis of Psychological Development in "Adolescence" and "Lady Bird"

Construção visual da identidade em filmes de amadurecimento uma análise comparativa do desenvolvimento psicológico em Adolescência e Lady Bird

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the visual construction of adolescent psychological development in contemporary independent cinema through comparative analysis of Ashley Avis's "Adolescence" (2018a) and Greta Gerwig's "Lady Bird" (2017). Employing qualitative methodology combining visual analysis and narrative examination, this investigation explores how distinct independent filmmaking approaches employ cinematographic techniques to represent the psychological complexities of adolescence. The findings reveal that "Adolescence" utilizes drug-induced visual aesthetics and color temperature shifts to externalize trauma and escape. At the same time, "Lady Bird" employs memory-filtered cinematography and color palette differentiation to represent identity formation through familial relationships. Both films demonstrate sophisticated visual strategies for externalizing internal psychological states, suggesting that independent cinema has developed nuanced approaches to representing adolescent development that extend beyond traditional narrative techniques. This analysis contributes to understanding how contemporary independent filmmakers utilize visual language to articulate psychological experiences, offering insights into the intersection of film studies and developmental psychology.

Keywords: Adolescent psychology; independent cinema; visual semiotics; addiction representation; coming-of-age films; cinematographic techniques.

RESUMO

Este estudo examina a construção visual do desenvolvimento psicológico adolescente no cinema independente contemporâneo por meio da análise comparativa de "Adolescence" (2018a), de Ashley Avis, e "Lady Bird" (2017), de Greta Gerwig. Empregando metodologia qualitativa que combina análise visual e exame narrativo, esta investigação explora como diferentes abordagens do cinema independente empregam técnicas cinematográficas para representar as complexidades psicológicas da adolescência. Os resultados revelam que "Adolescence" utiliza estéticas visuais induzidas por drogas e mudanças na temperatura da cor para externalizar traumas e fugas. Ao mesmo tempo, "Lady Bird" emprega cinematografia filtrada pela memória e diferenciação da paleta de cores para representar a formação da identidade por meio de relações familiares. Ambos os filmes demonstram estratégias visuais sofisticadas para externalizar estados psicológicos internos, sugerindo que o cinema independente desenvolveu abordagens sutis para representar o desenvolvimento adolescente que vão além das técnicas narrativas tradicionais. Esta análise contribui para a compreensão de como cineastas independentes contemporâneos usam a linguagem visual para articular experiências psicológicas, oferecendo insights sobre a interseção entre estudos cinematográficos e psicologia do desenvolvimento.

Palavras-chave: Psicologia Adolescente; Cinema Independente; Semiótica Visual; Representação do Vício; Filmes de Amadurecimento; Técnicas Cinematográficas

1. INTRODUCTION

The visual representation of adolescent psychological development has emerged as a significant area of investigation within contemporary film studies, particularly as independent cinema explores increasingly complex representations of youth experience. Coming-of-age narratives function not merely as entertainment but as cultural artifacts that document, interpret, and influence societal understanding of adolescent development (Driscoll, 2011). These films create visual landscapes that externalize internal psychological processes, offering insights into how identity formation is conceptualized and communicated in contemporary visual culture.

This study focuses on two contemporary independent films that represent distinct approaches to visualizing adolescent experience: "Adolescence" (2018a), directed by Ashley Avis and produced by Winterstone Pictures, and "Lady Bird" (2017), directed by Greta Gerwig and distributed by A24. "Adolescence" follows Adam, a seventeen-year-old from an abusive household who falls into addiction after meeting Alice, a free-spirited runaway. The film explores identity fragmentation through the visual representation of drug use and trauma (Adolescence, 2018a). "Lady Bird" examines Christine "Lady Bird" McPherson's senior year in Sacramento, focusing on her turbulent relationship with her mother and her attempts to forge an independent identity (Gerwig, 2017). While both films address adolescent identity development, they employ fundamentally different visual strategies to externalize psychological experience (see Table 1 for a comparative overview).

The selection of these films enables examination of how independent filmmaking contexts shape visual approaches to representing psychological development. "Adolescence," produced by Winterstone Pictures, an independent production company specializing in character-driven narratives, demonstrates an intimate approach to trauma visualization. "Lady Bird," distributed by A24, a studio renowned for supporting distinctive auteur visions, exemplifies how independent

production can facilitate highly personal, memory-based visual storytelling. Both films received critical recognition for their nuanced portrayal of adolescent experience, suggesting their artistic merit in depicting youth identity formation.

Table 1 - Comparative overview of film characteristics.

Comparative characteristics of "Adolescence" (2018) and "Lady Bird" (2017) demonstrate distinct independent filmmaking approaches to representing adolescent psychological development.

Aspect	Adolescence (2018)	Lady Bird (2017)	Analytical Significance
Director	Ashley Avis	Greta Gerwig	Different auteur visions within independent cinema
Cinematographer	Garrett O'Brien	Sam Levy	Distinct visual approaches to psychological representation

Aspect	Adolescence (2018)	Lady Bird (2017)	Analytical Significance
Production Context	Winterstone Pictures (independent, character-driven focus)	A24 distribution (independent, auteur support)	How independent contexts enable creative freedom
Primary Theme	Trauma, addiction, escape	Family, identity, place	Different psychological dimensions of adolescence
Visual Strategy	Drug-induced aesthetic, color temperature contrast	Memory-filtered cinematography, dual color palettes	Contrasting approaches to externalizing psychology
Narrative Structure	Non-linear, fragmented timelines	Linear with montage sequences	Different temporal representations of development

Source: The author, based on research data.

This examination addresses three interconnected dimensions of adolescent representation in contemporary independent cinema. First, it analyzes how these films employ specific cinematographic techniques to externalize internal psychological processes, exploring the visual language that makes abstract developmental concepts accessible to viewers. Second, it investigates patterns of visual symbolism deployed during critical psychological moments, examining whether shared visual vocabularies emerge despite different narrative approaches. Third, it considers how independent production contexts enable particular visual strategies, questioning whether creative freedom fundamentally shapes filmmakers' capacity to create psychologically nuanced representations. Through this analysis,

the study illuminates both how contemporary independent cinema depicts adolescence and how these visual constructions reflect broader cultural understandings of psychological development.

The significance of this investigation lies in its interdisciplinary approach, bridging film studies and developmental psychology to develop a more nuanced understanding of how contemporary cinema visualizes adolescent psychological experience. By analyzing specific visual strategies employed in these films, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of cinematic representation while providing insights that may inform future approaches to adolescent narratives in independent filmmaking.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundation for understanding adolescent development has been significantly shaped by Erikson (1968) psychosocial developmental theory, particularly its conceptualization of the "identity versus role confusion" stage. During this critical phase, adolescents confront the challenge of establishing coherent self-concepts while navigating various social roles and expectations. Marcia (1966) Expanded this framework by identifying four identity statuses: identity achievement, foreclosure, moratorium, and identity diffusion, providing a nuanced understanding of the diverse paths adolescents take in forming identities. Contemporary psychological investigation has further developed these foundational theories to account for modern society's increasing complexity and proposed the "narrative identity" concept, emphasizing how adolescents construct coherent self-narratives integrating past experiences, present circumstances, and anticipated futures. This narrative approach proves particularly relevant to film analysis, as cinema constitutes a narrative medium capable of externalizing internal identity construction processes.

As Sonni and Mardhani (2023, p. 90) demonstrated in their analysis of documentary approaches, "The participatory model is practiced predominantly by the filmmaker through active involvement in a scene, indicated by the presence of voice or the movement of the camera seeming to respond to the scene." This participatory approach reveals how filmmakers navigate the boundary between observer and participant, a consideration equally relevant for fiction filmmakers representing adolescent psychological experience. Similarly, their identification of the reflexive model where "the presence of the filmmaker's voice behind the camera maintains the intimacy of an event" (Sonni; Mardhani, 2023, p. 92) illuminates how visual techniques can create pre-cognitive emotional connections with audiences before conscious narrative processing occurs.

The analysis of visual representation in film draws on multiple theoretical traditions, including semiotics, film theory, and visual culture studies. Bordwell and Thompson (2013) *An approach to film analysis* provides comprehensive frameworks for understanding how technical elements, *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing, and sound work together to create meaning. Monaco (2009) *Work on visual semiotics* emphasizes how cinematic language communicates through complex systems of signs and symbols. Building on Metz (1977) seminal work on film language and psychoanalysis, contemporary documentary theory, as articulated by Nichols (1991) and further developed by, Sonni and Mardhani (2023) demonstrates how different approaches to visual representation, whether poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, or performative, create distinct relationships between filmmaker, subject, and audience. This framework proves particularly valuable for understanding how contemporary independent filmmakers employ varied visual strategies to represent psychological complexity, as filmmakers must navigate similar ethical and aesthetic considerations whether creating documentary or fictional narratives about adolescent experience.

The coming-of-age genre has evolved significantly in its approach to representing adolescent experience. Shary (2005) A comprehensive study traces this evolution from simplistic portrayals of teenage rebellion toward complex explorations of identity and psychological development. Contemporary coming-of-age films increasingly focus on internal psychological landscapes rather than merely documenting external behaviors. Recent scholarship examines how these films engage with issues of gender, class, and family dynamics in representing adolescent identity. Driscoll (2011) Analyzes how these films reflect and actively shape cultural understandings through narrative and visual strategies. The emergence of independent film distribution has created new opportunities for complex adolescent representations. As Gerwig herself noted, the film industry has begun supporting more personal, nuanced explorations of youth experience, particularly through studios like A24 that champion distinctive auteur visions.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative methodology combining visual analysis and narrative examination to investigate the representation of adolescent development in "Adolescence" (2018) and "Lady Bird" (2017). This methodological approach is informed by Monaco (2009) a framework for reading cinematic language, Bordwell and Thompson (2013) an approach to film analysis, and documentary film theory articulated by Nichols (1991) and demonstrated in practice by Sonni and Mardhani (2023), whose analysis of documentary approaches in Cameraperson illustrates how systematic categorization of visual techniques can reveal patterns of meaning-making in cinematic representation. Following their methodological approach of identifying scenes by visual characteristics and categorizing them according to established theoretical frameworks, this study conducts multiple complete film

viewings to identify and catalog key cinematographic moments that externalize psychological states.

4. FIL SELECTION AND JUSTIFICATION

The selection of "Adolescence" and "Lady Bird" was guided by four essential criteria enabling meaningful comparative analysis. Both films were released in the late 2010s (2017-2018), ensuring relevance to contemporary cinematic representations while maintaining sufficient critical distance for analysis. Each film places adolescent psychological development at its narrative core, explicitly engaging with identity formation challenges. Both emerge from independent production contexts: "Adolescence" from Winterstone Pictures and "Lady Bird" from A24 distribution, yet represent different scales and approaches to independent filmmaking. Finally, both received critical recognition specifically for nuanced adolescent portrayal, suggesting recognized artistic merit in depicting youth identity formation. This selection enables examination of how different independent production contexts shape visual strategies while maintaining focus on films deliberately engaging with psychological dimensions of adolescent development.

5. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework implements a systematic examination of visual and narrative elements, building upon established methodologies in film analysis. The investigation examines five interconnected cinematic dimensions: visual composition, encompassing framing choices, camera angles, and movement patterns; color and lighting strategies employing symbolism to establish mood while conveying psychological states; editing techniques including transitions, pacing decisions, and montage sequences; sound design incorporating musical choices creating emotional resonance; and narrative structure examining character development arcs. These

cinematic elements were analyzed specifically for their function in representing psychological processes central to adolescent development, including exploration phases where adolescents experiment with different possible selves, commitment moments to particular values, crisis periods challenging existing self-concepts, and movement toward resolution or integration.

6. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS PROCESS

The data collection process unfolded through deliberate progression, ensuring methodological thoroughness. Each film underwent multiple complete viewings, allowing identification and cataloging of key scenes representing significant developmental moments. Identified scenes underwent detailed analytical scrutiny through systematic documentation of cinematographic techniques. Visual patterns were meticulously documented through descriptive analysis, creating comprehensive records of specific cinematic moments. The fourth stage engaged in rigorous comparative study between films, identifying shared visual strategies and distinctive approaches. Finally, comparative insights were interpreted within developmental psychology frameworks, connecting cinematic choices to established psychological understandings of adolescent identity formation. This progression facilitated both the depth of examination regarding individual films and the breadth of comparison between different approaches, establishing robust foundations for findings.

7. VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF TRAUMA AND ESCAPE IN "ADOLESCENCE"

Ashley Avis's "Adolescence" (2018a) employs distinctive visual strategies to represent psychological trauma and the allure of escape through addiction. The film's cinematography, executed by Garrett O'Brien, creates what reviewers described as "the visual equivalent of a drug-induced trip" (Review, 2019), utilizing specific

techniques to externalize Adam's internal psychological state. The film establishes visual contrast between confinement and liberation through compositional choices and color temperature manipulation (see Figure 1). Scenes depicting Adam's abusive household employ constricted framing and oppressive camera angles, creating visual claustrophobia enhanced by desaturated color palettes dominated by cool tones. These compositional strategies visually communicate psychological entrapment before it is explicitly stated through narrative.

Figure 1 - Visual representation of psychological confinement in "Adolescence" through compositional and color strategies. The constricted framing and cool color temperature create an immediate visceral understanding of Adam's psychological entrapment within the abusive household environment.



Source: Adapted of Adolescence (2018a).

In stark contrast, scenes with Alice utilize expansive compositions, handheld camera movements suggesting freedom, and warmer color temperatures (see Figure 2). This visual dichotomy creates immediate comprehension of Alice's psychological function for Adam; she represents escape from psychological confinement. The film's use of color temperature proves particularly significant; the shift from cool blues and grays in domestic scenes to warm ambers and golds in scenes of romantic connection visually articulates psychological transformation before explicit character development occurs. This technique demonstrates cinema's capacity to communicate psychological experience through purely visual means.

Figure 2 - Visual representation of psychological liberation in "Adolescence."
The expansive composition and warm color temperature create visual contrast to household scenes, immediately communicating Alice's function as an escape from Adam's traumatic environment.



Source: Adapted of Adolescence (2018a).

The film's representation of addiction progression utilizes visual disruption and atmospheric manipulation. Multiple reviewers noted the "bathroom scene" as particularly emotionally effective (Adolescence, 2018b), suggesting Avis employs confined spaces and specific lighting to create visual intensity representing psychological crisis. The progression into deeper addiction correlates with increasing visual instability, jump cuts, distorted perspectives, and desaturated imagery, suggesting psychological fragmentation. This visual representation aligns with Caruth (1996), the theorization of trauma as an experience resisting traditional narrative representation, requiring visual disruption to communicate psychological reality. Table 2 summarizes the key visual techniques employed in "Adolescence" and their psychological functions.

Table 2 - Visual Techniques and Psychological Functions in "Adolescence."
Systematic documentation of visual techniques employed in "Adolescence" demonstrates how specific cinematographic choices externalize psychological states of trauma, confinement, and escape through addiction

Visual Technique	Technical Execution	Psychological Function	Narrative Context
Color Temperature Contrast	Cool blues/grays vs. warm ambers/golds	Confinement vs. escape visualization	Household scenes vs. scenes with Alice
Compositional Strategy	Constricted vs. expansive framing	Spatial manifestation of psychological state	Oppressive home vs. liberating outdoor spaces
Camera Movement	Static vs. handheld movement	Stasis vs. freedom of movement	Confined situations vs. escape moments
Visual Disruption	Jump cuts, distorted perspectives	Psychological fragmentation through addiction	Deepening drug addiction sequences
Perspective Choice	Child-height camera position	Powerlessness and vulnerability	Opening scene in mother's car

Source: The author, based on research data.

Critically, the film's opening sequence establishes its visual language for trauma representation. Shot from young Adam's perspective in his mother's car, the camera intentionally positions viewers at child height, unable to see adult faces clearly. This perspectival choice creates immediate visceral understanding of childhood powerlessness and confusion, establishing the film's commitment to visual externalization of psychological experience. Throughout the narrative, Avis maintains this approach, utilizing cinematography not merely to illustrate but to embody

psychological states, creating what film theorists term "subjective identification" through visual technique (Metz, 1977).

8. MEMORY-FILTERED CINEMATOGRAPHY IN "LADY BIRD"

Greta Gerwig's "Lady Bird" employs a fundamentally different visual approach, utilizing what cinematographer Sam Levy termed "memory-filtered" cinematography to represent identity formation through familial relationships and place. Gerwig's explicit direction to Levy was "I want this to look like a memory" (O'Falt, 2017), resulting in a distinctive visual process that transforms conventional cinematography into psychological representation. The technical execution involved color-copying photographic references, deliberately degrading image quality to evoke early 2000s aesthetics and memory's imperfect nature (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 - Memory-filtered cinematography in "Lady Bird" shows the distinctive pastel aesthetic created through the color-copying process. The slightly degraded, soft-focus quality evokes both early 2000s photography and the imperfect nature of memory itself



Source: The author, based on research data.

The film's color palette, inspired by Sacramento artist Wayne Thiebaud's pastel-hued paintings, employs soft blues, muted pinks, and serene tones reflecting both Sacramento's specificity and universal youthful longing. However, Gerwig and colorist Alex Bickel developed two distinct color palettes applied to different narrative contexts (see Figure 4). Scenes with "cool kids" feature cyan highlights and lavender blacks, creating a cooler, more distant visual atmosphere. Scenes in "Lady Bird" world interactions with family and genuine friends employ warmer tones with "more personality, more warmth and humanity" (O'Falt (O'Falt, 2017), 2017). This dual palette system visually distinguishes authentic from performative identity exploration, communicating psychological truth through color before explicit narrative revelation.

Figure 4 - The dual color palette system in "Lady Bird" demonstrates visual differentiation between performative identity exploration (cool, distant tones) and authentic identity contexts (warm, intimate tones). This pre-cognitive visual

communication operates before viewers consciously process the psychological distinction.



Source: The author, based on research data.

The film's camera work demonstrates remarkable restraint, employing what Gerwig called maintaining "sense of the proscenium" (O'Falt, 2017), awareness of frame as constructed space rather than transparent window. Levy opted for dolly-based movements rather than handheld or Steadicam, creating measured, deliberate camera motion reflecting contemplative remembrance rather than immediate experience. This technical choice creates psychological distance, enabling reflection,

aligning with the film's exploration of how adolescents construct retrospective narratives about their development.

Particularly significant is the film's use of mirror imagery to represent the mother-daughter relationship (see Figure 5). The bathroom scene shot entirely through mirror perspective visually articulates that Lady Bird and Marion are "reflections of each other. This compositional choice transforms the literal mirror into a visual metaphor, externalizing the psychological reality that Lady Bird cannot yet consciously recognize her fundamental similarity to her mother despite surface rebellion.

Figure 5 - Mirror composition in the "Lady Bird" bathroom scene. The entire sequence is filmed through the mirror perspective, visually articulating the mother-daughter reflection theme. This literal mirror becomes a visual metaphor for their psychological similarity despite apparent conflict.



Source: The author, based on research data.

The film's final sequences employ deliberate visual callbacks to earlier compositions, creating what Ricoeur (1992) terms "narrative identity" selfhood emerging through integration of past and present into a coherent but evolving

narrative. Table 3 documents the key visual techniques employed in "Lady Bird" and their functions in representing identity formation as retrospective narrative construction.

Table 3 - Visual Techniques and Psychological Functions in "Lady Bird". Systematic documentation of visual techniques in "Lady Bird" demonstrates how cinematography creates a memory-filtered aesthetic to represent identity formation as retrospective narrative construction rather than immediate experience.

Visual Technique	Technical Execution	Psychological Function	Narrative Context
Memory-Filtered Aesthetic	Color-copying process creating degraded quality	Evokes memory's imperfect, nostalgic quality	Throughout entire film as framing device
Dual Color Palette System	Cyan/lavender vs. warm/humanistic tones	Performative vs. authentic identity contexts	"Cool kids" scenes vs. family/genuine friend scenes
Wayne Thiebaud Influence	Pastel blues, muted pinks, serene tones	Sacramento specificity and universal longing	Sacramento landscape and setting scenes
Dolly-Based Camera Movement	Measured, deliberate motion (not handheld)	Contemplative remembrance vs. immediate experience	Throughout film, creating consistent aesthetic
Mirror Composition	Entire scene shot through mirror perspective	Mother-daughter as reflections of each other	Bathroom conversation scene
Visual Callbacks	Repeated compositions with subtle modifications	Integration of past and present into narrative identity	Final sequences referencing earlier scenes

Source: The author, based on research data.

9. COMPARATIVE VISUAL STRATEGIES

Comparative analysis reveals both convergences and divergences in how these independent films employ visual techniques to represent adolescent psychology (see Table 4 for a systematic comparison). Both films utilize color as a primary psychological signifier, though toward different ends. "Adolescence" employs color temperature to distinguish psychological states, cool tones indicating confinement and trauma, warm tones suggesting escape and connection. "Lady Bird" employs a color palette to distinguish authentic from performative identity contexts. Both approaches demonstrate a sophisticated understanding that color communicates psychologically before cognitively, creating immediate visceral comprehension preceding narrative explanation.

Table 4 - Comprehensive comparative analysis reveals both convergent visual strategies (use of color, composition, disruption for psychological signification) and

divergent applications reflecting fundamentally different understandings of adolescent identity formation.

Visual Element	Adolescence	Lady Bird	Convergence	Divergence
Color Strategy	Temperature contrast (cool/warm)	Dual palette system (cyan/warm)	Both use color as psychological signifier	Different psychological functions (confinement/escape vs. authentic/performative)
Composition	Constricted vs. expansive framing	Position within frame (edge/center)	Both externalize internal states spatially	Different spatial strategies
Camera Movement	Handheld (suggesting freedom)	Dolly-based (measured restraint)	Both employ deliberate movement choices	Opposite psychological effects (immediacy vs. contemplation)
Crisis Representation	Jump cuts, distorted perspectives	Subtle aspect ratio shifts	Both use visual disruption for psychological crisis	Degree of disruption (overt fragmentation vs. subtle destabilization)
Temporal Structure	Non-linear, three timelines	Linear with montage sequences	Both manipulate temporal experience	Different theories of identity formation (disruptive vs. evolutionary)
Overall Aesthetic	Drug-induced, visceral immediacy	Memory-filtered, nostalgic distance	Both create distinctive psychological atmospheres	Opposite temporal relationships (present trauma vs. past remembrance)

Source: The author, based on research data.

Both films employ compositional strategies to externalize internal psychological experience, though through different techniques. "Adolescence" uses constricted versus expansive framing to represent psychological confinement versus liberation. "Lady Bird" uses positioning of characters within the frame at frame edges

during marginalization, centered during moments of recognition, to communicate psychological states. These approaches suggest an emerging visual vocabulary in independent cinema for representing adolescent psychology through the spatial relationship between the character and the frame.

Significantly, both films employ visual disruption to represent psychological crisis, though manifesting differently. "Adolescence" uses jump cuts and distorted perspectives during addiction's intensification, creating visual fragmentation mirroring psychological fragmentation. "Lady Bird" uses more subtle disruptions, slight aspect ratio shifts during heightened emotion, maintaining overall visual continuity while signaling psychological intensity. These approaches suggest a spectrum of techniques available for representing psychological disruption, from overt fragmentation to subtle destabilization.

The films diverge most significantly in their temporal approach. "Adolescence" employs a non-linear structure, fragmenting time to mirror psychological disorientation, with three narrative timelines converging during crisis moments. "Lady Bird" employs a more linear structure punctuated by montage sequences compressing time during intense exploration periods. This divergence reflects different theoretical understandings of adolescent development: "Adolescence" suggests identity formation as fundamentally disruptive and fragmenting, "Lady Bird" suggests it as gradual evolution punctuated by accelerated moments.

10. DISCUSSION

Cinematic Language of Psychological Representation

The comparative analysis reveals the emergence of sophisticated visual language for representing psychological experience in contemporary independent cinema. This language operates through visual metaphors, compositional strategies, and editing techniques that externalize internal states. Both films demonstrate that contemporary filmmakers employ shared fundamental approaches to color as a psychological signifier, composition as a spatial manifestation of internal experience, and editing rhythm as a temporal correlate of psychological processing while developing distinctive applications.

Particularly significant is how both films employ what might be termed "pre-cognitive communication," visual information creating psychological understanding before conscious processing. "Adolescence" communicates Adam's psychological confinement through compositional claustrophobia before viewers consciously register framing choices. "Lady Bird" communicates identity contexts through color palette before viewers explicitly note color shifts. This pre-cognitive communication demonstrates cinema's unique capacity among narrative media to create embodied understanding, engaging viewers' perceptual systems before interpretive faculties.

The analysis suggests independent cinema has developed particularly nuanced approaches to psychological representation, enabled by creative freedom from commercial constraints. Both films demonstrate a willingness to prioritize psychological accuracy over conventional narrative clarity, trusting visual communication to convey complexity that might require extensive exposition in commercial contexts. This creative freedom enables filmmakers to develop visual languages matching psychological experience's actual complexity rather than simplified versions deemed commercially safer.

Independent Production Context and Visual Innovation

The comparative analysis illuminates how independent production contexts enable specific visual strategies for psychological representation. "Adolescence," produced by Winterstone Pictures with emphasis on character-driven narratives, demonstrates an intimate approach, maximizing emotional impact through carefully constructed visual metaphors. Director Avis employs techniques prioritizing psychological authenticity over visual conventionality, creating a drug-induced aesthetic that commercial contexts might deem too unsettling. The independent context enabled this commitment to psychological accuracy despite potential commercial risks.

"Lady Bird," distributed by A24's support for distinctive auteur visions, exemplifies how independent production facilitates highly personal, memory-based approaches. Gerwig's collaboration with Levy to develop unique technical process color-copying references, creating custom color palettes, demonstrates creative freedom to prioritize artistic vision over established methodologies. This freedom enabled year-long pre-production visual development that commercial timelines might prohibit, resulting in an unprecedented "memory-filtered" aesthetic.

Despite different aesthetic executions, both films demonstrate a sophisticated understanding that visual techniques can represent psychological development as effectively as narrative exposition. This suggests that while production context influences aesthetic execution, fundamental capacity for nuanced psychological representation emerges from filmmakers' commitment to psychological authenticity rather than production budget or studio support. Independent contexts enable rather than determine this commitment, providing creative freedom for filmmakers already oriented toward psychological complexity.

Implications for Understanding Adolescent Development

The visual strategies employed in these films have significant implications for how adolescent development is understood and represented culturally. By creating visual externalization of internal psychological processes, these films make abstract developmental concepts tangible and accessible. Particularly significant is how both films represent identity not as a fixed achievement but as an ongoing process of negotiation and integration. This visual approach aligns with contemporary psychological understanding of identity as fluid and contextual rather than static and absolute.

"Adolescence" visually represents identity fragmentation through trauma and addiction, demonstrating how adverse experiences disrupt coherent self-concept formation. The film's visual fragmentation during addiction progression creates a cinematic articulation of what psychologists describe as identity diffusion, the inability to commit to a coherent self-concept (Marcia, 1966). "Lady Bird" visually represents identity as a narrative construction integrating multiple experiences and social roles, aligning with McAdams (2001) narrative identity theory. The film's visual callbacks and mirror imagery create a cinematic representation of how adolescents construct coherent self-narratives from disparate experiences.

These films suggest cinema functions not merely as a reflection of psychological knowledge but as a medium for its exploration and development. The visual strategies employed create new ways of conceptualizing psychological experience, potentially influencing how viewers understand their own developmental processes. This reciprocal relationship between cinematic representation and psychological understanding suggests that film studies and developmental psychology have much to gain from interdisciplinary dialogue.

11. CONCLUSION

This study examined how contemporary independent coming-of-age films visually construct adolescent psychological development through specific cinematographic techniques and narrative strategies. The comparative analysis of "Adolescence" and "Lady Bird" reveals sophisticated visual languages for representing psychological experience that emerge from independent filmmaking contexts while addressing universal developmental themes.

The findings, systematically documented in Tables 1-4 and illustrated in Figures 1-5, demonstrate how contemporary independent cinema functions as more than entertainment; it constitutes a medium for exploring and articulating psychological understanding of adolescent development. "Adolescence" employs drug-induced visual aesthetics and compositional contrast to externalize trauma and escape, creating a visceral understanding of how adverse experiences fragment identity formation. "Lady Bird" employs memory-filtered cinematography and dual color palettes to represent identity formation as retrospective narrative construction, creating a visual articulation of how adolescents integrate experiences into coherent self-concepts.

The comparative analysis reveals how different independent production contexts enable distinctive visual approaches while sharing fundamental commitments to psychological authenticity. Winterstone Pictures' character-driven focus enabled "Adolescence" to prioritize psychological intensity over commercial palatability. A24's auteur support enabled "Lady Bird" to develop an unprecedented memory-based aesthetic. Both contexts demonstrate that independent production facilitates creative freedom, enabling sophisticated psychological representation, though specific aesthetic manifestations vary.

This investigation contributes to interdisciplinary discourse at the intersection of film studies and developmental psychology in several key ways. First, it

systematically documents specific visual techniques contemporary independent filmmakers employ to represent psychological development, establishing foundations for understanding cinema's role in visualizing psychological concepts. Second, it demonstrates how these visual representations function as theoretical articulations that inform psychological understanding, suggesting cinema actively contributes to psychological knowledge rather than merely reflecting it. Third, it reveals how independent filmmaking contexts enable distinctive psychological representation approaches while drawing on shared visual vocabularies, illuminating complex relationships between production environments and creative outcomes.

The study's critical contribution lies in demonstrating that visual semiotics in cinema constitutes more than an illustration of psychological theory; it represents an active theoretical engagement that deepens understanding of developmental processes. The films examined employ visual strategies that do not simply depict identity formation but theorize it through cinematic means, offering insights complementing and extend traditional psychological frameworks. "Adolescence" theorizes trauma's fragmenting effects through visual disruption; "Lady Bird" theorizes identity as narrative construction through memory-filtered aesthetics. These visual theorizations demonstrate cinema's unique capacity among narrative media to make invisible psychological processes perceptible.

Future investigation could expand this analysis to include a broader range of contemporary independent coming-of-age films, particularly those representing diverse cultural contexts and identity experiences. Cross-cultural comparative analysis would illuminate how different cultural understandings of adolescence manifest in visual representation strategies. Additionally, reception studies examining how adolescent viewers interpret these visual representations would provide valuable insights into whether cinematic visualization influences adolescents' understanding of their developmental processes. Such an investigation would further elucidate

reciprocal relationships between cinematic representation and psychological understanding, contributing to both fields' evolving knowledge.

The convergence of sophisticated visual techniques with psychological authenticity in these independent films suggests broader implications for contemporary cinema. As independent production continues expanding through digital distribution, opportunities increase for filmmakers to develop innovative visual languages for psychological representation unconstrained by commercial imperatives. This evolution promises richer, more nuanced cinematic exploration of human psychological experience, potentially transforming not only how adolescence is represented on screen but how it is understood culturally.

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