ang070 S/Ü "Key Concepts in Cultural Studies"
Assignment "Film": Identity, Discourse, Media

This assignment is a mandatory part of your portfolio and needs to be handed in on time. It is ungraded but you will receive feedback. Additionally, a sample solution will be published on the Institutswiki.
Please make sure to submit your assignment stapled together but not bound in any folder. Every assignment must include a cover sheet and the statement on plagiarism. You may write up to three pages of text, according to the formatting specifications of our style sheet. Any text beyond the first three pages will be ignored.

Please analyse the following frame by addressing the tasks below:

1. Formal and media-specific analysis
   Describe the mise-en-scène in the given frame, i.e. the visual and the cinematographic design. Identify and briefly comment on relevant discourses.

   ➢ Set/art decoration: living room of a family home; in the background: a couch, a red lamp, an answering machine; further back: children's toys: a hula hoop, a bike
   ➢ Costume design: Olive is wearing a red T-shirt (probably from an aerobic dress) for children, squinted at the collar and another pink shirt underneath; colourful, childlike bangles and a sweatband; huge glasses
   ➢ Make-up and hairdo: Olive does not wear ("diegetic") make-up; her hair is parted, suggesting a ponytail (which, however, is not visible in the frame)
   ➢ Lighting/colour: the whole frame is extremely colourful, but red is the dominant colour (T-shirt, lamp, cushion on the couch, parts of the bike); high-key lighting
   ➢ Acting: Olive's body language suggests a pleasant surprise, but it is very artificial/ affected and grownup/adult in a very would-be manner; her palms are up on her cheeks in apparent amazement; she smiles a "fake" smile; her gaze expresses emotion, however: at the same time it is fixated on an off-screen object (which we know to be a TV screen showing a beauty queen in the moment of her victory)

   ➢ Focus: shallow focus with Olive in the foreground; the background is blurred
   ➢ Frame: Olive stands slightly off-centre (to the right), looking to the left
   ➢ Distance: close shot
   ➢ Angle: eye-level shot, perhaps slight low angle
   ➢ Point of view: reaction shot; zero ocularization (nobody's shot)

   ➢ Age/ Childhood (context: Robinson and Davies): toys in background; age of actress; children's bicycle
   ➢ Gender / Girlhood (context: Judith Butler): protagonist's hairstyle; colour coding: red/pink
   ➢ Body Culture / Fatness: curvaceous figure and round lamp
   ➢ Beauty (context: Esposito and Happel): beauty contest on TV
   ➢ Family: living room setting/domesticity; "gatekeepers" (context: Robinson and Davies)
   ➢ Media (see also: role of popular culture in Happel and Esposito): reaction shot; TV as influencing protagonist
   ➢ Race / Ethnicity (see Happel and Esposito): white protagonist
   ➢ Class (see Robinson and Davies): setting: living room has multiple purposes; shabby furniture; protagonist's old fashioned clothes

   Olive's subject position as child, daughter, girl, in a white, working-class setting learning from and imitating the performance of an adult female at a beauty contest

2. Functional analysis: Toward a problem-oriented sample analysis
Based on the findings from your formal and media-specific analysis, provide a **coherently written** analysis of this frame, i.e. one that identifies and states a clear research problem and moreover, addresses the following points:

Research problem: The film's staging of the cultural/discursive production of traditional/ (hetero-)normative genders and gender identities, in this case Olive's imitation of the (hyper-) femininity of the beauty queen, exposes and problematises the disciplining impact medial representations exercise on cultural notions of femininity as well as on identity formation more generally.

1. the discursive construction of identity through representations in the media;

With regard to the discursive intersections between gender and age, the frame shows the discrepancy between Olive's childlike environment (costume: T-shirt, sweatband; hairdo: parted hair; set/art decoration: toys; etc.) on the one hand and her allegedly grownup, affectedly hyper-feminine manner (acting: posture, look) on the other. This clash between Olive's environment and her behaviour suggests that she is imitating the adult postures and look(s) of the woman she watches on TV. Her gender performance is thus aiming at imitating/ 'copying' the performance of the beauty queen. Moreover, Olive's is a formative performance in the sense that the frame shows her in the crucial process of assuming/appropriating a specific gender identity as she clearly considers the beauty queen a role model. The frame suggests that she is trying to imitate this role model's heteronormative hyper-femininity consciously, even as she is unconsciously internalising it. By emulating/imitating this 'idealised' femininity, Olive unconsciously participates in the (re-) production of a gender identity/ stereotype that patriarchy (cf. Butler's "compulsory system") deems desirable for women, namely the hyper-femininity of the beauty queen. However, the flaws in Olive's imitation, i.e. her 'failure' to live up to the inaccessible standards of this gender 'ideal', eventually result in an unintended misrepresentation whose comic effect points out the performativity of all genders, even as it questions the alleged desirability of hyper-femininity in particular.

2. relevant contexts (historical, cultural, literary, generic, etc.).

Historical/ Cultural Context:
Whether it occurs during a beauty pageant – the first Miss America pageant was hosted in 1921 – or in a TV commercial, the staging of hyper-femininity is a crucial component when it comes to construing and policing normative gender roles in a patriarchal culture. The figure of the model has been vital in this staging, both as a (fashion) icon and as a literal role model. As such, this figure has provided countless cultural representations of hyper-femininity that serve to promote 'idealised' gender stereotypes and the low self-esteem they tend to cause.

Genre/ Film History Context:
With regard to genre, the traditional masculinist gender performances of the road movie (*Easy Rider; Mad Max; The Bucket List*; etc.) are being revisited and revised in *Little Miss Sunshine*. The film therefore belongs to a recent cinematic tradition that deliberately irritates and queers the generic conventions of the road movie (*Thelma and Louise; The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert; Transamerica*)

3. Comparison and/or contrast: second frame

Suggest one other frame from the film that contrasts and/or corresponds with the given frame in an aspect relevant to your research problem. Briefly discuss how both frames relate to the problem by addressing differences in representation and their possible functions.

Plausible Examples: any frame that shows Olive in situations that are crucial with regard to the formation of her gender identity, e.g.:

➢ Olive ordering ice cream "à la mode"
➢ Olive practicing her dance moves
➢ Olive cross-questioning the beauty queen about ice cream/ frozen yoghurt
➢ Olive's drag act
➢ etc.

4. Lecture

In a short concluding paragraph, relate your analysis to knowledge and skills from the lecture.