

Analysis of Good Will Hunting - Erin Riley

Good Will Hunting is a poetic story of a young man's struggle to find his place in the world by first finding out who he is. Matt Damon plays the troubled genius with an acute awareness of the depth of the human soul. The movie is a journey through the mind of Will Hunting as he is forced to endure therapy instead of jail. With the help of the psychologist, played by Robin Williams, Will discovers himself and realizes his value in the world by understanding what matters to him most. This movie is a source of wonderful examples for film technique. Gus Van Sant's directing combined with the writing talents of Matt Damon & Ben Affleck (who plays Will's best friend, Chuckie), is a dynamic combination of technical aspects used to evoke emotion and empathy. There are several aspects I will discuss: color, angles/shots, camera movement, editing, and distortions. These are each extremely significant in the overall composition.

The first element I will discuss is color. Throughout most of the movie, very natural colors are used. Van Sant's use of warm ambers is an inventive way to create a sense of humanity and creates a strong sense of empathy for Will. Whenever Will is in a place he feels safe and comfortable, the colors are very warm and inviting. For example, when he is in Skylar's (Minnie Driver) room at Harvard, or in Sean's (Robin Williams) office, or his apartment, the dominant color is amber. This creates a wonderful sense of warmth and the viewer realizes at these times Will isn't wearing any masks. He is being himself because he feels safe in these situations. The times when Will is in a place where he is hiding within himself, or doesn't have that safe feeling, Van Sant does a very noticeable color shift to the cold colors, such as blue and white. This creates a sense of manipulation and unrest. It is very impersonal. One example is Will's first meeting with Sean. He is looking at a painting that is hung on the window and as he is looking at it, he is analyzing its artistic value and Sean's life. The closer he gets to the painting, the colder the light gets until the end of the monologue when he is right in front of it and the sunlight creates this look that is very similar to an overexposed photograph, which causes Will to look very surreal, and frightening. It's a great moment of a complete shift in mood within a shot. The coldness of the shot creates a feeling of calculation and the viewer can understand how Will lashes out when in a situation he doesn't feel comfortable with.

The next element I will discuss is angles/shots. Van Sant makes very strong statements with his use of camera angles and shots. His use of mise en scene is beautiful. Each scene is carefully crafted, even when it appears to be very spontaneous. There are some great examples of good camera work in this movie. One example is the scene when Sean is in his apartment after his first meeting with Will. He is sitting in a dirty apartment with dishes every where, and Sean is sitting at the table, drinking. Van Sant cuts to this gorgeous shot in which he uses a higher angle and places Sean in the right portion of the screen, the weakest, and the glass of whiskey in the left, he then uses the glass of whiskey as the dominant. This shot creates the sense that Sean is an alcoholic, or at least he drinks often enough where it is beginning to control him. It is very obvious in this shot that the whiskey has the power. Another example is the scene with Will and Sean at the pond. Sean has a gorgeous monologue in this scene and through almost the entire

thing, the only shot is an eye-level close up on Sean. It stays on him until he begins talking about love, then the camera very slowly, staying at eye-level, pans to include Will in the shot. This effective technique creates the idea that Will is slowly being exposed by Sean's words. Another example with Will and Sean is the scenes in Sean's office. During most of the movie, Van Sant uses eye-level medium two-shots during these scenes. Will and Sean are never in the frame together, until the end, after Will's breakdown, then the mise en scene includes both of them, using a full shot. This clearly identifies the progress of the relationship. It takes Will a long time to trust Sean. Van Sant's manipulation of the shots in these scenes truly creates that sense of coming together. Yet another example of strong camera work is Will's scenes with Skylar in her room. Van Sant's use of close-ups and extreme close-ups gives the viewer a sense of voyeurism, as if we were in the room with them. This is an excellent technique for this movie because it creates an incredible sense of empathy for these characters. The closeness of the camera gives the viewer closeness to the characters. During the movie, there are periodic shots where Will is on a train going to work or Sean's office. My final example is the scene with Will and the professor (Stellan Skarsgaard) toward the end of the movie when Will burns the paper with the math proof on it that the professor gave to Will because he couldn't do it. This shot is a great example of power. At this point, the professor is on his knees on the ground in front of Will, with the burned paper in his hand. Van Sant creates a sense of control by using a high angle shot on the professor, making him seem insignificant, and a low angle shot on Will, making him seem important and powerful.

The use of camera movement was very creative in this movie. Van Sant used several different techniques. In the opening scene when Will was in his apartment reading, Van Sant used a pull back dolly shot to really isolate Will in the small apartment and give it the sense of how alone Will really was at that point, with only his books for company. He used an ariel shot during the playground fight scene, however briefly, but it was just long enough to create the sense of unity these friends have, how they all stick up for one another. One technique Van Sant used often and very artfully was the hand held camera. During the scenes with Will and Skylar in her room, the use of a hand held camera caused a sense of closeness that was so real, it felt as if we were in the room with them, in fact, it was almost intrusive. There is a great moment when Will and Skylar are on the bed, on the verge of the argument, and the camera is moving a bit, but the viewer gets a very theatrical sense because it is incredibly realistic. The camera acts as an eye in these scenes and creates an amazing sense of emotional connections. It was absolutely beautiful. The odd angles while the camera was moving made it appear like a painting, each movement carefully crafted.

Van Sant and Pietro Scalia did an excellent job with the editing. The editing was slightly formalistic because of the odd angles and cuts and even though the story itself was realistic, the editing would sometimes be formalistic in nature. This may seem to be a poor choice, but quite the contrary. First and foremost, the montages were beautiful. In the beginning of the movie, Van Sant used a montage to establish Will and his life, but instead of using normal cutting from one moment to another, he used a very unique kaleidoscope effect. The use of this effect gave the idea that there was more to this than meets the eye. Granted, this would probably fall under the distortion category, but it works with editing because of the way it slowly morphed from the multiple pictures within one frame to the shot of Will alone in his apartment. Anyway, the

kaleidoscope effect gave the sense that Will was a person with many pieces that made him whole. It was very effective. A general editing note for Van Sant was the fact that he cut to other characters, even when they weren't speaking. He especially used this in the scenes with Will and all of his friends. There is a great moment when he cut to Will's friend, Bill (Cole Hauser) when Chuckie was telling a story. Bill was listening, but I could tell there was something else going through his mind. The use of this editing technique creates a sense of relationship and intrigue about the other characters. Obviously, the focus of this story is on Will, but Van Sant encompasses everything in Will's life, including the people around him. Parallel editing is used in several points throughout the film. The scene when Will is at the arcade with his friends is paralleled with a scene with the professor and Sean at a fancy restaurant having drinks while discussing Will gives the sense of two completely different worlds coming together.

Another instance is when Skylar is at the airport, looking around, expecting Will to show up and instead of giving the audience the anticipation of the possibility of Will appearing, he cuts to Will sitting on a park bench, watching planes leave. This creates instant empathy for Skylar and Will, knowing they want to be together, but knowing they won't be. At the end of the movie when Will is leaving, but he is dropping off a note at Sean's paralleled with Chuckie at Will's apartment establishes the separation and evolution of Will's priorities. One of the most intriguing editing moments is the scene when Will is at the interview for the National Security Council and he begins to tell a story. At this point, Van Sant uses an over the shoulder shot, with the focus on the NSA shot but he then cuts to Will's face in Sean's office, telling the same story. However, the story never stops. It is a wonderful use of continuity editing and of Will telling Sean about his life. Finally, Van Sant returns to the kaleidoscope editing when Will and Sean are talking about being abused by their fathers. It creates a sense of different aspects of two lives coming together. I could go on forever, but these are the moments I found the most interesting.

Finally, the last element I will discuss is the use of film distortions. The best example of this is the use of slow motion during the playground fight scene. Van Sant uses slow motion combined with regular speed during this entire scene. What this does is glorify the idea of violence, but before it gets to be too glamorous, he throws in a few moments of normal speed, which reminds us how bloody and violent fighting is. The jumping around gives the audience a feeling of unrest and disgust at fighting. It feels very urgent, but still normal for these guys to randomly jump someone because of a grudge from kindergarten.

In conclusion, Van Sant does an excellent job at directing this film by implementing so many different and creative techniques to tell a story that might otherwise get boring. The uniqueness of the elements and the way they are used, like the kaleidoscope effect, is clever, and well manipulated, and causes the viewer to think about different aspects of the film, and especially of Will. It's especially unique because it does not give you the answer, but makes you figure it out, much like Will, and therefore creating a wonderful sense of empathy for Will Hunting.

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