Foster Care in American Film: The Impact of Hollywood's Glamor on Perceptions of the System

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ABSTRACT: The goal of this project is to analyze three recent, popular American films which depict the foster care system and determine how these films align with the actual realities of this system. The three areas specifically highlighted are the child, the parent, and social services. This research was conducted through content analysis of the chosen films. While each of the films depicted some actual realities of the foster care system, many of the images presented were incongruous with the entire reality. When people begin to believe these untruths, they create misperceptions that are then perpetuated over time.

“So put me in your books/So you know what it’s like/To live a life not knowing/What a normal life’s like/Put a label on my head/So you know what it’s like/To live a life not knowing/What a normal life’s like.”
-Marcus, Short Term 12

“We’re both in prison, you and I. Punished for our strength and our independence. Don’t forget who you are.”
-Ingrid, White Oleander

This paper will focus on three American films released since the early 2000s and how these films present the foster care system. The goal is to analyze the films through content analysis to determine how they portray a) the foster child, b) the foster and/or biological parents, and c) the system of social services and social workers. After this in-depth review of each film, I will then determine how accurately the films depict this social institution. Specifically, I will compare relevant film depictions to the foster care laws, demographic information, and other real world descriptions. The goal of this paper is to assess how films portray this often overlooked population, and how film depictions may influence both the children in care and the people outside of the system.

Prior to beginning my viewings and analyses of the films, I made several predictions about what images I would encounter. The foster child, I predicted, would be portrayed as either
a) a sweet child who can do no wrong but was dealt a difficult hand in life, or b) a hardened and most likely criminal youth. I hypothesized that the foster and biological parents would be portrayed as uncaring and potentially abusive, with the exception of the final set of foster parents who would be the kindly saviors who adopted the main child(ren). Finally, I anticipated seeing the social service system as a slow, unhelpful machine that was unable to really effect any change or help those in their care. The social worker, I predicted, would be uncaring, overworked, or incompetent.

American foster care as an organized institution can be traced to Charles Loring Brace, who founded the Children's Aid Society in New York City in 1853 with the express purpose of helping the “class of vagrant children” populating the streets of the city (Early Adventure 80). Homeless and neglected children from New York City were placed in homes in rural areas of the country, specifically the Midwest. This became known as the “Orphan Train Movement.” Brace described a Dickensian scene of dirty, abused, and homeless children who flocked to the Society in search of help (Early Adventure 77). These children did not have a place in the city, and farmers out west needed assistance on their farms. To Brace, it was the perfect arrangement, and by 1893, the Society had sent more than 50,000 boys and girls out of the city (Early Adventure 78). In many ways, this arrangement seemed more like indentured servitude than opening a home to another member of the family, though the kids did move between farms. In 1853 the first circular of the Children's Aid Society, stated that applicants would ask for “perfect children” who were suited for work, rather than accepting any child that needed help (Early Adventure 81). While the Children's Aid Society still functions today providing services to children and their families in New York, the nature of foster care has changed greatly since its inception.
In the years since Brace’s “Orphan Train” movement, many things have changed. In 1909, the White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children issued several proposals surrounding child welfare, one of which sought to establish a national foster care program (Yarrow 2). In the following decades, the number of children in institutions decreased, while the number of children placed in foster family homes increased. In the 1960s, several pieces of legislation were passed when it became apparent that welfare assistance did not reach all children in need due to extenuating circumstances such as living in “unfit homes.” These pieces of legislation made it mandatory for states to provide support or foster care assistance to children in need (Yarrow 13-15). In 1980, Congress passed the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, which brought foster care close to where it is today. The act stated that reunification and adoption should be the primary goals for children in state care and that every child needed an individualized treatment plan (Yarrow 23). The past century’s focus on child welfare, child safety, and the individual needs of children in care revolutionized foster care from the institution that Charles Loring Brace began in 1853.

Today, almost 400,000 children are in the foster care system in the United States (Child Welfare Information Gateway). Foster care involves placements in homes other than that of the parents, including relative, non-relative, group, and other forms of placement. According to the National Adoption Center, foster care is “a temporary arrangement in which adults provide for the care of a child or children whose birthparent is unable to care for them. Foster care is not where juvenile delinquents go. It is where children go when their parents cannot, for a variety of reasons, care for them” (What is Foster Care). Already in this definition are indications of misconceptions that people make about foster care and the child welfare system. This paper
seeks to explore what misconceptions popular films may have perpetuated.

**Methods**

This study grew out of my own interest in the plight of foster care children and my own experiences working with such children. Over the summer of 2014, I worked with a number of older children in foster care at a summer camp which prepared them for independent living. Due to my experiences with them, I entered into this project with certain preconceived notions about the foster child and the foster care system. For example, I only worked with older kids within the foster care system, mostly male, and many of them had behavioral problems and juvenile records. Though I was aware that this was not the case with all children in foster care, I was most familiar with the image I built after my work. As much as possible, I have attempted to remain impartial and not let my experiences or preconceived ideas enter fully into my research. Nevertheless, I have found that my experiences working with foster children invaluable and will draw upon these experiences to interpret and add perspective to my film analysis.

I briefly debated between analyzing television shows or films. If I selected television shows, I could look at more works, as a 30-minute or one-hour program is much shorter than a two-hour feature film. However, the problem I encountered in my preliminary research was that most foster children on television shows were on crime dramas such as *Law and Order* or *Criminal Minds* and only appeared for part of one episode. Generally, these portrayals only showed the delinquent side of youth in foster care, and not the side where parents had failed their children. There were only two exceptions to this delinquent portrayal, *Life Unexpected* and *The Fosters*. *The Fosters* is a television show that is still currently airing new episodes, so I would not be able to analyze the entire content. Both television shows would be difficult to analyze
because there were a variety of unrelated subplots which detracted from the foster care program.

In order to select the films to be analyzed, I first determined several limiting categories. I wanted to look at films made by American film companies and set in the United States, in order to focus my research. Accordingly, this is not a cross-cultural comparative project, but rather an in-depth look into the depiction of foster care in American film and how that relates to the American foster care system. Second, I chose to limit the time period of the films. Not only did I want to analyze more recent films so as to judge them by contemporary standards, but I wanted films that in theory relate to on-going laws and processes regarding foster children and the present foster care realities. I also wanted to make sure that the films I selected reached a wider audience and actually could have had an influence on the public’s way of thinking. Therefore, I looked at box office grosses in the United States for each film as well as any awards or nominations which presumably would have increased the popularity of the film. Star power and name recognition also played into the selection process, as people may be more willing to watch a film if they recognize and/or enjoy a particular actor. With these criteria in mind, I came up with my list of three films: Hotel for Dogs, Short Term 12, and White Oleander.

Before I begin my analysis, let me say a few words about several films I did not include, including Angels in the Outfield, Antwone Fisher, Moonrise Kingdom, and Annie. Angels in the Outfield, an early-1990s remake of a film from the 1940s and was excluded from my final list due to its age and its primary appeal to young children. I wanted my films to span across as many genres as possible, which meant that I could only include one children’s film in the final count. As Hotel for Dogs has come out much more recently, it is more likely to have an influence on public opinion than a 1990s remake of a film originally produced in the 1940s.
Moonrise Kingdom was an incredibly popular film with good name recognition, but it is set in 1965. Despite the character named “Social Services” and the important storyline of a foster child finding a family, it does not take place in the present, and therefore laws and present day understandings of foster care social services may not apply. Antwone Fisher was another film I left out, and it was a particularly difficult decision. It depicts a very gritty and dark picture of a childhood in the system, but due to the semi-autobiographical nature of the film and my intention to look at only fictionalized stories, I decided that it did not fit with this project. Finally, in the midst of this thesis, the Will Smith-produced remake of the musical and film Annie was released. In the previews for the film, Annie clearly asserts herself as a foster child and the film also calls attention to issues of race which might exist within the system. However, although the film has contemporary relevance, the degree of popularity and public appeal is unknown. Therefore it was not included in this project.

Once I determined which films would be included in my study, I compared my notes about the three aspects that I have chosen to focus on (the child, the parent, and the system) with various sources that explain the reality of the foster care system. I looked at the most recent statistics and demographic information about the foster child, I researched rules about foster care pertaining to the responsibility of the parent in various states, and I found articles that presented research gathered over time about the same issues that I encountered in the chosen films.

Review of Literature

The foster care system in American society has received a great deal of attention from researchers and observers. Much of the published research on foster care focuses on problems in the system, using such buzzwords as “crisis,” or focuses on the more difficult cases, such as
children with illnesses or delinquency. However, one area of study that has not been fully explored is the public perception of the foster care process, especially as it has been depicted through the mass media. There have been several studies about television news stories centered upon foster care, and about children's welfare social workers, which will be discussed below.

This project was largely influenced by the research of Miriam L. Freeman and Deborah P. Valentine. Their 1999 study, “Through the Eyes of Hollywood: Images of Social Workers in Film,” analyzed 44 films from 1930 to 1998 to look at portrayals of child welfare social workers. Their study was able to look at a much wider range of source material over a greater historical period than I was able to do, but laid the framework for the research that I conducted. Their analysis of the films consisted of in-depth viewings where they determined how social workers were portrayed in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. In general, their findings argued that portrayals of social workers often conformed to stereotypes about the field. Inspired by their work, I sought to do something similar, but to expand more research to issues within the broader foster care system.

Media attention on foster care and adoption is not limited to fictional stories in movies and television shows. In their 2006 study, “Covering Adoption: General Depictions in Broadcast News,” authors Susan L. Kline, Amanda I. Karel, and Karishma Chatterjee analyzed 292 broadcast news stories about adoption. Over the course of five years, the researchers found that the depictions were more positive than problematic, though stigma and stereotypes were still present in the storytelling.

Previous to this, sociologist Herbert Blumer examined the role of films in influencing public opinion more generally. In 1935, Blumer published his paper “Moulding of Mass
Behavior Through The Motion Picture.” Though there has been a great body of research on these topics since, Blumer's theory of “mass behavior” and how individuals formed opinions is still relevant. In particular, Blumer sought to discover how mass behavior functions, forms in, and is informed by society. For Blumer, motion pictures were still a relatively young phenomena, and they constituted an interesting frame to understanding a facet of mass behavior. Movies were perfect for his research because:

It seems clear, however, that it is conducive to ready comprehension or, what amounts to the same thing, it makes it easy for the spectator to assume the role of the characters, to identify himself with them quickly and effectively (Blumer 122).

The ability of a film to provide audiences with a collective experience in something completely different than their everyday lives was a prime example of how mass behavior worked. Blumer identified the main influence of film as a “reaffirmation of basic human values but an undermining of the mores” - a seemingly contradictory statement that emphasizes that movies manage to resonate with audiences from all walks of life (Blumer 124). Perhaps the most important point Blumer identified about the influence of motion pictures is that:

motion pictures operate like all agencies of mass communication to turn the attention of individuals outward from their areas of locally defined life. This concern with the new, the strange, and the different, is not merely a direction of attention to the outside of local culture; it is an attack upon the local culture. For these new forms of life which are presented in the movies become attractive and understand-able, and develop a claim on one's allegiance (Blumer 124).

When applying Blumer's findings about mass behavior and movies to this project, it can be assumed that even though the experience of foster care might be foreign to many viewers, audiences still identify with the stories and these identifications influence their opinions.

It should be noted that Blumer's research is some of the earliest on the influence of film,
and there has been a great deal of research on this topic since. “Moulding of Mass Behavior” was also borne from his earlier work with the Payne Fund Studies, a series of independent research investigations from 1929 to 1933. These studies sought to determine the influence of films on children but “lacked methodological rigor” and are largely questioned in the social science community (Dillman Carpentier 1). Ultimately, the Payne Fund Studies led to the creation of the first film industry supported code of censorship. For these reasons, although Blumer’s findings about identification with the story and characters are valid, his research in this area is still problematic due to the connection to the Payne Fund.

More recent research on the influence of film expands to areas beyond identification with the characters and story. Graeme Turner in *Film as Social Practice* states that “[f]ilm is a social practice for its makers and its audience: in its narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself” (Turner 4). By looking at film and film analysis through this lens, it becomes a way to learn culture. Turner’s book became a guide for understanding film as I undertook this project.

One final piece to consider is the greater body of television and film in general. The story of foster care is a theme used and misused frequently. According to the website “TV Tropes and Idioms,” a user generated and edited website similar to Wikipedia where users can write about certain recurring themes in their favorite TV shows and movies, a startling number of tropes have to do with foster care, despite the relatively small number of TV characters who are in foster care. These tropes fall into several categories, including “Foster Kid,” “Department of Child Disservices,” “Abusive Parents,” and “Happily Adopted” (TV Tropes). One of the potential and unfortunate outcomes of these highly unrealistic tropes is that children and
teenagers begin to believe them. Despite the considerable research that demonstrates otherwise, many people may come to believe the images regarding the negative effects of the foster care system, just as they have come to believe the negative and faulty images of juvenile delinquency.

Overall, the popular media has created gross misconceptions of what the foster care institution consists of through a lack of real information and misrepresentations. As I will point out below, the majority of children in foster care are there for a short time, placed with a relative, or are in a long-term care situation (Child Welfare Information Gateway). The goals of foster care usually involve either reunion with parents or adoption. However, without a more in-depth understanding of these realities, it is possible that one could be unduly swayed by these popular media images. Often times, foster care is depicted as an institution where parentless kids are dragged from one bad home to another, quite frequently at that, throughout their entire lives. In the discussion below, I will present evidence for the emergence of false images. My research seeks to find if these are typically the case, and how accurately the system is represented otherwise.

**Discussion and Analysis**

*Hotel for Dogs: A Children’s Film on Finding a Home*

The 2009 film *Hotel for Dogs* is a story about finding a home, told through the lens of children in foster care and abandoned dogs. It is a children’s comedy, and so provides a lighter and more fanciful image than other films.

In the film, 11-year-old Bruce and his 16-year-old sister, Andi, have been in foster care for the past three years since their parents died. In that time, they have been in 5 placement
homes, and now run the risk of separate placements if they continue to misbehave. They are both incredibly sharp children, but also troublemakers. The movie opens with Bruce placing a rock in a cell phone box, resealing it in plastic wrap, and passing it to Andi so she can sell it to a pawn shop. However, as a children’s film, the emphasis is on the children as troublemakers with hearts of gold. They only tricked the pawnbroker so they could get enough money to eat some decent food and buy some food for their dog, Friday.

The pawnbroker quickly discovers their deception and finds a police officer to track them down. The kids then run, but don’t evade capture. Their social worker has to pick them up at the police station and bring them back to their foster home.

The foster parents are portrayed as incompetent, uncaring adults. They are a married couple who are the only two members of a truly terrible band. The foster mother, Lois, prepares unpalatable food for them and keeps the pantry locked at all times to prevent them from stealing her food. Upon being greeted with a harsh warning that since they missed dinner, the kids weren’t going to get any food for the night, the social worker, a kind man named Bernie, seems to also realize that the foster parents are incompetent, but does nothing.

Bruce and Andi are not allowed to have a dog at their foster home, so they hide him on the fire escape outside of their window. The kids refuse to give up Friday to a real family because he had been theirs since he was a puppy and their parents were alive. When the dog is captured by animal control, they have to bribe the man to give him back to them. Their discussion of Friday and the other dogs at the pound is an allegory to their situation.

Bruce and Andi team up with two local kids working at a pet shop to transform a local abandoned hotel into a home for the city’s abandoned dogs. They become close with their two
new co-conspirators, but don’t reveal that they are in foster care. In fact, Andi expressed discomfort at the mere idea of others knowing that she is in foster care and denies it profusely.

After a while, their smooth-running operation begins to fall apart and the authorities arrive to take the dogs back to the pound and to arrest Andi and Bruce. This time, their foster parents are notified and refuse to allow them to return, accusing the kids of stealing from them. Bernie can’t do any more to help them, so they are brought to separate group homes in the city.

While at the boys’ home, Bruce is forgotten and walked over. There isn’t enough food for the timid boy after all the more aggressive boys attack the table, and his things are not respected and are damaged by others staying in the home. The girls’ home that Andi is placed in shows a variety of sullen teenage girls rather than the aggressive, playful boys at the facility Bruce was placed in.

The two run away from their respective group homes with help from their friends and resume their mission to save the city’s unwanted dogs. Despite the trouble that they face, they go ahead and steal back all the dogs that had once resided in their hotel from the pound. They then return to the hotel which results in a large commotion, involving the police and animal control chasing them. Police officers attempt to arrest the kids at the hotel, but Bernie shows up and makes an impassioned speech about the family and home that the children managed to provide for the dogs. The large group of people who gathered to witness the commotion all cheer in support of the kids and dogs, and they are permitted to keep the hotel running.

In addition to learning that they will not get in trouble for running from the group homes, stealing the dogs from the pound, and operating the hotel, Bruce and Andi are then informed by their social worker that he and his wife wish to adopt them. The film ends happily on all
There are several troubling ideas presented in *Hotel for Dogs* that may influence perceptions of the foster care system. Firstly, almost all of the adults who possess any degree of authority are portrayed as incompetent idiots. The animal control workers seem to enjoy taunting the kids and hurting the dogs, which instantly paints them as the “bad guys” of the movie. In addition, Lois and Carl Scudder, the foster parents, are unintelligent, incompetent, and not suited to be parents. Even Bernie, the kind social worker, is not given a wholly positive light as he sees that the Scudders are incompetent and still leaves Andi and Bruce in their care. The kids in the movie express their dislike for and distrust in adults frequently and even outsmart adults on a regular basis, leaving no room for other interpretations.

Secondly, the care situations are portrayed in a very negative light. Andi is ashamed to admit she is in foster care, which contributes to a generally negative societal opinion on foster care and the children in the system. Identifying with a character in a film can be and empowering experience, but if the character is ashamed of the similarity, it can have quite the opposite effect. It suggests that the foster home is not a safe or nurturing environment at the same time the group homes are not portrayed in a realistic fashion.

These issues reveal prejudices present in our current culture towards foster care and those involved with the system. They also present frightening, and potentially opinion-forming, images of those involved with the system - which can later lead to the development of the prejudices that do not correspond to real life circumstances.

*Short Term 12: The Independent Film about Group Home Life*

The critically acclaimed independent film *Short Term 12*, released in 2013, depicts
another facet of the foster care system. This film documents life at a group home for teenagers and the lives of the workers.

*Short Term 12* opens with the employees at a group home regaling their newest coworker with stories of work and past kids. This conversation also serves to establish a few things for the viewers: first, these kids can be rough and scary; second, running away is a huge concern; and third, there aren’t always happy endings. After this, the workers go inside to begin the day with the kids, starting with a community meeting where it is announced that Marcus, one of the kids, will be turning 18 and aging out in a week’s time. Turning 18 is significant for children in the foster care system, as it marks the age where they have “aged out” of care, even if they still receive support.

At the community meeting that is held every morning, the children and workers sit in a circle and discuss how the previous day went. Then, the leader of the meeting begins the discussion of levels. Most of the kids are very short with this, simply stating, “Green, fine,” or something similarly short. Levels appear to function on the stoplight system. For example, later on, when the new girl curses and breaks a rule in the process, she is told that she has dropped a level. Though the consequences for level drops aren’t explained outright nor are they severe (as evidenced by the girl's sarcastic reaction: “Oh, a level drop. What am I gonna do?”), there is a sign on the television that states that residents can only watch if they are at green.

One issue that comes up right away is how the rest of the world views the kids. When Nate, the new employee, introduces himself, he states that he’s always wanted to work with “underprivileged” kids. This immediately sets Marcus off on an expletive-filled rant about how Nate should have thought before speaking. The kids do not appreciate being labeled in such a
way, and seem to yearn for normalcy. This is an idea that many people not familiar with the system hold, and is the first of many moments where Nate's conversations function as a way for the audience to learn about the inner workings of the system.

Several rules of group home life are explained in this meeting. First, there is no swearing in the group home. Failure to follow this rule results in a level drop which can result in limited privileges, such as loss of television time. Despite this rule, quite a few swears manage to slip out, both by the kids and the adults. A second rule is that once the kids get past the gate to the home’s yard, the staff can’t touch them. This is why it is imperative for the staff to catch runaways before they get out.

As indicated above, the workers don’t exclusively follow the rules either. In their conversations directly outside of the home, expletives are scattered throughout. Although never mentioned as a rule it can be assumed that the kids aren’t allowed to smoke, seeing as they are all under 18. Outside, Mason, one of the employees, takes the opportunity to smoke. There is nothing explicitly mentioned about the staff having to follow the same rules, but when Grace, another employee, curses in a conversation with one of the girls, she jokingly comments that that is a level drop. Having the adults follow the same rules as the kids is also a way to level the playing field and make the kids feel less threatened and different, as they likely do outside of the walls of short term 12.

When a new girl, Jayden, is brought to the group home, more rules of life in the home are clarified. Each child has their own room which they can decorate appropriately, and there are shared bathrooms for the girls and boys respectively. Before moving into the home, her bags are searched and any dangerous items - belts, scissors, razors - are held by the staff, but can be
checked out whenever she needs them. Her room door must be kept open at all times due to her
history with self-harm, but this is not a rule that applies to all of the kids in the home.

Jayden’s history also shows how diverse the children in foster care and group homes are.
Her mother died three years ago, but her father is still alive. She has been in and out of group
homes for the past three years due to “dangerous behavior”. She is only in short term 12 during
the week, and has home visits with her father on weekends. It is assumed that she will soon be
returning home full-time. Most of the other kids there, however, do not seem to be in contact
with their biological families.

Grace also performs room checks weekly to see if the kids have sneaked in any forbidden
items. On one such search, she discovers marijuana hidden in Marcus’ mattress. She goes
outside to join the kids and the rest of the staff in outdoor rec time just in time to catch Marcus
violently responding to the taunts of a younger child. In her discussion with him, Grace asks
why he’s acting out - assault and drug possession could send him to juvenile detention, and he’s
only a week away from adulthood. She assumes that it’s because he doesn’t want to leave and is
perhaps scared of what he will do once he’s out.

One issue that *Short Term 12* deals with is parental abuse. Two of the kids in the group
home explicitly mention dealing with it, and Grace reveals it in her past also. Marcus reveals in
a rap that he wrote and performs with Mason that his mother used to hurt him. After shaving his
head, his one request for his birthday, he is scared to look up.

“Is it lumpy?” he asks Grace and Mason.

“I usually keep my hair long because she used to hit me,” he reveals.

Jayden, too, deals with parental abuse, but hides it from her social worker. Grace sees
herself in Jayden and explains that Jayden’s reluctance to divulge the abuse is that she is terrified. In Jayden's mind, her father, her abuser, is always there. She can only talk about her problems when reading Grace a children’s story that she wrote about an octopus and a shark. The shark offers to become friends with the octopus, but only if the octopus will let him eat one of her legs. This repeats until the shark eats the octopus’ last two legs and she dies. Finally, Grace reveals her past abuse when learning that her father is up for probation. After her mother died, she was sent to live with him and he abused her physically and sexually, resulting in an aborted pregnancy.

Jayden’s story of abuse also brings up another issue. Despite the abuse, she is still deeply saddened when her father forgets her on her birthday and doesn’t pick her up from the home. She is reluctant to turn him in, and it is likely not solely due to her fear of him. Even though he has hurt her, Jayden still loves her father.

Another issue that the film addresses is self-harm and suicide. Jayden has a history of self-harm, which is why her bedroom door must always be kept open. Even when her scissors and razors are taken away, she find a way to harm herself. She uses her fingernail to scratch “Why” into her skin when her father doesn’t come to pick her up on her birthday. Grace, too, has a history of self-harm. She reveals her scars on her ankles to Jayden when they are talking after Jayden’s freak out. Instead of trying to stop Jayden, she tries to understand the girl, knowing that that will be more helpful than acting as another adult who knows what is best and will not listen. Grace explained her former self harm habits “it’s impossible to worry about anything else when there’s blood coming out of you”. Her cutting has ended, but there are hints throughout the film that she still doesn’t know how to deal with her own issues without harming
herself. Grace has a habit of picking at her nails. Upon learning of her father’s upcoming release from prison, she picks so forcefully that she actually draws blood. Marcus’ story also revolves around issues of self-abuse. Already scared about leaving and facing the real world, experiences a loss when his fish dies mere days before he turns 18. Reeling from all the uncertainty, he slits his wrist with a piece of glass and is taken to the emergency room. He luckily survives and ends up thriving.

This film was not only critically acclaimed, but also praised for accuracy in its depiction of the foster care system and life in group homes. Writer and director Destin Daniel Cretton based the film off of two years of work at a group home in southern California (Karpel). In essence, Nate, the wide-eyed new group home employee, was Cretton on his first day. Critics have raved over the film, but those that are more familiar with the foster care system have noted a few flaws, most notably that everything wraps up quite nicely at the end and was in general over-dramatized (Karpel). Though those are valid concerns, it is still a Hollywood film and not a documentary about the day-to-day life of children in group homes; a little drama and a happy ending are the bare minimum. Despite these concerns, critics still commented favorably about the accuracy of the depictions in *Short Term 12* as well as other recent television ventures that have brought foster care to the forefront of general consciousness.

*White Oleander*: The Book-to-Film Adaptation Showing Mother-Daughter Bonds

*White Oleander* is a 2003 film based upon the book of the same name. It follows 15-year-old Astrid Magnussen through several years of her life as she experiences the foster care system. At fifteen, she lives with her single mother, Ingrid, an artist and a free spirit. Though Ingrid tells Astrid they shouldn’t get attached, she doesn’t listen to her own advice and falls for
Barry. When she discovers that Barry has been cheating, Ingrid poisons him with white oleander flowers. She is arrested, convicted of murder in the first degree, and sentenced to 35 years to life in prison.

Astrid is picked up by a social worker and given only a few minutes to pack a bag of belongings before she is brought to a foster home. Here she lives with Starr, Starr's boyfriend Ray, and Starr's biological and foster children Carolee, Davy, and Owen. While living with Starr, Astrid changes to become the girl that Starr wants her to be. She begins dressing in tight, flashy, pink clothes and she attends church services with the woman. She is even baptized. When Astrid visits her mother in prison, Ingrid heartily disapproves of all the changes coming over her daughter.

Astrid learns more about the new family that she is living with - Starr and Ray aren't married, but they do sleep together and are quite loud even while the children are in the house. Ray is already married, but his wife took off with his son years ago. Over time, Astrid grows closer and closer to Ray, which sparks jealousy in Starr. The woman is angry that Astrid has caught Ray's attention and begins drinking again. She and Ray fight loudly one night and she end up pulling a gun and shooting Astrid in the shoulder as she tries to run out the window.

When Astrid is released from the hospital, her social worker, Miss Martinez, explains that they can't find a permanent placement for Astrid just yet, so she is going to live in McKinney Hall, a rather prison-like group home. Astrid is immediately confronted by violence there, and so adapts and changes herself to fit in. She becomes a brooding loner and cuts off all of her hair. While at "Mac," she meets Paul, a graphic artist around the same age as her. He comforts her and becomes her closest friend and lover.
When visiting Ingrid, Astrid is warned against attaching herself to people just because she feels lonely. Her mother’s unloving attitude reveals why Astrid always tries so hard to change herself to be what those around her want. She is also trying her hardest to separate herself from her mother by cutting off her hair to destroy her beauty.

Astrid is moved to a second foster home with Claire and Mark, a married but childless couple. They both work in the entertainment industry, but Mark is much more successful than his wife and is away from home frequently. Astrid forms a much closer bond with Claire and begins to think of her as her mother. Ingrid wants to meet this new influence on Astrid's life, and try as she might, Astrid cannot prevent their eventual meeting. Ingrid manipulates Claire using everything that Astrid told her, and criticizes Astrid for once again bonding with another mother figure. When Astrid confronts her mother about her manipulative and selfish ways, Ingrid reveals that she “would rather see [Astrid] in the worst kind of foster hell than living with that woman”. Hurt, Astrid finally stands up to her mother and cuts her off, refusing to visit again.

A few days later, Astrid overhears a fight between an increasingly-unstable Claire and Mark about how “it's not working” and that they should “send her back.” Though she knows those words are about her, she still goes to Claire's room to comfort the woman. When she awakens the next morning beside her foster mother, Astrid discovers that Claire has swallowed a bottle of pills and died.

She is, once again, returned to McKinney Hall, but this time isolates herself. After finally cutting her mother off and losing the next most important female figure in her life, Astrid chooses to be totally alone, even from Paul. Miss Martinez introduces Astrid to a number of foster families, many of whom have good histories with social services and would provide safe
and stable homes. Yet Astrid says no to all of them. Finally, Miss Martinez asks Astrid what she wants and she chooses Rena, a Russian woman who looks like a bit of a mess, so she won't be let down if this one disappoints her as well.

While living with Rena, Astrid is confronted by two reminders of her mother. First, two girls who are enrolled at the college and are conducting a woman's studies project by visiting Ingrid at the prison come to visit Astrid and relay messages from Ingrid. Second is Ingrid's lawyer, who asks Astrid to lie in court for her mother's appeal. Astrid finally agrees to meet with her mother again, but this time stands up to Ingrid and demands the truth before promising to lie.

The end of the film is a bit uplifting when, while waiting for Astrid's turn to speak at the appeal, the courtroom empties; the appeal was lost because Ingrid finally chose to let Astrid go.

**Analysis of the Foster Child**

My analysis of the presentation of the foster child figure in *Hotel for Dogs, Short Term 12*, and *White Oleander* is primarily based on the facts and figures provided in the Child Welfare Information Gateway’s “Foster Care Statistics 2012,” the most recent year for which statistics are available. These statistics cover areas ranging from placement settings, goals, outcomes, and demographic information, among others.

1. Children In, Entering, and Exiting Care

Obviously the hundreds of thousands of children that are presently in foster care cannot be reproduced in a single film. However, the films do show that there are many different types of children in care as well as addressing entrances and exits to care. Astrid enters foster care for the first time at the beginning of *White Oleander*, while Andi and Bruce exit care (through adoption) by the end of *Hotel for Dogs*. Marcus (*Short Term 12*) and Astrid exit care due to
aging out, and Jayden (12) almost returns exclusively to her father's care.

In 2012, there were roughly 400,000 children in foster care. During that year, however, there was a high rate of turnover. 254,162 children entered care and 241,254 children exited care (Child Welfare Information Gateway).

2. Placement Setting

Andi and Bruce (Hotel for Dogs) and Astrid (White Oleander) were placed in nonrelative foster family homes. Of the total children in the American foster care system in 2012, 47 percent were in this kind of placement setting (Child Welfare Information Gateway). Later in the film, Andi and Bruce are moved to separate group homes, both of which were filled with other children, but were separate for each gender. Short Term 12 deals exclusively with this placement setting, but shows an older and mixed-gender home, very similar to the home that Astrid moves in and out of in White Oleander. In 2012, only 6 percent of children were in group homes, so this statistic might have been overstated by the films (Child Welfare Information Gateway). The overrepresentation of this setting will be discussed later in this paper. When Andi and Bruce run from their group homes, they could be considered to be part of the 1 percent of children who had run away, according to the 2012 statistics (Child Welfare Information Gateway). Astrid and Paul run away for a day while at Mac, but plan to return; Sammy (Short Term 12) runs from the group home frequently, but the attempts do not seem to be viewed as attempts to actually get away and he is always caught before he steps off the property.

Overall, the three films provide a somewhat comprehensive look at various placement settings available to children in the foster care system, however the films may have misrepresented the frequency in which some of those occur. Group home living was present in
all three films, while only accounting for a small percentage of actual placements, and relative care was not represented at all.

2. Case Plan Goals

There is little mention of case plan goals for Andi and Bruce in *Hotel for Dogs*. It seems that Bernie’s only goal for the children is long-term foster care. Whether this is the goal, or there is no goal established, either of these are uncommon in real-life foster care statistics, accounting for only five percent of cases each (Child Welfare Information Gateway). *Short Term 12* exposes these in a bit more detail, but the film's focus on the adult workers diminishes some of the social work details. Marcus’ goal can be assumed to be independent living after aging out, as he is a week from turning 18. Jayden's goal is explicitly stated to be reunification with her father, and they are clearly working towards that goal until she exposes her father's abuse. Miss Martinez in *White Oleander* never explicitly mentions Astrid's case plan goals, but reunification with her parent is out of the picture, as Ingrid has been sentenced to 35 years in prison and her father is absent. It appears that permanent placement (and potentially adoption) is on Miss Martinez's mind, but she is experiencing an overload of cases and cannot make it happen for Astrid. Once she does find potential permanent homes, Astrid does not appear to want that and instead simply looks forward to aging out.

3. Outcomes

The outcome of Andi and Bruce’s foster care experience was adoption, by nonrelative caretakers. Adoption accounts for the results of 21 percent of foster care cases, though family relation is not indicated in that statistic. *Short Term 12* and *White Oleander* provide much less hopeful outcomes; both Marcus (*12*) and Astrid (*Oleander*) exited the system by aging out. Of
the four characters who exited the foster care system in the three films, half aged out, which is much more frequent than the actual reality (Child Welfare Information Gateway). Generally, social workers attempt to avoid simply letting a child age out and instead hope to find adoptive families or reunite the children with their biological families.

4. Length of Stay

Andi, Bruce, Marcus, and Astrid are in a small group of children who have been in care for three to four years; the national statistics reveal that only 9 percent of children in foster care stay for this length of time. Their length of stay was almost three times higher than the median amount of time that children who exited foster care spent in the system (Child Welfare Information Gateway).

Although not accounted for in any of these statistics, Hotel for Dogs and, to a degree, White Oleander also make mentions of the length of time in individual homes. Andi and Bruce were with the Scudders for two months already at the beginning of the film. When discussing their time in care, Bruce points out that they were only with one family for two hours. Astrid spent three years in foster care, split among three foster families and two periods at a group home.

The length of stay for the children in Short Term 12 is not always identified, but can be inferred. Marcus has been at Short Term 12 since he was 15 and was presumably in placement elsewhere before. Jayden's time in foster care is, at the start, the same as Andi, Bruce, and Astrid: she has been in and out of group homes, so each stay has been shorter, but the cumulative time is three years. Placements of 1 to 11 months account for the greatest amount of time in care, 35 percent of the cases (Child Welfare Information Gateway).
5. Age

Of the children whose ages were identified - Bruce (11), Andi (16), Marcus (nearly 18), Paul (16+), and Astrid (15+) - all fell well above the median age of children in (8.5 years), entering (6.5 years) and exiting (8.2 years) care (Child Welfare Information Gateway). There are several potential explanations for this, the most likely being that Hollywood prefers teenage protagonists to six-year-olds. However this also may be in part responsible for the misconception that most/all kids in foster care are older.

6. Race and Ethnicity

Bruce and Andi are both Caucasian or white, as far as Hotel for Dogs suggests. In the one picture of their birth parents, both parents also appear to be white and their ethnicity is never discussed. They are like the majority of children in and exiting American foster care (Child Welfare Information Gateway). Though not addressed in these reports, Bruce and Andi are eventually adopted by black parents, forming a racially heterogeneous family.

The other films are more diverse, but protagonists are primarily white. Jayden, Sammy, Mason (a former foster child), Grace (another former), Paul, and Astrid are also all presumed to be Caucasian. Mason, who was adopted by Hispanic parents, celebrates his parents' Hispanic heritage and was raised in a way where he may have adopted that identity despite being biologically white. Marcus and Luis, both from Short Term 12, are the only two main or supporting foster child characters in any of the films that were outwardly ethnically diverse - Marcus is black and Luis is Hispanic. Background kids in the group homes in each of the three films also fell into other racial categories, but were not prominently featured.

7. Gender
The films provide a relatively even balance of children in foster care. Andi and Bruce are placed in single-sex group homes for a time and, though there is not enough information to determine how many children are in each home, there appear to be roughly the same number in each. Short Term 12 may house a few more boys than girls, but the two main foster kids are Marcus and Jayden, a male and a female. Astrid's experiences in foster care include several foster brothers and sisters as well as fellow residents of both genders at Mac. The real-life statistics are quite close to a 50/50 split as well, with 52 percent male and 48 percent female (Child Welfare Information Gateway).

8. Summary

Though the films over- and under-represent certain attributes of the children in the foster care system in America, they do manage to cover most categories and instances that occur in the real foster care system.

Another characteristic ascribed to many foster children in the media is delinquency. Overall, in the three films analyzed for this project, there were very few acts of delinquency, and none were portrayed in a bad light. Andi and Bruce sold a rock as a cell phone so they could feed their dog and thus got the viewer's sympathy; when they later steal dogs from the pound to save their lives, it is not acknowledged as wrong by any of the “good” characters because it is not morally wrong to save a life. When Astrid threatened another girl at her group home with a knife, it was in response to an earlier attack and for her own protection. Grace discovered Marcus' marijuana stash, and confiscated it but did not report him as he was close to aging out. None of these acts read as immediately dangerous or all that bad because the protagonists already had the viewer's sympathy.
Delinquency among children in the foster care system is generally less severe than portrayed in the films. As of 2011, there were 61,423 youths (under age 21) in juvenile detention, most commonly placed there for charges related to delinquency. Delinquency is “behavior that would be considered illegal if committed by adults,” acts which were portrayed in the films without repercussion (Juvenile Detention).

Children in foster care are overrepresented in U.S. national figures of juvenile detention. Thirty-five percent of children in foster care are arrested at some point (Facts About). According to research by the Vera Institute of Justice, children in foster care are more likely to be sent to juvenile detention while awaiting trial as opposed to their nonfoster peers. Their research showed “no evidence that foster youth committed more crimes or crimes of greater severity than nonfoster youth, both factors that could explain differential detention rates” (Conger 9). This suggests a bias against youth in foster care.

In the real world, one subset of the foster care system functions as an alternative to sending juvenile offenders into detention facilities. Specifically, Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC) is designed to help prevent future incarceration among at-risk youths and has the same goal of other foster care programs, reunification with families (whether biological, adoptive, or foster). These programs teach the children and teens skills to avoid delinquency, provide behavioral management, and therapy and thus require a different type of training for the foster parents (Multidimensional Treatment). MTFC could be a reason why there remains a perception that children in foster care are “bad news” as they are placed there only as an alternative to juvenile detention. While it is still uncertain whether traditional foster care “is likely to reduce or exacerbate the propensity for adult criminal behavior,” MTFC aims to reduce
Despite programs set in place by foster care agencies and the state, youth in foster care are more likely to be incarcerated later in life (McCarthy). The correlation may exist between the two due to the fact that many children placed in foster care are already at risk for later criminal activity. Research by Doyle in 2008 found that “children placed in care have two to three times higher arrest, conviction, and imprisonment rates than children who remained at home,” though his estimates are imprecise (Doyle 766). A 2011 study in California found similar results. Of the adult inmates incarcerated in the state, 14 percent had been in foster care at some point (McCarthy). While children in foster care might not be more inclined to crime than their nonfoster peers, they are more likely to be incarcerated as juveniles and later in life as adults.

The types of delinquency portrayed in the films – drug possession and use, false pretenses, and threats with weapons – are similar to the types of crimes that most juveniles are convicted of, but the characters do not have to face the consequences of their actions. Although delinquency is a very real problem in the foster care system and beyond it, it is ignored or diminished in the films.

**Analysis of the Parents (Biological and Foster)**

Only two of the films (*Hotel for Dogs* and *White Oleander*) had characters in foster family homes, but a total of four non-relative foster families were portrayed in them. The only foster parents that the audience sees in *Hotel for Dogs* are the Scudders, though there are mentions of earlier experiences, including a two-hour placement. As stated before, the Scudders are portrayed as incompetent, unkind, and irresponsible guardians. These two characters bring up questions about the screening and application process to become a foster parent; they suggest
that the process is less regulated than it actually is.

In order to become a foster parent in the United States, prospective parents must go through an application, screening, and training process. According to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, prospective parents must be at least 21, but don’t have to be married, or even have a partner for that matter. In addition, Illinois DCFS lists these qualifications:

• participate in a home inspection and social assessment;
• complete 27 hours of training focused on foster care and the needs of children who are in foster care;
• complete a criminal background check of all household members;
• be financially stable; and
• complete a health screening that includes verification that immunizations are up-to-date.
(Illinois Department of Children and Family Services)

If prospective parents pass all of these qualifications, then they will be approved to act as foster parents. Taking all these matters into consideration, it is unlikely that adults who are not suited to guardianship will pass the qualifications in order to become foster parents.

Once placed in the care of foster parents, a foster child will still receive support from the state, including a monthly stipend for the parents to spend on necessities such as food and clothing. This stipend, however, is not enough of a financial incentive to people simply looking to get free money from the government, and additional allowances for special circumstances are not vast. The average basic rates paid to foster families “fall below [the] estimate of the cost of caring for a child” (DeVooght). Though studies which have looked into the impact of economic incentives on desire to provide a foster home have found that more money provided by the government increases the number of open homes, the subsidy provided still cannot be considered an additional income (Duncan and Argys). Thus the idea that foster children can be an additional
source of income is not practical.

The films do acknowledge that there are good foster parents, too. At one point in *Hotel for Dogs*, Bernie approaches Andi and Bruce to inform them that there is a couple who would love to foster them both. They are described as the perfect parents, having already raised two foster children who are now in college. However, when learning that they would have to move several hours away from their new friends and dogs, Andi and Bruce turn down the opportunity to live with the couple. In *White Oleander*, Miss Martinez introduces Astrid to a couple with a similar history, who Astrid also turns down. She does have one successful placement, with Claire, where she bonds deeply with her foster mother. However, the shaky relationship between the Claire and her husband makes the situation still less than ideal.

Out of all the children depicted in the three films, only two still had relationships with their biological parents: Jayden from *Short Term 12* and Astrid from *White Oleander*. Jayden's mother died when she was younger and she is in the process of moving back with her father full-time. He is physically abusive to her, however, and is not an example of a parent that can take care of a child at the moment. There is a variety of action that the social worker can take, if Jayden and her father still want to reunite eventually, including anger management and other types of therapy. There are brief mentions of Grace's history with her own father, who was also abusive to her when she was a child. In this film, biological parents are depicted as unfit and abusive, while the only foster parents depicted (Mason's) are successful parents.

Ingrid is a much more complex character than any of the briefly mentioned biological parents in *Short Term 12*. Astrid adores her mother at the beginning of the film, but through her experience in foster care begins to see her mother's true colors. Astrid is not removed from
Ingrid's care, and social services would likely never have been called on the family. Instead, Ingrid is arrested for the murder of her boyfriend. It is only at that point that she is recognized as an unfit mother.

An issue that *White Oleander* brings to focus is that of children in foster care with an incarcerated parent. Over half of state and federal prison inmates in 2007 were parents of minor children. Of those inmates, 19 percent had been a single parent before arrest; more mothers than fathers had come from single-parent households (Glaze 5). This is the same situation that Ingrid and Astrid found themselves in in *White Oleander* and the reason for Astrid's entrance to care. Like the film depicted, children usually maintain a relationship with the incarcerated parent, despite no longer living together. However, *White Oleander* did follow the same tradition of white-washing the adults as the other films did with the children. Hispanic and black/African American women are more likely than white women to be incarcerated (Mauer 8) and are also slightly more likely than white women to be mothers (Glaze 14).

The films also provide one example of adoptive parents who are quite extraordinary. In reality, children are placed in foster homes with the goal of reunification with their biological parents or adoption, likely by foster parents. However in *Hotel for Dogs*, Bernie, the social worker, and his wife adopt Andi and Bruce at the end of the movie. There is no indication that the couple has been approved as a foster home prior to the decision to adopt, nor is there any mention of the actual process of adoption. Despite the shortcomings in depicting the functions of the system, they do represent a positive example of parents in a film which is otherwise missing.

One last subject that must be discussed is that of abuse. Andi and Bruce are not physically or mentally abused, but they are neglected by their foster parents. Many of the kids
and teens staying in Short Term 12 had a history of abuse in their former placements and homes, most notably Jayden. Child abuse is unfortunately common in the United States; over 3 million reports of abuse are made each year (Facts About). Abuse can fall into any one of six categories: neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological maltreatment, medical neglect, or other, with neglect being the most common form. Of the 297,971 reports of abuse in Texas in 2011, only half (~98,000) were investigated, resulting in 17,108 cases where children were removed from their homes and placed into foster care (Facts About). Unfortunately, being placed in foster care is not always the safest option.

Stories occasionally pop up in the news about children enduring abuse at their foster homes. While this is an uncommon occurrence, it does exist. In July 2014, a hearing was held at the Texas House Select Committee on Child Protection in response to seven abuse and neglect related deaths in 2013 (Associated Press). Former foster children from Texas recounted tales of horrors endured. One reported being locked in a dark room and prohibited from eating and drinking, while another revealed that his foster parents attempted to get more money out of the state by putting him on medications he didn't actually need (Associated Press). Only weeks before these hearings were held, a five-year-old in Maine died of suffocation during a punishment from her foster mother. The “punishment” involved being completely wrapped in duct tape. Six weeks prior to her death, the girl told her mother and child welfare worker that she was being hurt, and yet nothing was done (Mcfadden). Though these incidents are extreme and rare, they do occur.

**Analysis of the Foster Care System**

*Hotel for Dogs* doesn’t explicitly say anything about the system, but there are plenty of
instances where the functions of the system are implied. One such instance, as discussed above, is the movie's failure to accurately depict the process of adopting children.

One specific instance in Hotel for Dogs when rules of the foster care system are mentioned is when Bernie brings Andi and Bruce home from the police station at the beginning of the film. Lois scolds the children for missing dinner (which is served at five every evening). At breakfast the next morning, she says, “I am obliged to provide two meals a day – that's lunch and dinner” (Hotel for Dogs). This “rule” is the only explicitly mentioned rule, and it suggests that children in foster homes are less important than biological relations. It is also pointedly untrue in most instances. For example, according to the Ohio Administrative Code, chapter 5101:2-7-06, foster parents are required to provide three nutritious, balanced meals a day, and a nutritious snack should be available between meals.

Another law that the Scudders break, which Bernie should have uncovered during his inspection of the home or, before that, during the approval process is that children are not allowed to share rooms with kids of the opposite gender unless they are under five years old or one child is the parent of the other (Chapter 5101:2-7-02). Though Andi and Bruce are biological siblings, they are legally not allowed to stay in the same room. There are related rules under the category of sleeping arrangements which state that children must be provided with permanent beds, and it is debatable whether Andi and Bruce were actually sleeping on beds in their room at the Scudders’. Bruce appears to sleep on a couch, while Andi's bed looks more like an impermanent cot.

None of the other films had such blatant examples of illegalities that passed for rules in the world of the movie, though there were some glaring problems in White Oleander. Once
again returning to the sleeping arrangements of the children, at Astrid's first home with Starr, two of the children sleep in the living room due to a lack of space. The rules from Ohio's Administrative Code state that “[t]he presence of a foster child in a foster home shall not cause any other resident of the home to be deprived of a bed or bedroom” (Chapter 5101:2-7-02). The two foster children put Starr's two biological children out of sharing the one other bedroom, and one must sleep in the living room. Astrid is given access to a shared bedroom with Carolee, but the living arrangements for the two boys in the house (at least one of whom is a foster child) break the following regulations:

A bedroom for foster children shall: […] Include storage space for personal belongings and closet or dresser space for clothing. […] Provide a safe and comfortable sleeping area ensuring reasonable privacy and access to adult supervision, as appropriate to the age and functioning level of each foster child. […] Not have the entry to a foster child's bedroom located so as to require the foster child to pass through another bedroom or a bathroom in order to enter his or her bedroom or to require another person to pass through the foster child's bedroom to enter another room [and] Be comparable in appearance in terms of wall coverings, floor coverings, and general decor to other bedrooms used by other children residing in the foster home (Chapter 5101:2-7-02).

*Short Term 12* is most explicit about the rules of the group home, as they are explained to the new worker and the new resident. Based on my experiences working with teens in foster care, though not in a residential setting, these rules are very basic and similar across the board. The adult workers cannot touch the kids outside of the home, which means that if a child wants to run away, he only has to get past the front gate before he is free. In group settings, respect is expected from everyone; the adults are expected to respect the teens and kids in their care. Inside the home, each child gets their own rooms but they share bathrooms based on gender. The rooms are their own spaces, and with a few exceptions, they are to be respected as such. Workers and other residents knock on doors before entering bedrooms to perpetuate the idea of
mutual respect. The only exception to this rule comes in the form of insuring the safety of the children in care. Jayden, who has a history of self-harm, is not permitted scissors or sharp objects and must keep her door open at all times. Finally, because of the setting, explicit language and images are not allowed; violations to this results in level drops and limited privileges in the home.

*Short Term 12* also highlights the limitations of group home workers. Though these are the people who, arguably, know the children the best, they cannot make any decisions for the kids. The staff at the group home are not social workers, nor are they therapists. They are there to watch over and care for the kids. As such, they have roles that more closely resemble friends than other adult authority figures. Grace clarifies their position to Nate early in the film by stating that they “have to be an asshole before [they] can be [the kids’] friends” (*Short Term 12*). The lack of power that they possess due to their position is highlighted when Grace first goes to Jayden's social worker to express concerns about Jayden's safety at home; though Grace had learned or inferred intimate details of Jayden's life, because Jayden had not come forth to say anything, the social worker would not make changes to her case plan.

In all three films, the social workers are depicted as unhelpful, but not in an uncaring manner; rather they are bogged down by other factors outside their controls. Bernie from *Hotel for Dogs* is perhaps the least realistic social worker, as he sees firsthand the conditions and rules that Andi and Bruce are living under but does not do anything about it until the very end. However, he does try his best for the siblings, even finding them a perfect-sounding family for placement. Miss Martinez from *White Oleander* expresses her dissatisfaction with the system. She clearly wants to help Astrid out, but is overloaded with work; the foster care system in the
film also appears to be overloaded with too many children and not enough families. This is a reality that still exists in many cases today (Duncan and Argys). Jayden's social worker in *Short Term 12* is perhaps the worst example of a social worker out of the three films. Unlike Bernie and Miss Martinez who are both well-meaning, he appears to have ulterior motives. Jayden's father is a friend of a friend, so he does not believe Grace when she comes to him with concerns of abuse. Once Jayden confesses the truth, however, he is quick to amend her case plan goals and separate her from her father. Overall, the social workers are depicted as small cogs in a larger machine, trying to do the best they can for the children in their care, but unable to make any large differences.

Finally, all three films contribute to an overrepresentation of group home placement and the failure of the foster care system to adequately regulate these settings. There are several potential political and ideological implications of this, most prominently that group homes are more representative of the state and government. By moving the stories out of the more normal setting of a family home into a state-run group facility, it is easier for the films to blatantly comment on the failure and dysfunction of the state. Though the neglectful foster families do not reflect well on the system, they are not as obviously employees of the state. The depersonalized setting of the group homes and problems that children encounter there are a more obvious indictment of the failings of the state to protect and provide for the children in its care. The harsher, unprotected nature of the group homes is especially highlighted in *White Oleander*. On Astrid's first day in the home, she is attacked by another resident; she had previously been treated well during most of her time in Starr's home. The contrast between the comforts of a family home and the impersonal dangers of a group home are meant to draw attention to the system's
failure to protect the children in its care.

Conclusion

Overall, the films I analyzed portrayed the foster care system more accurately and positively than I initially expected. One reason for this could be that my initial experience with fictional foster care representations was in television shows which, as I discussed earlier, are problematic in that they generally only show the grungier and delinquent side of the system and children.

Hotel for Dogs was a fairly successful children’s film featuring two popular child actors and well-known adult actors. It is empowering to children, both foster and otherwise, to see kids similar to themselves outsmarting adults and making a difference. It also raises awareness of the foster care system. Though Andi is initially ashamed to admit that she is a foster kid, when her friends continue to support her after discovering the truth, she embraces that part of herself. That is certainly an important lesson to children in foster care.

Despite these positive outcomes, it also perpetuates several negative stereotypes about foster kids, foster parents, and the foster care system. Andi and Bruce are, by some definitions, delinquents, which is a fear that many people hold about children in foster care. The foster parents are unhelpful and unkind to the children in their care, when in reality, foster parents are trained and expected to treat foster children as their own. Finally, negligence in the system and phony rules (such as the parents’ responsibility to only provide two meals) are perpetuated.

Short Term 12 conveys an incredibly powerful message about the foster care system as well, and highlights realistic group home life. Although group home placement is not nearly as common as home placements, it still is something that people should be informed about properly.
The negative depictions of group homes are all too common, and the honestly caring employees at short term 12 are refreshing to audiences used to the darker group homes from other films. Thus, *Short Term 12* is especially important because it is based on both research and actual experience working in group homes and is more accurate to the reality. It has an uplifting ending, showing that even teens in the system who feel like they have nowhere to go can make something better for themselves. Though the ending might be too perfect, it is an important message to send.

*White Oleander* shows the most variety in placements and in background. Unlike many of the children in the other films, Astrid's mother is alive and well, but incarcerated. Situations where children are placed in care due to parental negligence, inability to parent, or incarceration are very common and weren't depicted in any of the other films. Rather than insisting that the child has a behavioral problem that is the reason for being in care, *White Oleander* shows that parents can, and do, fail their own children.

At the beginning of this project, I made predictions about what each category would look like in the films. The foster children in the films were overall in between the two extremes that I identified – flawed, but not hardened. Only the kids in *Hotel for Dogs* could be classified as the heartwarming orphan-types, and that is likely because the film is a children's movie. Many of the foster and biological parents were uncaring or unable to complete their duties properly, as I predicted. The only good outcomes were options which the children dismissed for one reason or another or came at the end of the film, for the stories would not have been as interesting if everything was perfect the whole time. Finally, the social workers were definitely overworked and unable to give everything to one child. There was less outward judgment on the system.
present in the films, though it still overall seemed to be a slow machine.

Further research might investigate the repercussions of foster care as portrayed in the media. For example, current research on motivation to foster and adopt finds that most people choose to foster or adopt because of child-related reasons. In a 2003 study, Tyzoon Tyebjee, found that a desire to make a difference in the life of a child, provide a home for a child, provide meaning for themselves, and desire to be a parent topped the list of motivations to foster children (Tyebjee 702). However, none of the studies ask what the impression potential parents had of the foster care and adoption systems before entering the training and application stages of the process. Finding out what influence media, especially fictional film and television, exposure had on their decision to open their homes to children is another avenue of research that should be investigated.

It, too, is important to see what effect these representations have on real life foster children. Further research could investigate whether foster children in America face any problems at school and activities due to their placement in the system. Do parents, teachers, and administrators have negative perceptions of these children? Is less expected of them? Do their classmates tease or ostracize them for having non-traditional families? If peer opinions are formed only from fictional media, the ideas they have about foster care are likely very different from what the children actually experience.

A final area that should be researched in conjunction with foster care and public perception is the idea of fostering and adopting across cultural lines. This includes cross-racial families, where parents of different ethnic backgrounds adopt or foster children and LGBT children and adults attempting to participate in the system. In the films analyzed for this project,
there was only one instance of cross-racial adoption or fostering, when Bernie and his wife adopted Andi and Bruce at the end of *Hotel for Dogs*. There was no discussion about children who are in the system due to issues with their biological parents over their sexuality, or gay and lesbian parents attempting to gain approval to parent children.

My research has focused on how foster children, foster parents, and the system are represented in recent American films. There has been considerable research done on how media impacts youth, social problems, and many other facets of our society, but not on the foster care system. This can lead to a fuller understanding of how the general public perceives the system, especially now in an age where people are constantly bombarded by the media on their phones, computers, and tablets. Expanding on this research by looking at more films spanning a wider variety of genres can contribute to this area of research.
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