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**Wonder girls: Undercurrents of resistance in the representation of teenage girls in 1980s American cinema**

Wilkinson, M.C.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Of all of the blind spots that exist in film scholarship, the lack of serious analyses of young women in the cinema has been one of the most glaring.”<sup>1</sup>

When I was a young girl in the 1980s, my parents suggested my younger brother and I refrain from watching commercial television during the week and rent a film from the video store in the weekend instead. Over the course of the next few years, my brother and I alternated weekends in our selection of viewing materials, which included a strong partaking of the 1980s teen film genre; we eagerly consumed new releases and insatiably devoured repeat viewings of common favourites such as *Sixteen Candles*, *Pretty in Pink*, *The Breakfast Club*, *Labyrinth*, *Weird Science*, *Flight of the Navigator*, *Back to the Future* and *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*<sup>2</sup>. The films that we encountered on these weekend viewings shaped us in many ways; they showed us what ‘high school’ (an American, exotic phenomenon for us) was like, what teachers were like, what friendships should be like, what romance could be like, what music and cultural objects we ought to like, and what kinds of teenagers we could grow up to be. As the 1980s faded into the 1990s, and I became more aware of the cultural images that surrounded me, I assumed that the representations of strong, individual and intellectual teenage girls that were calling out to me from all corners of the Anglo-American media in this decade (from the Spice Girl’s “Girl Power”, to television shows such as *My So-Called Life* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, animated series like *Daria*, and films such as *Pump Up The Volume*, *Hackers* and *Clueless*) had always been there. I assumed that the images I had encountered in the 1980s had been as empowering. But upon frequent revisits to these films, I began to realise more and more they were only superficially similar. The stereotypical characterizations may have looked the same – the cheerleaders still looked like cheerleaders - but their content, the moral and ideological messages of the material, and the access I had to the voices and the individual subjectivities of these heroines, were strikingly different.

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance, eds. *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice* (Detroit: Wayne State Michigan Press, 2002). Back cover quote by Gina Marchetti.

<sup>2</sup> All details of television programs and film can be found in the filmography at the end of this thesis; titles are listed alphabetically.

Just after the turn of the century, now a student of Film Studies in the UK, I found my fingers would often run past the shelves of the university library in search of writings on the films that I had loved and embraced so much in my youth. But I was disappointed to find very little had been written about the teen films of the 1980s or about the representation of teenage girls in cinema in general. As my own interests developed – as my passion for research and writing on cinema grew and my desires to unravel the constructions of gender in popular culture and the arts were becoming increasingly vocal – it seemed natural to return to these films of my youth, and to approach them, now, from an academic perspective. When Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance released their edited volume of essays on the representation of teenage girls in film, *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice – Cinemas of Girlhood*, in 2002, one particular article in it appeared to confirm my instincts about the conservative nature of the 1980s films that I had so thoroughly enjoyed as a young girl. In ‘Pretty in Pink? John Hughes Reinscribes Daddy’s Girl in Homes and Schools’, Ann De Vaney writes:

During the 1980s when academic and professional doors were opening for women, and when ‘Roe vs. Wade’ was the law of the land, [John Hughes, prolific teen film director] elected to depict ... his girls as under the rule of their father ... He was an important part of political and popular discourses that articulated a backlash against women’s rights.<sup>3</sup>

When I read this, I felt validated in my call to further research these teen films of the 1980s – surely the evidence of ‘this backlash’ (and of course, Ann De Vaney is referring to Susan Faludi’s seminal book *Backlash* here as well - in which Faludi traced the cultural backlash against the politics of Second Wave feminism, across various political and cultural lines under Reagan’s 1980-1988 administration in the US) was not only presented in the films of John Hughes, but in a much wider array of teen films throughout the 1980s. And this made me wonder; how did this actually work? How do we recognise an ideology ‘imbued’ within a genre? At what levels of the frame, and the narrative, is a ‘backlash’ articulated and made (in)visible? There was more to it, I felt, than just these John Hughes films that presented “girls as under the rule of their fathers”; this ideology would have had to infuse the very fabric of all these films, and their representations of a teenage generation.

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<sup>3</sup> Ann De Vaney, “Pretty in Pink – John Hughes Reinscribes Daddy’s Girl in Homes and Schools,” in *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice*, eds. Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance (Detroit: Wayne State Michigan Press, 2002). 210-211.

At the same time, however, De Vaney was, in my opinion, neglecting to fully acknowledge that these films somehow produced a more active and strident teenage girl on film as well<sup>4</sup>. I was convinced that the heroines of the teen films of my childhood, and Molly Ringwald especially, had also somehow invited me to celebrate teen girlhood, and of all her intellectual, creative, and physically powerful potential. Had the teen girls of the 1980s teen films not inspired, or in some way led to, the feisty teenage heroines that American popular culture so readily embraced in the 1990s? The 1990s were, in fact, the ‘quintessential’ decade for the representation of the teenage girl on screen, where most lines of discourse that involved this figure took on newly progressive stances; from Riot Grrrls, to Girl Power, to Reviving Ophelia, to the fighting Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar), to the well-spoken and emotionally sophisticated Joey (Katie Holmes) and Jen (Michelle Williams) in *Dawson’s Creek*, to the poignant reflections on early adolescence in *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, the ironic commentary on teenage girlhood in *Clueless*, and the intellectual sensibilities of Felicity (Keri Russell) in *Felicity* and Lindsay (Linda Cardellini) in *Freaks and Geeks*, to name but a few. As Peggy Orenstein wrote, in an article entitled ‘The Movies Discover the Teen-Age Girl’ in The New York Times, August 11<sup>th</sup> of 1996:

No one has called it such, but if 1996 is to be christened anyone’s, it ought surely to be named the year of the teenage girl. Consider the evidence: Alanis Morissette packs concert venues with thousands of ululating 13-year-olds who thrill to her hit “Ironic” the way their mothers swooned over “Love Me Do”. *Reviving Ophelia*, a therapist’s account of her work with young women is at the top of the paperback best seller list. “My So-Called Life”, a drama about a 15-year-old girl and her angst, plays in perpetual reruns on MTV. Time magazine recently named the psychologist Carol Gilligan, who first brought girls’ faltering sense of self to public attention, one of the country’s most influential people. And in the ultimate Zeitgeist test, a slew of films are being released this summer centring on the lives of adolescent girls... [These are not films that use young women as plot devices, as virginal blanks upon whom other characters project fantasies, or as victims. Rather, these are films...] for children and adults alike, in which girls are in charge of their own fates, active rather than reactive;

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<sup>4</sup> Even though De Vaney does propose that, in spite of their conservative messages, the John Hughes films are still much loved by audiences even today, she does not connect his films to the more progressive representations that came after, or to a larger perspective on the representation of teenagers in film in general.

films that are about girls' relationships to one another rather than to boys, that tackle the big themes of teenage life, like anger, sexuality, alienation and displacement.<sup>5</sup>

And Orenstein was not alone in this observation that the 1990s celebrated a newly progressive representation of the teenage girl (see for instance Gonick (2006), Tassone (2003), Kearney (2002 and 2011), Wald (1998), and Levine and Parks (2007)). Something must have happened in the 1980s that led a seemingly 'conservative' representation of teenage girls (that according to De Vaney, constituted a possible backlash against feminism) into a space where more progressive representations were possible. So how did they *get there*? Could it be that the 1980s was a decade that presented some kind of innate 'tension' in its teen films? Could the representation of teenage girls within this genre have acted as a catalyst of sorts, where most of the output might have been highly conservative in nature, yet somehow, undercurrents of resistance were forming, and pockets of agency were being enabled to create small cracks in the assumed 'stable' image-output machinery that is Hollywood? Could these films, unknowingly, have slowly begun to shift our tastes, and desires, towards more forward and independent inscriptions of the teen girl identity on screen? Or could it be that there was something specific about the representation of the teenage girl *in itself* that allowed for this 'moving back and forward' at the same time; that this figure opened up of a space and time in the image, that, by remaining suspended in contradiction, could de-stabilise our set thoughts on the representation of women on film? Feminist film theory, an area of cultural criticism that evaluates the very relation between the depiction of gendered identities, power, ideology, language, the arts and spectatorship, has thus far commonly overlooked the figure of the teenage girl. What might analysis of her representation contribute to ongoing debates?

These were the questions I had going into this project – the aim of which had now become threefold; through close reading and textual analysis, I want to examine the representation of teenage girls in 1980s teen films in order to 1) investigate whether these representations constituted a (neo-conservative) backlash against feminism in American popular culture, 2) figure out what it was about these images that might have opened up pockets of resistance for the more progressive images of teenage girls that followed in the 1990s, and 3) understand what the figure of the teenage girl on film, in itself, might contribute to a feminist film theory that has, thus far, focused predominantly on the representation of adult women on screen. These three 'quests' engage with three principal areas of research.

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<sup>5</sup> Peggy Orenstein, "The Movies Discover the Teenage Girl", *The New York Times*, August 11, 1996 – my own paraphrasing in brackets.

The first is that of (structural) discourse analysis, of understanding and exposing the ideology that consistently underpins a particular line of ‘discourse’ (or output) within popular culture. The second is that of genre studies, an area of film studies research that analyses a particular cohesion between films of a specific genre, by mapping and analysing recurring tropes and trajectories. And the third (most relevant) area of research is that of feminist film theory and, at some specific junctures, its connections to the areas of cultural theory/analysis and philosophy as well.

In the following three sections of my introduction, I will briefly go into these three areas one by one; I will introduce some of the literature that became the starting point (and/or a sample methodology) for my work, explore their areas of interaction and relate them to how my own project took shape, and developed. In doing so, I wish to expose more clearly the specific gaps within the fields that this project is attempting to fill, and sketch out the framework and background for my project at the same time. When I look at the area of discourse analysis in film studies, I will first briefly introduce some of the history, politics and socio-cultural themes of 1980s America, and relate this to the popular cinema that the decade produced. What were the important themes of the decade, and how have its representations of adult men and women so far been understood? I believe it is essential to introduce this here, because it allows me to set out the context (the landscape) that my own ‘objects’ were thrust into and became a part of. I will also call upon some of these themes throughout the rest of my thesis. By looking at a few examples of the critical discourse analysis that has so far engaged with this period, I simultaneously introduce where the roots of my own approach and my thinking lie, and how I have come to understand the connections between popular American cinema and its contemporary politics in general.

As I move on to introduce the second area of research I engage with – writings on genre, or teen film, and 1980s teen film more specifically - I take the opportunity to relay the process I underwent to find my corpus for this project as well, and discuss how I came to select the case-studies I use throughout the thesis. In the third and final part of this introduction, I introduce my main area of research, feminist film theory, and, more specifically, representation studies (I focus not on issues of spectatorship, for instance, but on a textual analysis of the image only), as I sketch out the organisation and structure of my thesis. Both the areas of discourse analysis and genre studies will remain relative ‘jumping off points’ (starting points, or touching stones) for my research, which is why I introduce them at greater length here, whereas key texts from within the fields of cultural and feminist film theory allow me to enter into more elaborate dialogues with the films, and the representations

of teenage girls, throughout the rest of the project. As I engage with these texts in the main body of my thesis, I will introduce them more specifically, at each relevant juncture.

### **1980s America: Introducing the Social-Political Landscape and the Films It Produced**

The 1980s was a decade densely laced with political, sociological and cultural events (and its many intersections) in America; it presented an intense reawakening of Cold War sentiments, in what is often called the ‘Second Cold War’ (Republican President Ronald Reagan declared the Soviet Union “the focus of evil in the modern world” in a speech in 1983), as well as several tensely fraught, international ‘stand-offs’ with Iran, invasions of Grenada and Panama, the Aids epidemic (reintroducing discussions about homosexuality and safe sex into mainstream debate), the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger, Reagan’s call to bring down the Berlin Wall, the introduction of VHS videotapes and the ‘fair use’ act, conglomerate mergers and takeovers radically transforming what remained of the Hollywood Studio system, and the king and queen of pop, Michael Jackson and Madonna, reigning over the new (and globally exported) channel MTV. Politically, for America, it was a period fuelled by unwavering conservative rule; it was the decade that saw Ronald Reagan elected, and re-elected in a landslide, and a decade that thereby strongly positioned a ‘new’ wave of (neo-) conservative political ideals into mainstream American culture and thought.

I choose to use the term ‘neo-conservatism’ here, and throughout this project, because this is how Ann De Vaney describes the recurring ideology underlying popular culture in the 1980s. I recognize it is a much debated term, and not one generally associated with Reagan’s politics per se, even though it is more formally associated with his voting public, often consisting of former Democrats, like Reagan himself. I use it to refer to the 1980s popularization of a new (second generation) wave of political ideals, embraced by former neo-liberals, who suddenly turned to Republican alliances. These ideals generally supported free markets and capitalism, individualism and representative democracy, a return to nostalgic, 1950s values (the centralization of the nuclear family unit, a focus on the suburban home, and the upholding of certain Christian traditions and ways of thinking), an unshakeable sense of patriotism, low interest for international diplomacy, an unconditional support for military action, and a rather ‘binary’ outlook upon the rest of the world (that we have since come to associate with more recent neo-conservative politicians such as George W. Bush and Dick Cheney.)<sup>6</sup> The consistent popularity of these ideals at the time were further established

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<sup>6</sup> For further readings about neo-conservatism, see for instance Mark Gerson’s *The Essential Neo-Conservative Reader* (1996), Irving Kristol *Reflections of a Neoconservative: Looking Back, Looking Ahead* (1983) or *Neo*

when the Republicans won a third consecutive term with the election of George H.W. Bush in 1988, and made these views part of a zeitgeist that dominated the US for more than decade.

A few key works that introduced pertinent areas of discourse analysis on the films of this period inspired my own methodology and thinking early on. Robin Wood's *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986) drew important connections between particular films of the 1970s and early 1980s and the specific cultural context that produced them. In his chapter 'Papering the Cracks: Fantasy and Ideology in the Reagan Era', Wood, for example, addresses how strong, conservative themes of the decade, such as the fear of fascism and the relationship with the father, featured in sci-fi blockbusters such as *Blade Runner*, *Starwars* and *E.T.* In his chapter on 'Images and Women', Wood addresses what he calls the 'anti-feminism' that is presented by some films of the 1980s, such as *An Officer and a Gentleman* and *Terms of Endearment* yet in contrast to this, Wood argues, the teen film *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* was more progressive and female-friendly, because it embraced and constructed a new female spectator position. Alongside Wood's book, Andrew Britton's article 'Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment' (1986) suggested that during the Reagan years, Hollywood presented a certain conservative reassurance to its public, specifically with regard to its representations of masculinity, paternity, technology and nuclear anxiety, in films such as *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Ghost Busters* and *WarGames*. Michael Ryan and Douglas Keller's book *Camera Politica: the Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood film* (1988) similarly connected different structural and thematic recurrences to specific film genres of the 1970s and 1980s (technophobia in fantasy films for instance, metaphors of fear in disaster films, and the restoration of the masculine in superhero films), and also addressed the politics of sexuality and of representation in films such as *Klute* and *Desperately Seeking Susan*<sup>7</sup>. More recently, Stephen Prince's volume of edited essays, *American Cinema of the 1980s: Themes and Variations* (2007), addresses specific themes and films for each year of the decade, and relates many of these to specific aspects of Reagan's conservative politics. Ultimately, what became most clear to me from this last book, and the previously mentioned titles, is that 1980s popular American cinema introduced a newly divisive representation of gender on film; where depictions of 'the new man' were competing with (although greatly outnumbering still)

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*Conservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea: Selected Essays 1949-1995* (1995), Irwin Stelzer's *Neoconservatism* (2004) or Irene Taviss Thomson's *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas* (2010).

<sup>7</sup> Other works following a similar approach included William Palmer's *The Films of the Eighties – A Social History* (1995), Richard Ferncase's *Outsider Features: American Independent Films of the 1980s* (1996), and Marsha McReadie's *The Casting Couch and Other Front Row Seats: Women in Films of the 1970s and 1980s* (1990).



representations of ‘the new woman’. Much has been written about these representations of (adult) gender in the 1980s, and these findings were really important for my own work – in the next few paragraphs, I will briefly sketch out an overview of this aspect of the cinematic landscape of the decade, and refer to relevant sources in footnotes below.

Most of 1980s leading Hollywood output was created by male producers and directors, male stars, and featured male driven narratives<sup>8</sup>. The 1980s was a decade in which the former brat pack directors of the 1970s, Steven Spielberg, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma and Oliver Stone, and new commercial talents, such as James Cameron, John Landis, Robert Zemeckis, Barry Levinson, Rob Reiner, Joe Dante and John Carpenter, alongside a new wave of more independent filmmakers, such as the Coen brothers, Spike Lee, Jim Jarmusch, David Cronenberg, David Lynch and John Sayles, were all predominantly preoccupied with male wish fulfilment<sup>9</sup>. This ‘theme’ has been analysed in/traced back to several groups (or sub-genres) of films in the 1980s. Firstly, it features in trilogies/series that presented male fantasies about exploration, heroism and man-made manipulations of time; in the *Indiana Jones* series, the *StarWars* and *StarTrek* series, the James Bond films (six Bond films were released between 1981 and 1989) and the *Back to the Future* trilogy, for instance<sup>10</sup>. Secondly, male wish fulfilment was embodied by the aggressive and fighting, hard male body, in titles/series such as *Rocky*, *Rambo*, *Robocop*, *Die Hard*, *Batman*, *Blade Runner*, *Tarzan the Ape Man*, *Raging Bull*, *Scarface* and *The Terminator*.<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, the 1980s presented popular horror film series that privileged male desire (about masochism and female virginity), in series such as *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* and the continuing *Halloween* franchise.<sup>12</sup> Fourthly, the war film often addressed questions of a renewed masculine identity and the heroism of returning veterans in the aftermath of Vietnam, in acclaimed films of the decade, such as *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Casualties of War*, *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Good Morning Vietnam*<sup>13</sup>. Fifthly, numerous films presented an

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<sup>8</sup> For more information on the production circumstances and box office figures, see *A New Pot of Gold – Hollywood Under The Electronic Rainbow: 1980-1989*, by Stephen Prince (2000).

<sup>9</sup> For more information on this tendency, see Stephen Prince (2007).

<sup>10</sup> For additional reading, see Wood (1987), Palmer (1993) and Prince (2007).

<sup>11</sup> Susan Jeffords has connected this type of masculinity specifically to Reagan’s politics and aggressive stance against the Soviet Union, in her book *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1995), whilst James Kendrick’s *Hollywood Bloodshed: Violence in 1980s American Cinema* (2009) re-examined the influence of Reagan and Bush’s politics on the depiction of violence in Hollywood throughout the decade; under neo-conservative perspectives on family and capitalism, violence, Kendrick argues, was ‘re-packaged’ to avoid overtly vilifying the masculine hero, and the ‘father’. Yvonne Tasker’s has also written extensively on the male action star’s body and its relation to contemporary politics (1993).

<sup>12</sup> These films produced images that weren’t particularly progressive for women, as has been proposed by both Carol Clover (1992) and Barbara Creed (1993), and Kendrick (2009).

<sup>13</sup> See Wood (1987), Ryan and Kellner (1988) and Prince (2007).

intensely romantic (or Utopian even) perspective on male bonding and camaraderie, in films such as *Ghost Busters*, the *Lethal Weapon* and *Beverly Hills Cop* series, *Stand By Me*, *The Blues Brothers*, *Rain Man*, *Trading Places*, *Karate Kid* and *Twins*<sup>14</sup>. Sixthly, the films of the 1980s persistently restored the patriarchal role within the nuclear family unit, and embraced a ‘new, caring father’ (in a possible response to women increasingly taking to the work floor, in reality), in titles such as *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Three Men and a Baby*, *Mr. Mom*, *Ordinary People*, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, and even *Fatal Attraction*.<sup>15</sup> And lastly, 1980s Hollywood presented an almost unlimited horizon for a few virile new stars, Tom Cruise, Tom Hanks and Richard Gere, who presented all-American, everyday male fantasies made ‘reality’, in films such as *Risky Business*, *Big*, *American Gigolo*, *Splash*, *Bachelor Party*, *Days of Thunder*, *An Officer and a Gentleman*, *Top Gun* and *Cocktail*<sup>16</sup>.

These are all films that have remained part of our popular viewing even today – these films have been remembered. If we look at them anew, they illustrate how the 1980s presented a cinematic landscape that was dominated by issues surrounding the (re)establishment of masculinity and patriarchy; the industry appeared fuelled and driven by, as well as aimed at, a male desire. And this, in itself, underscores Susan Faludi’s suggestion that there was a ‘backlash’ against feminism in American popular culture, under Reagan’s administration. But the 1980s presented an interesting dichotomy for the representation of women in American as well. In this post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, post-Sexual Revolution, post-Second Wave feminism America, women had readily and steadily been climbing up the socio/economic ladder. They were taking to the work floor *en masse*, with women eventually comprising a remarkable 47% of the workforce in the US, in 1990<sup>17</sup>. The landmark Roe vs. Wade case had overturned all state laws outlawing restricting abortion in 1973, the Equal Rights Amendment had passed in 1972, and was presumed to insure equal pay for women, whilst Geraldine Ferraro became the first woman candidate to run for Vice Presidency, in the 1984 elections. The income women earned opened them up to a whole new range of markets

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<sup>14</sup> See Wood (1986), Prince (2007), Donaldson’s *Masculinity in the Interracial Buddy Film* (2005) and Brian Locke’s *Racial Stigma on the Hollywood Screen* (2009).

<sup>15</sup> The advent of the ‘new, caring father’ in the 1980s, as part of a backlash against feminism, has been addressed more specifically by Tania Modleski’s *Feminism Without Women* (1991), Sarah Harwood’s *Family Fictions* (1997) and Elizabeth Traube’s *Dreaming Identities – Class, Gender, and Generation in 1980s Hollywood Movies* (1992), as well as Stella Bruzzi’s *Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Postwar Hollywood* (2005). I will come back to this point at length later in my thesis.

<sup>16</sup> Select examples of studies of these films can be found in Prince (2007), Tasker (1993), and Studlar’s “Cruise-Ing Into the New Millennium: Performative Masculinity, Stardom and the All-American Boy’s Body”, in Murray Pomerance, ed., *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls: Gender in Film at the End of the Twentieth Century* (SUNY Press, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Casey B. Mulligan, “A Milestone for Working Women?” *The New York Times*, January 14, 2009, and for a larger perspective on the growing female workforce in the US during the 1970s/1980s, see Faludi (1991).

and consumer products, promoted through many new and intricate strategies of cross-media advertising.

This might, in part, have led to, what I call, the decade's 'Body-as-Project' theme (or its more general obsession with 'healthism')<sup>18</sup>. This theme was made evident by the success of the fitness and body-building videos (by Jane Fonda, Raquel Welch, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Cher for instance<sup>19</sup>) and the strict self-discipline invoked by the popular Ayds, Scarsdale and Atkins diets in the 1980s, the rise of the mall as the ultimate locale for all-round consumption, beautification and self-improvement, the insurgence of self-help books, the emphasis on fashion and dress in women's magazines, and the increasing private access and demand for plastic surgery. 1980s Americans – across genders - were readily invited to mould their unruly bodies into malleable commodities, to sculpt, transform, and adapt their body over and over again. Alongside the return to traditional values and the powers and potentials of the masculine subject, then, the 1980s American zeitgeist embraced and promoted the more progressive potential of individual, (female) liberties and the concept of self-adaptation as well<sup>20</sup>.

The opposition between these two lines of discourse had a polarizing effect on the representations of adult women on screens. On the one hand, adult women were seen to have returned and become reduced, once more, to their traditional roles as mothers, carers and victims in melodramas such as *Terms of Endearment*, *The Color Purple*, *Beaches* and *Steel Magnolias*<sup>21</sup>. At the same time, their roles as mothers were often vilified, if not 'evacuated' from the home entirely, in films such as *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Ordinary People*, *Three Men and a Baby*, *Honey I Shrank the Kids* and *Out of Africa*<sup>22</sup>. Alongside this, women were

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<sup>18</sup> This theme cannot be traced to one specific source; it derives from reading the feminist works of Susan Bordo, Sandra Lee Bartky and Cressida Heyes, as well as works on makeovers and makeover media in the 1980s that involved multiple aspects of the (self-)adaptation of the body; Irene Taviss Thomson (1992) writes about it in relation to 1980s American individualism, and Myra MacDonald (1995) discusses it in her chapter 'Refashioning the Body', when she analyses the decade's emphasis on self-transformation and its progressive portrayal in films such as *Working Girl*.

<sup>19</sup> The connections between these videos, more progressive interpretations of the malleability of the self and the origins of makeover television have been set out at length by Vanessa Russell in her article *Make me a Celebrity: Celebrity Exercise Videos and the Origins of Makeover Television* in Dana Heller, *Makeover Television - Realities Remodelled* (2007).

<sup>20</sup> I do not wish to deny the validity of Foucauldian readings of these aspects of American culture (see for instance Susan Bordo (2003)) here, that have successfully argued how these trends reveal certain power structures at play through bodily control over citizens, but some have suggested that these aspects can also be read progressively, especially for the individual powers of women in 1980s America (see for instance MacDonald (1995), or readings on the makeover (Heller, 2006). This provides an interesting tension – where both readings apply – that begins to open up pockets for the back and forth that I address in this thesis as well.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance Wood (1987) and MacDonald (1995).

<sup>22</sup> For more reading on the analysis of these representations of women in 1980s films, see Modleski (1991), MacDonald (1995), Sarah Harwood (1997), Traube (1992) and Faludi (1991).

presented as either naive, easily domineered sexual objects or as ‘dangerous’ vamps in films such as *Nine ½ Weeks*, *Fatal Attraction*, and *Dangerous Liaisons*<sup>23</sup>. These examples presented one side of the dichotomy, where women were resigned to traditional, conservative and passive roles. But the decade also produced a lieu of popular films, such as *Nine To Five*, *Legal Eagles*, *Baby Boom* and *Working Girl*, that presented ambitious, working women who were able to transform themselves, and successfully balance their work with relationships or motherhood<sup>24</sup>, whilst titles such as *The Witches of Eastwick*, *Alien* and *Private Benjamin* presented alternative strategies and metaphors for the new strengths and powers available to women in American society<sup>25</sup>. This dichotomy thus suggests that, even in this overbearing conservative landscape, contradictory voices were being raised, and embraced by audiences.

This introduces some of the context into which the teen films that I look at in this project emerged to address new, young audiences. Within a predominantly masculine and ‘male desire driven’ terrain, some representations of adult women were embracing more progressive, self-transformative and independent female attitudes on screen, and this perhaps indicates that the 1980s industry was catering to a zeitgeist deeply divided on how to interpret and reposition the role of the ‘new woman’ in society, after the Second Wave of the 1970s. But most of the discourse analyses of the trends amongst the representation of gender in the 1980s, offer strongly determined readings of the films, and, generally, reject the suggestion that there might have multiple tendencies (or innate contradictions) at play in some of these titles. On top of that, these studies fail to recognise the role that the release of (literally) hundreds of teen films might have played in this cinematic landscape. It is here that my study might provide a new angle on the dominant ideological discourse of the decade, and could contribute a new critical perspective on the representation of gender in the 1980s.

### **The Teen Film Genre and the Selection of the Corpus**

After the success amongst teen audiences of high concept films like *Grease*, *Carrie* and *Jaws* in the late 1970s<sup>26</sup>, and with the advent of cinema multiplexes in malls across the US, and the launch of the new teen phenomenon MTV in 1980, the consumer potential of the American teen was radically embraced by the (entertainment) market of the 1980s. This resulted in an

<sup>23</sup> See MacDonald, particularly the chapter ‘Sex ‘n Spice’, in *Representing Women* (1995).

<sup>24</sup> These films have been embraced for their empowering, and self-transformative qualities (see for instance Rapf (in Prince, 2007) and MacDonald (1995), and there connections to 1990s feisty heroines (Tasker (1998), but I do wish to acknowledge here, that this doesn’t necessarily mean these films are successfully answering the feminist cause – rather, they present new ways of representing working women, albeit within an ultimately conservative, heteronormative and traditional Hollywood paradigm.

<sup>25</sup> See Tasker (1998), MacDonald (1995) and Rapf, in Prince, ed. *American Cinema of the 1980s* (2007).

<sup>26</sup> See also Justin Wyatt’s *High Concept* (University of Texas Press, 1994).

immense boom in the production of teen films during the decade<sup>27</sup>, constituting what was to become the second, popular ‘wave’ for the genre, after the first ‘wave’ of teen films established the genre in the 1950s<sup>28</sup>.

The first wave of teen films had catered to a new ‘teenage’ demographic that appeared post-World War II, in a 1950s America that was otherwise defined by conformity<sup>29</sup>. In his book *Teenagers and Teenpics: the Rejuvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (originally published in 1988), Thomas Doherty identifies four distinct subgenres that emerged during this first ‘wave’; the clean teenpic, the juvenile delinquent film, the rock ‘n roll film and the cult film. Doherty argues (and this was similarly proposed by David Considine in *The Cinema of Adolescence* (1985)) that these subgenres reflected the struggles of a newly liberated (and/or lost) post-World War II generation when faced with having to ‘conform’ to their parents’ lifestyle, and post-war guilt, and often resulted in a strong rejection of authority and institution in American culture. These films, featuring teen stars such as James Dean, Elvis, and, to a less rebellious degree, Mickey Rooney and Sandra Dee, consistently developed complex discourses about adolescent identity, rebellion, race, sexuality, individuality, mobility and other American freedoms. The success of these films confirmed that popular cinema had branched into a new market and that for this generation, the representation of teenagers on film occasionally redeemed, but mostly resisted and commented on, the American political ideals of its time.<sup>30</sup>

Interestingly, where the 1950s had been defined as a society based on conformity, in which teen film had provided a channel for countering, rebellious voices, 1980s America presented a society that highly prioritised the individual<sup>31</sup>, but that reinvigorated its teen films to cater to a more conservative agenda. It was therefore surprising to find that little academic research had addressed this genre and these tensions, when I started my project in 2005. Part of what makes teen films particular vulnerable carriers for certain ideological discourses is

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<sup>27</sup> Timothy Shary sets out this argument at great length, in his book *Generation Multiplex* (2003).

<sup>28</sup> For more information on the first wave of teen films in the 1950s, see Thomas Doherty’s *Teenagers and Teenpics* (Temple University Press, 2002), and David Considine’s *The Cinema of Adolescence* (Jefferson NC: MacFarland 1985).

<sup>29</sup> See Taviss Thomson (1992).

<sup>30</sup> In 2006, Considine followed up on this latter notion in his article (in Carolyn Cocca’s *Get Real: Adolescent Sexuality – a Historical Handbook and Guide*), “Representations of Adolescent Sexuality in the Media”, which provides a detailed overview of different representations of sexuality across four distinct periods in media history: 1890s-1920s, 1930s-1940s, 1950s-1960s, and the 1970s-to beyond. In this article, Considine places more of an emphasis on the representation of girls and sexuality on screen that in the aforementioned book, by analysing titles such as *Splendor in the Grass* and *A Summer Place*. For more reading on teen films and their discourses between 1950s and 1980s, see for instance Nancy Schwartz’s “Coming of Age: A Masculine Myth” (1972), and Elayne Rapping’s “Hollywood’s Youth Cult Films” (1987), that reviewed the youth cult film genre across several decades in America, as well.

<sup>31</sup> See Taviss Thomson (1992).

that they are neither written nor produced by the subjects they present or are attempting to address. As Timothy Shary points out, "...the teen film genre is perhaps the only film genre that is virtually never produced by the people it involves. Teens do not make films; adults do."<sup>32</sup> In effect, and particularly for the representation of the teenage girl, this means that it is usually the 'father' who creates and voices these representations (as the writer/director/producer of these films), and not the 'daughter' herself. Timothy Shary has extensively traced the history, the evolution and the character of the teen film genre<sup>33</sup>. His work focuses especially on the second wave of teen films in the 1980s, and he explores the different subgenres that the decade presented in great detail, such as the teen-science film, the teen-adventure film, and the 'nerd' films (teen films that present social outcasts as their main protagonists). The strength of this work, however, lies with its breadth, rather than its depth; Shary's writing does not present close readings of particular films, or otherwise explore the underlying ideologies of the film, or the details of the frame more closely. Other early writers on teen films (including Armond White (1985), Thomas Leitch (1992), Jon Lewis (1992), Bernstein (1997)<sup>34</sup>, Bulman (2004), and Tropiano (2005)) again popularly, or sociologically, trace the evolution of particular trends and sub-genres, grouping together titles and mapping generic traits, but they tend not to present close readings of the films. They also frequently preference teen films that feature teenage boys, such as *Rebel Without a Cause*, *The Summer of '42*, *Stand by Me* and *Animal House*.

A few recent titles do address the representation of teenage girls more specifically, including Sarah Hentges's *Pictures of Girlhood: Modern Female Adolescence on Film* (2005), Roz Kaveney's *Teen Dreams: Reading Teen Film and Television from 'Heathers' to 'Veronica Mars'* (2005), Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson's *Teen TV* (2004), and Catherine Driscoll's *Teen Film* (2011), but these titles focus mostly on the 1990s, and examine girl-centred teen films such as *Clueless*, *Mean Girls* and *Legally Blonde*, and television series such as *Buffy*, *Popular* and *Veronica Mars*. Again, these works do not necessarily engage with their objects in close reading, or attempt to really 'pull' at the representations of teenage girls in popular American culture, rather, they provide overviews of the genre and the corpus in

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<sup>32</sup> Timothy Shary, "The Teen Film and Its Methods of Study: A Book Review Essay." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 25, no. 1 (1997): 38.

<sup>33</sup> *Generation Multiplex* (2003), *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen* in (2005) and an edited volume on global trends in youth cinema, entitled *Youth Culture in Global Cinema* (2007).

<sup>34</sup> Bernstein's book is a good example of 'popular' writing on 1980s teen film; aiming primarily at the nostalgic values produced by the genre, his book traces and maps audience recollections of teen films, and mixes popular fandom of the films into an overview of the genre. Many more examples like this exist, including Gora (2011), Clarke (2007), Christie (2009) and coffee table books on the lives of the bratpack actors, such as Pulver and Davies (2000).

relation to the changes in society, or changing ideas about citizenship. In this sense, these works helped me to define the genre, and informed the selection of my corpus.

The teen film genre presents a collection of films that are produced primarily to cater to teenage audiences and/or that feature teen characters in the leading roles; the films incorporate a wider range of plots and subgenres (there are teen film sex comedies, melodramas and horrors, and so on), but they are coherent in their focus on teenage ‘rites-of-passage’ issues (including, for example, the loss of virginity, the search for identity or a place within society, and struggles with schools, parents and friends), and often feature a set of recurring narrative tropes, settings, and stereotyped ‘teenage’ characters (such as cheerleaders, rebels and geeks).<sup>35</sup> On top of this, it must be noted that commercial American teen films, especially those from the 1980s, tend to revolve around white, heterosexual, middleclass, suburban American (and particularly mid-western) teenagers<sup>36</sup> - this has become somewhat of a genre staple in itself.

In order to assemble a collection of films for my study, I began in late 2005 to write up a list of teen films and other films that featured teenage girls that I remembered from my childhood in the 1980s. This led me to approximately 35 titles. I then surveyed friends and colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic and asked them about the films they remembered, to map what had been ‘popular’ both within and outside the United States. From the very beginning the lists from both sides of the Atlantic differed; films mentioned by my American friends, such as *Little Darlings*, *Girls Just Want To Have Fun* and *The Legend of Billie Jean*, for example, had not been (memorably) released in Europe. Upon consulting distribution information, via the internet and Stephen Prince’s overview of Hollywood productions during the 1980s, *A New Pot of Gold*, this was often confirmed; in the US, the range of teen film distribution had been wider (and had experienced longer running schedules) in the 1980s than in Europe. This was likely the result of the concept of the multiplex cinema, which, with its multiple screens often housed inside a mall, targeted teen audiences in the US in ways that the fewer amounts of screens in the cinemas in Europe did not at the time.

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<sup>35</sup> For further readings on the definition and characteristics of the genre, see Steve Neale’s *Genre and Hollywood* (2000) and *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood* (2008), Thomas Schatz’s *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System* (1981), Joseph Reed’s *American Scenarios: the Uses of Film Genre* (1989) and Wheeler Dixon’s *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays* (2000).

<sup>36</sup> This has begun to change, after the 1980s, as more teen films began to feature homosexuality, in *But I’m a Cheerleader*, for instance, and featured different ethnicities, in *Above the Rim*, *Boyz in the Hood*, *Menace II Society*, and *Bring it On* or *Save the Last Dance*, but the standard, especially the heteronormative sexualities, have remained. Outside Hollywood, teen films have represented a wider range of teen identities all across the world; see for instance, Shary (2006) and Pomerance and Sakeris (1997).

I next consulted the Internet Movie Database in early 2006 and, through its search engines, made lists of every American production (films funded or produced by American studios) released in the US between 1979 and 1991. I selected the films that (prominently) featured teenagers, and this resulted in over 400 titles. It was at this stage that I had to make a first round of selective decisions; I chose to eliminate television films (or ‘after school specials’, as they are often called in America) because in their style and content, they connect explicitly to a different genre and format. I also chose to not look at teen horror films, because this area had previously been explored by feminist analysis (including the works on the *Final Girl* by Carol Clover, and the works of Barbara Creed) and was indeed very different in content and style from the teen romantic comedies and dramas I wanted to look at. I also discarded films that sidelined the representation of teenage girls to such a degree, that their contributions with regards to image construction would be extremely minimal (this included, for instance, many of the boy-centred teen sex comedies produced in the 1980s, that presented a rather two-dimensional teen girl character, mostly as an anonymous nude body – an aspect of the teen film subgenre that I felt would already be addressed by looking at its most well-known examples, such as *Porky’s* and *The Revenge of the Nerds*). I then cross-referenced my resulting list with my previous lists, and with fan-forums dedicated to 1980s cinema, such as The 80s Rewind – Home of ‘80s Retro Movies<sup>37</sup>, in order to evaluate which titles had recognisably become part of the 1980s teen film canon. I also compared my list to the teen-film corpus lists of teen film overview works, such as Timothy Shary’s *Generation Multiplex* (2002), Robert Bulman’s *Hollywood Goes to High School* (2005), and, more recently, Catherine Driscoll’s *Teen Film* (2011), in order to gain a better perspective on the films that had thus far appeared on the academic radar. Ultimately, after looking into the availability (through DVD purchases, video stores, downloads, forums, and, increasingly, online portals such as Youtube), I had compiled a list of approximately 125 titles that formed the basic corpus for my study of the representation of teenage girls in American teen films from the 1980s (the complete list can be found in the filmography, under the heading ‘Selected Corpus’, at the back of this thesis).

For the selection of the case-studies that I use for close reading in this research, I first watched all of the titles in my corpus. During these viewings, I began to map recurring elements and scenes, and important differences or parallels between the films (and this was very much influenced by my readings on teen film genre too). I looked for tropes and

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<sup>37</sup> This site provides an extremely comprehensive overview of 1980s American cinema in general; accessed November 26, 2012. [www.fast-rewind.com](http://www.fast-rewind.com).



trajectories on both the visual and the narrative level that engaged with the representation of the teenage girl, with the construction of her identity or image, specifically. After I had identified pivotal scenes for close analysis, such as, for instance, the makeover scene, I began to organise my arguments. This led me to the second phase in my selection process. Rather than point towards all 125 films individually, I decided I would have to select a narrower range of examples, that, nevertheless, would reflect the important trends of the decade, so that I could engage with these films in greater depth. I contracted the number of close analysis case-studies to approximately 15 ‘key’ films that, in my opinion, presented the dominant tendencies and shifts visible amongst the *popular* representation of teenage girls in 1980s American teen film. (This also meant, for instance, that I decided to focus predominantly on the popular films that presented the teenage girl *within* American society, as opposed to the few that isolated her at its edges (in delinquency, teenage pregnancy or prostitution, for instance), because I wanted to see how tensions of discourse functioned in these leading examples, rather than in titles that dealt with more resistant subject matter of itself - I come back to this in my conclusion). With this selection of 15 films, I also took into consideration that most of the popular teen films were important, valuable objects to (re)consider, because they have remained influential on the teen film genre today, and are still commonly recognised and frequently viewed. This led me to include almost all of the John Hughes films, for instance. At the same time, I selected a film like *Smooth Talk*, which really borders independent and art-house (even feminist) filmmaking, because it is a rich text that purposely plays with how the teenage girl had been represented before its release, exposing tropes as well as re-evaluating them. These 15 films thus present a balanced overview of what the popular representation of teenage girls in the 1980s teen (romantic) comedies and dramas had to offer; from the commercially successful (from *The Breakfast Club* to *Say Anything*), to titles that have since become ‘cult’ teen films (such as *Fast Times of Ridgemont High* and *The Legend of Billie Jean*), to films that have remained less exposed or recognised by the public (including, for instance, *Teen Witch* and *Better Off Dead*).

The purpose of this thesis, from the start, was to provide qualitative analysis through close readings, and to explore a theoretical dialogue with specific films that could potentially open up new areas of debate within feminist film theory (rather than providing an overview of quantifiable or empirical data, for instance). But these case-studies are, by no means, meant to be presented as all-inclusive or exhaustive – I recognise that, even within my own corpus, there are usually one or two titles that refute the very findings I propose in each analysis. This should, however, not become a significant issue, as long as my case-studies do reflect larger

trends, and demonstrate that the tendencies I am describing - the contradictory lines of discourse that the teen films of the 1980s opened up - always stemmed from larger, collective forces, as opposed to from singular, isolated examples. This thesis looks to these films for the moments that begin to open up areas for negotiation, that result from collectives, from overlay, from interplay, from movements in between – and this, in itself, rejects any one particular, rigid or universalised reading, of one, or all of the films in my corpus.

### **About the Structure of the Thesis and the Use of Theory**

When I began this project, I quickly realised that, if I wanted to provide a valuable argument that might further feminist film theory when it came to the representation of teenage girls, or even just enter into any fruitful dialogue with my objects of analysis, I would have to go right back to the beginning of feminist film theory, because so little has been written about the teenage girl on film so far. As much as this thesis is nostalgic about the teen films of the 1980s, it is also, then, inherently nostalgic about the theories of representation, and feminist film theory in itself.

The thesis is divided into two main parts, both of which are introduced at greater length by a separate introduction. In the first part, I begin to look at the representation of teenage girls by exploring all that is set, structurally, in these 1980s American teen films. In the first chapter, I introduce the three principal locations of the genre, and analyse how the frame presents and confines the image of the teenage girl within these settings. In the second chapter, I turn to the article that, arguably, launched contemporary feminist film theory nearly 40 years ago, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ by Laura Mulvey (1975), to see whether the standardised constructions that Mulvey presented (where Hollywood cinema is constructed to support a man’s active ‘looking’, whilst reducing the image of the woman to a passive ‘to-be-looked-at’ object) apply to the representations of teenage girls in teen film as well. I expand this analysis of the distribution of power with regards to structures of seeing on film, by then turning to Michel Foucault’s concept of surveillance as well. In the third chapter, I turn to the possibilities for a reversed, teen girl gaze, and engage with Richard Dyer’s writings on gazing upon the male body, at Mary Ann Doane’s writings on the veil and the female gaze, at Jackie Stacey’s work on the female ‘fan’ gaze, and at Anne Friedberg’s concept of the mobilised, female gaze in the mall (that of the *flâneuse*). This chapter provides a good example of how, through my engagement with my objects, new questions arise that prompt me to move towards different aspects of feminist film or cultural theory (including moving from psychoanalysis and structuralist, cultural theory, to post-structuralist, post-

modern theory, for instance); my findings constantly steer my argument into new directions or approaches that I need to forcibly provoke my objects to ‘speak back’ – to really begin to stretch out, to expose and poke at these images.

In the second part of this thesis, I turn towards that which ‘moves’ within these teen films. I begin the fourth chapter by looking at the underlying narrative trajectories and stereotyped representations, and here I turn to some of the discussions proposed within genre studies as well as Richard Dyer’s writings on stereotypes. I also examine how the teenage girl is presented in her ‘rite-of-passage’; how does she *become* (woman?) in these films, through her onscreen relationship with her father (a reversed Oedipal trajectory), for instance, or through a recurring trope like the makeover. In this chapter, I engage with more recent observations in feminist theory, ranging from Mary Ann Doane, to Tania Modleski, Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, Yvonne Tasker and Tamar Jeffers McDonald. In the final chapter of the thesis, which is also the longest chapter, I turn towards the performing teenage girl, in dance, in gender/cross-dressing, and in tropes that emphasise her affective display, to look at possible areas for resistance amongst these representations of the teenage girl. In this chapter, I move from Mary Ann Doane and her understanding of the performance of femininity, to the performance of gender as explored by Judith Butler and Annette Kuhn, and eventually, to Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject, and Barbara Klinger’s relation of affective display to, what she has termed, the ‘arresting image’.

On the whole, this thesis presents my humble intention to create an ode, of sorts, to the relevance of textual analysis, and to the theoretical works that inspired me personally, both as a Film Studies student in the UK and in my academic research today; the writings of Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane and Richard Dyer (this project is, in a way, also my attempt to continue Dyer’s work on whiteness (1997); these teen films are so homogeneous in their depiction of race and sexuality, one of the project’s underlying aims is to expose and understand the dominant standards of whiteness in popular culture, against which everything else is set). Ultimately, then, this project is perhaps best understood as an impassioned plea for, or a reclamation, even, of, the studies of representation, of going back to the beginnings of feminist film theory to try and find new ways to move forward. I personally believe the study of film and the studies of representation are no more obsolete today, than feminism itself, or any critical analysis of culture, history, and identity. As Annette Kuhn wrote, in *The Power of the Image*:

...in order to challenge dominant representations, it is necessary first of all to understand how they work, and thus where to seek points of possible productive transformation. From such understanding flow various politics and practices of oppositional cultural production, among which may be counted feminist interventions.... There is another justification for a feminist analysis of mainstream images of women: may it not teach us to recognize inconsistencies and contradictions within dominant traditions of representation, to identify points of leverage for our own interventions; cracks and fissures through which may be captured glimpses of what in other circumstance might be possible visions of “a world outside the order not normally seen or thought about”?<sup>38</sup>

Kuhn here challenges a new generation of feminist film theorists to not only analyse and explore dominant representations, but, in doing so, to find areas of contradiction and inconsistency within these representations, so that resistance and divergence may be exposed to offer possible areas of intervention. The analysis of the representation of teenage girls in 1980s American cinema does all this, for me. It allows me to re-evaluate the hidden ideologies at play within a popular genre, and popular cinema at large, to contribute a new perspective within discourse analysis, and to expose areas of contradiction and inconsistencies within a seemingly set representation that could possibly further feminist film theory, and reopen areas of debate. From within cramped and confined, strictly neo-conservative spaces, these representations of teenage girls find ways to resist; they find small spaces for movement, for openings, and create cracks. This is why I have called this project Wonder Girls, because, like wonder boys, these teenage girls are golden, successful at an early age, yet, because they pass by unrecognised by their contemporaries, they remain unaware of their own potential - their status is inherently fleeting, and miraculous most, in hindsight; when history finally gives them visibility.

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<sup>38</sup> Annette Kuhn. *The Power Of The Image: Essays On Representation And Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985). 10