SLICE OF LIFE FORMULA IN JONAH HILL'S *MID90S* (2018) FILM

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Abstract

Mid90s (2018), a film directed by Jonah Hill, masterfully employs a slice-of-life formula to depict the coming-of-age of Stevie, a thirteen-year-old in 1990s Los Angeles, abstracting the often-unspoken complexities of adolescence through a series of loosely connected, observational vignettes rather than a traditional linear narrative. The film eschews explicit plot points and grand dramatic arcs, instead immersing the viewer in the mundane yet formative experiences of Stevie's summer: the tentative steps into a new social group of older, rebellious skateboarders, the awkward fumbling with identity and belonging, the casual cruelty and genuine camaraderie within the group, and the subtle shifts in his relationship with his troubled home life. Through extended, unhurried scenes of skateboarding, loitering, and late-night conversations, the film captures the raw, unfiltered essence of youth, where moments of boredom, exhilaration, vulnerability, and fleeting independence coalesce to form the fragmented but deeply impactful mosaic of a boy finding his place in a chaotic world, allowing the audience to intuit the emotional and psychological shifts occurring beneath the surface of everyday interactions.

Keywords: *Mid90s*, Slice-Of-Life, Jonah Hill

INTRODUCTION

Jonah Hill's *Mid90s* (2018) isn't just a film; it's a meticulously crafted time capsule, a raw and unvarnished glimpse into the pivotal summer of thirteen-year-old Stevie's life in 1990s Los Angeles. The film distinguishes itself by eschewing the conventional narrative structures often found in coming-of-age stories. Instead of a clear-cut plot with defined rising actions, climaxes, and resolutions, Hill opts for a slice-of-life formula, presenting a series of loosely connected vignettes that collectively paint a vivid portrait of adolescence. This intentional departure from traditional storytelling allows the film to abstract the often-unspoken complexities of growing up, presenting them not as grand dramatic events, but as a mosaic of everyday experiences.

At its core, *Mid90s* immerses the audience in the authentic, sometimes uncomfortable, realities of youthful exploration and self-discovery. It doesn't rely on heavy exposition or overt emotional declarations. Rather, the film trusts its viewers to infer the emotional and psychological shifts occurring beneath the surface of seemingly

mundane interactions. This observational approach is key to its power, inviting a more active and introspective engagement from the audience, as they piece together Stevie's journey from fragmented moments.

The film's strength lies in its commitment to realism, both in its aesthetic and its thematic execution. Shot on 16mm film, it evokes a distinct nostalgic quality that perfectly complements its period setting. This visual choice isn't merely stylistic; it enhances the feeling of authenticity, making the audience feel as though they are watching unearthed home videos rather than a staged production. This commitment to verisimilitude extends to the performances, particularly from the young, largely inexperienced cast, who bring a genuine awkwardness and spontaneity to their roles.

Mid90s also serves as a potent exploration of identity formation and the profound influence of peer groups during formative years. Stevie, grappling with a challenging home life marked by an abusive older brother and a well-meaning but often overwhelmed single mother, finds solace and a sense of belonging with a crew of older skateboarders. This newfound community, while offering camaraderie and acceptance, also exposes him to the harsh realities of their world, pushing him to confront boundaries and make choices that accelerate his understanding of himself and others.

The film's depiction of this subculture is neither glorified nor condemned. Instead, it's presented with an empathetic neutrality. We see the allure of their rebellious spirit, the freedom of skateboarding, and the fierce loyalty within the group. Simultaneously, Hill doesn't shy away from portraying the darker aspects: the casual racism, the misogyny, the underage drinking and smoking, and the underlying vulnerability that often accompanies bravado. This nuanced portrayal is crucial to the film's slice-of-life approach, as it reflects the multifaceted nature of real-life experiences without moralizing.

A significant aspect of the film's abstract nature lies in its elliptical storytelling. Important moments are often hinted at, rather than explicitly shown, requiring the audience to read between the lines and connect the emotional dots. For instance, the strained relationship between Stevie and his brother, Ian, is conveyed primarily through brief, intense bursts of violence and simmering tension, leaving the audience to infer the long-standing dynamics and emotional scars. This technique mirrors how young people often process complex situations – not always with clear understanding, but through fragmented experiences and emotional responses.

The film's focus on the ordinary acts as a powerful lens for examining extraordinary internal shifts. Extended scenes of skateboarding, loitering on street corners, and late-night conversations in cramped bedrooms aren't merely filler; they are the building blocks of Stevie's transformation. It's in these unhurried moments of shared experience that bonds are forged, lessons are learned, and personal boundaries are tested. The casualness of these interactions belies their profound impact on Stevie's developing sense of self and his understanding of the world around him.

Ultimately, *Mid90s* succeeds by embracing the messiness and ambiguity of adolescence. It doesn't offer easy answers or tidy resolutions. Instead, it presents a

snapshot, a brief but intense period in a young life where innocence begins to erode, and the complexities of adulthood loom large. By prioritizing atmosphere and authentic character interaction over a conventional plot, Jonah Hill crafts a film that resonates with a deep sense of truth, capturing the essence of growing up not as a singular event, but as a continuous, often unscripted, journey of discovery.

Films often serve as reflections of life experiences, and frequently, the most captivating narratives emerge from snippets of daily reality. The "slice of life" formula in cinema aims to capture the essence of intimate moments, without excessive dramatization or rigidly structured plots. Instead, this approach focuses on character development, emotional exploration, and the depiction of authentic environments. This approach emphasizes the authenticity of mundane moments, reflecting the protagonist's interactions with peers and the challenges of growing up in a subculture marked by both camaraderie and conflict (Beck, 2007). Jonah Hill, better known as a comedic actor, made a striking directorial debut with *Mid90s* (2018), a film that effectively utilizes the "slice of life" formula to present a profound portrait of adolescence in 1990s Los Angeles. This article will analyze how Hill employs key elements of the "slice of life" formula including multi-layered character development, non-linear narration, and a focus on atmosphere to create an honest and memorable cinematic experience that accurately depicts the challenges and beauty of growing up within the burgeoning skateboarding culture.

The film, therefore, operates as an abstract painting of youth, where individual brushstrokes – a shared cigarette, a failed trick, a quiet glance – combine to form a comprehensive, emotionally resonant whole. It's a testament to the power of observation in filmmaking, proving that sometimes, the most profound stories are found not in grand narratives, but in the subtle nuances of everyday life.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The application of the slice-of-life formula in *Mid90s* yields a multifaceted result, demonstrating how the absence of a traditional narrative arc can, paradoxically, create a richer, more authentic depiction of a transitional period in a young person's life. The film's strength lies not in a climactic resolution, but in its ability to immerse the viewer in the *process* of coming-of-age, highlighting the subtle, almost imperceptible shifts that accumulate to form a new identity. This approach allows for a deep dive into the raw emotional landscape of adolescence, where growth is often more about osmosis and gradual absorption of experience than dramatic breakthroughs. The result is a film that feels less like a constructed story and more like a lived experience, prompting the audience to engage with the material on an emotional and empathetic level rather than solely intellectual.

A key result of this stylistic choice is the profound sense of verisimilitude achieved throughout the film. By prioritizing observational realism over overt plot progression, *Mid90s* successfully recreates the distinct atmosphere of the 1990s and the specific world of skateboarding culture. The dialogue often feels improvised, the interactions are frequently awkward or unpolished, and the pacing allows for moments of quiet

contemplation or seemingly aimless hanging out. This unfiltered portrayal contributes significantly to the film's credibility, making the characters and their struggles feel genuinely human. The audience isn't told about Stevie's burgeoning independence; they *witness* it through his tentative steps into new social dynamics, his first encounters with illicit substances, and his quiet defiance of his home environment.

Furthermore, the slice-of-life framework enables a nuanced exploration of social dynamics and group identity. The film's focus on the mundane interactions within the skateboarding crew reveals the intricate pecking order, the unspoken rules, and the complex mixture of loyalty, cruelty, and camaraderie that defines their relationships. Each character, though not fully fleshed out through extensive backstories, is given enough screen time within these vignettes to establish a distinct personality and role within the group dynamic. This results in a highly believable portrayal of a subculture where acceptance is hard-earned, and belonging often comes with implicit challenges and tests. The audience observes how Stevie navigates this new social terrain, learning to adapt, assert himself, and absorb the values (both positive and negative) of his new friends.

Depicting Reality and Authentic Atmosphere

Mid90s stands out for its ability to deliver an authentic and palpable 90s atmosphere, not merely as a backdrop, but as a character in itself. Jonah Hill meticulously replicates the era's aesthetic through rough 16mm cinematography, a narrow 4:3 aspect ratio, and a rich soundtrack filled with hip-hop and punk rock from that period. This creates a strong sense of nostalgia for viewers who experienced the era, while also providing an honest glimpse for those who did not.

The film avoids overly striking filters or excessive visual effects, instead relying on natural lighting and accurate prop details—such as clothing, skate shops, and room décor—to build a living world. The dialogues in the film also feel remarkably organic, capturing the way teenagers spoke at the time without seeming forced. This authenticity is essential for the "slice of life" formula because it allows the audience to fully immerse themselves in the characters' world, believe in their experiences, and feel the emotions presented as if they were part of the moment. It's not just a visual recreation, but a reconstruction of the feeling and vibe of an era.

Layered Character Development and Emotional Complexity

The film excels at presenting complex and flawed teenage characters, especially the central figure, Stevie (Sunburn), and his group of friends, without offering explicit moral judgments.

Elaboration/Explanation: Instead of following a clear narrative arc, the film shows fragments of Stevie's life as he tries to adapt to his new environment. We see his struggles for acceptance, the pressure to be "cool," and the emotional confusion that often accompanies puberty. Other characters like Ray, Ruben, Fourth Grade, and Fuckshit are

also given space to reveal their vulnerable sides and insecurities behind their facades of toughness or indifference.

For instance, Ray (Na-kel Smith), who appears to be the most mature and responsible among them, eventually reveals his deeper vulnerabilities and aspirations. Ruben and Stevie's relationship, which begins with bullying, evolves into a more nuanced dynamic, reflecting the complexities of friendships at that age. The film doesn't judge their bad behavior, but rather presents it as a consequence of their environment and lack of guidance. The "slice of life" approach allows for deeper character exploration because it's not burdened by the need for a grand plot. The focus shifts to daily interactions, subtle emotional reactions, and internal character growth that often happens implicitly, mirroring how humans develop in real life. This makes the characters feel more human and relatable.

Non-Linear Narration and Focus on Moments

Mid90s eschews traditional narrative structures with clear beginnings, middles, and ends, opting instead to present a series of scenes that feel like a collection of separate yet interconnected memories.

The film's plot isn't driven by a single conflict or a grand objective; instead, it flows like memory, skipping less important times and events to focus on key moments that shape Stevie's experiences and the group's relationships. This approach mimics the way we remember and experience life, where pivotal moments often stand out more than a seamless linear narrative.

There are many scenes that might seem plot-insignificant, such as conversations at the skate shop, long skateboarding sessions, or chaotic party scenes. However, each of these moments contributes to our understanding of the group dynamics, Stevie's emotions, and the overall atmosphere. There's no grand resolution; the film ends with a sense of life continuing, not a definitive closure. This characteristic is at the heart of the "slice of life" formula. By prioritizing moments and experiences over plot, the film invites the audience to reflect on the meaning of small interactions and subtle changes that occur in everyday life. This allows themes like identity, friendship, and self-discovery to emerge organically, without the need for excessive expository dialogue or flashbacks. Viewers are encouraged to feel, not just understand.

The film's minimalist narrative also yields a powerful portrayal of Stevie's internal world without resorting to voiceovers or explicit emotional declarations. His journey is charted through his actions, his reactions, and the subtle changes in his demeanor. From his initial wide-eyed awe of the older boys to his growing confidence and adoption of their mannerisms, Stevie's transformation is a slow burn, meticulously captured through careful observation. The quiet moments, like Stevie practicing skateboarding tricks alone or his thoughtful gazes during group conversations, become crucial windows into his evolving psyche. This indirect character development allows for a more relatable and universal understanding of the anxieties, aspirations, and vulnerabilities inherent in navigating the turbulent waters of adolescence.

One of the most compelling results of the slice-of-life approach is its ability to highlight the fragility of adolescence and the precarious balance between innocence and exposure. Stevie's descent into the world of his new friends is gradual, almost imperceptible, mirroring how young people often drift into new experiences without fully comprehending the implications. The film doesn't present a clear turning point where Stevie loses his innocence; rather, it shows a series of small, incremental exposures to violence, drug use, and sexual content that collectively chip away at his childhood. This nuanced portrayal avoids sensationalism, instead emphasizing the often-subtle erosion of boundaries and the complex nature of learning and growing through potentially damaging experiences.

Discussion of *Mid90s* inevitably centers on its deliberate pacing and its resistance to conventional narrative propulsion. While some viewers might find this approach slow or lacking in dramatic tension, it is precisely this unhurried rhythm that allows the film to breathe and truly capture the essence of a period in life where time often feels both infinite and fleeting. The extended scenes of skateboarding, often without dialogue, become meditative interludes that convey the joy, freedom, and singular focus that defines the sport for these characters. These moments are not just visually appealing; they serve a thematic purpose, representing a form of escape, self-expression, and a temporary reprieve from the pressures of their lives.

Moreover, the film's observational style invites a deeper discussion about the role of environment and circumstance in shaping identity. Stevie's troubled home life, while not extensively explored, serves as a crucial backdrop against which his search for belonging unfolds. The film subtly suggests that his attraction to the skateboard crew is not merely about finding a hobby, but about finding a surrogate family and an escape from the instability at home. This environmental determinism, depicted through authentic interactions rather than exposition, fosters a discussion about the socio-economic factors that often push young people towards alternative communities in search of acceptance and validation.

The decision to focus on a particular subculture also opens up a discussion about nostalgia and cultural specificity versus universal themes. While the film is steeped in 1990s aesthetics and skateboarding culture, its underlying themes of belonging, identity, peer pressure, and the challenges of growing up are timeless and universally relatable. The period details enhance the film's authenticity and charm, but they never overshadow the deeper human story at its core. This balance is critical to the film's success, allowing it to appeal to those who experienced the 90s, while also resonating with anyone who has navigated the tumultuous waters of adolescence regardless of their generation.

A significant point of discussion revolves around the film's portrayal of masculinity within this specific context. The skateboard crew, with its rough-and-tumble dynamics, presents a particular model of masculinity—one often characterized by bravado, stoicism, and a reluctance to express vulnerability. Stevie, as an impressionable young boy, begins to emulate these traits. The film doesn't explicitly critique this model, but rather presents it as an observed reality, prompting viewers to consider the implications

of such influences on developing young men. This nuanced depiction avoids moralizing, instead inviting a broader conversation about the various forms of masculinity that young boys encounter and internalize.

Furthermore, the film sparks discussion about the authenticity of representation in cinema. Jonah Hill, having grown up during this era and being familiar with similar subcultures, brings an insider's perspective to the filmmaking. This personal connection is evident in the subtle details, the naturalistic performances, and the overall tone of the film, which feels deeply lived-in. This leads to a broader conversation about the value of personal experience and genuine understanding in creating compelling and truthful narratives, especially when depicting specific communities or historical periods. The film avoids stereotypes, instead presenting complex, flawed characters that defy easy categorization.

The ending of *Mid90s* is particularly illustrative of the slice-of-life approach's impact. There's no grand resolution, no clear-cut triumph or tragedy. Instead, the film concludes with a moment that feels both poignant and open-ended, reflecting the ongoing, unresolved nature of life itself, particularly during adolescence. This deliberate ambiguity forces the audience to ponder Stevie's future, rather than providing a neat conclusion. It reinforces the idea that growing up is a continuous process, full of uncertain outcomes, and that a single summer, while formative, is but one chapter in a much larger story. This lack of definitive closure is a powerful artistic choice that elevates the film beyond a simple coming-of-age tale.

Another crucial discussion point is the film's subtle yet effective use of symbolism and recurring motifs. The act of skateboarding itself, for instance, transcends mere recreation; it becomes a symbol of freedom, rebellion, escape, and community. The cuts and bruises Stevie accumulates are not just physical injuries but represent the metaphorical scars of experience and the lessons learned through trial and error. These symbolic layers, woven seamlessly into the fabric of the everyday, enrich the film's texture and provide additional avenues for interpretation, without ever feeling forced or didactic.

The critical reception and audience response to *Mid90s* also form an interesting discussion point. While praised for its authenticity and raw portrayal of youth, some critics found its narrative too slight or its characters too unlikable. This divergence highlights the subjective nature of cinematic appreciation and how different viewers respond to a film that intentionally prioritizes atmosphere and character over traditional plot. It underscores the idea that films utilizing a slice-of-life formula often require a different kind of engagement from the audience, one that values observation and introspection over straightforward storytelling.

Finally, *Mid90s* stands as a testament to the enduring power of the slice-of-life narrative, particularly in portraying the often-understated but profoundly impactful period of adolescence. The result is a film that resonates because of its honesty and its refusal to sensationalize or sentimentalize the experiences of growing up. It invites viewers to recall their own formative years, the friendships forged, the mistakes made,

and the subtle ways in which seemingly ordinary moments shape the people we become. This film demonstrates that sometimes, the most compelling stories are not about what happens, but about how life unfolds, moment by messy moment.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated how Jonah Hill's *Mid90s* (2018) masterfully employs the "slice of life" formula to deliver an honest and memorable cinematic portrayal of adolescence. The film's success stems from its ability to create an authentic 90s atmosphere and develop complex, layered characters like Stevie, whose journeys reflect real-life emotional complexities without explicit moral judgment. By prioritizing a non-linear narrative focused on everyday moments rather than grand plots, *Mid90s* allows themes of identity, friendship, and belonging to emerge organically. Ultimately, *Mid90s* transcends simple nostalgia, offering a profound character study that highlights the power of nuanced storytelling within popular culture. It stands as a testament to cinema's ability to capture the raw, emotional truth of growing up through relatable, everyday experiences.

Ultimately, *Mid90s* stands as a profound testament to the effectiveness of the slice-of-life formula, demonstrating that a film can achieve deep emotional resonance and authentic character development without adhering to a rigid, conventional plot. Jonah Hill's directorial vision creates a cinematic experience that is less about what dramatically happens and more about how life subtly unfolds, capturing the messy, unscripted, and deeply personal journey of a young boy navigating the intricate world of adolescence. The film's deliberate pacing, observational style, and commitment to raw realism collectively ensure that Stevie's coming-of-age feels not just believable, but profoundly lived, cementing *Mid90s* as a compelling and authentic portrayal of a pivotal summer in 1990s Los Angeles.

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