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

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PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the first three chapters of this thesis I examine the mise-en-scene of the 1980s teen film, and look at how the visual construction of the frame captures and presents the teen girl characters within it. The first chapter begins this exploration by looking more closely at three recurring generic settings of the 1980s teen film - the home, the high school and the mall - and considers how these locations inform the representation of the teenage girl in the frame. The chapter suggests the three locations primarily function to reinforce traditional gender lines and boundaries, to visually 'box' in the characters, and to ultimately confine the movements of teenage girls. In the second chapter, I continue to explore the three principal locations in 1980s teen film, and the visual constructions they present within the frame, but I do so here from the angle of power distribution, and the concurrent monopolies on looking/gazing. I first look at how the three locations act both as public and private spaces for the representations of teenage girls, and how the girls are shown to appropriate/transform the spaces into either realm. I then point out that these three locations (whether public or private) are all presented as conducive to certain structures of looking; the teenage girls in these films are either objectified as sexual subjects by their to-be-looked-at-ness, or they are made subject to authoritarian surveillance by patriarchal figures. The teenage girls are presented as passive, controlled and supervised, and this ultimately counters any transformative (or performative) powers they might have previously conjured over their surroundings. The films normalize such constructions, and thereby continue to reinforce traditional and conservative gender norms.

After considering the dominant structures of seeing in 1980s teen film in the previous chapter, and concluding that they cater mostly to a male and patriarchal gaze, I turn in the third chapter to the representations of a female, 'teen girl gaze' in the three dominant locations in 1980s teen film. I look at how the teen girl gaze is structured and presented from a range of different angles, and I suggest that there are in fact three prevailing 'types' of girl gaze that reside within the genre. The first type is a teen girl gaze directed at boys; one that would seem directed and fuelled by sexual desire. I explore the context and structure of this teen girl 'gaze', and look at how it recurs at different times throughout the decade. Does this 'gaze' allocate any activity/agency to its desiring teen girl subjects? And what does the particular character of the 'teen girl' bring into play, with regards to debates about female looking in film? For the second type of teen girl gaze, I turn to another, even more prevalent

type of girl 'gaze' presented in teen films in the 1980s, namely one directed at other girls. This gaze is, however, decidedly not sexually oriented (it is not a homo-erotic gaze) but rather 'comparative' in nature. How does this 'gaze' differ from the gaze introduced by Mulvey? And what can be concluded about this trope of girl-on-girl-looking, within the teen film genre in the 1980s? For the third type of gaze, I return to one of three dominant locations in the films, and examine the teen girl gaze in the recurring setting of the mall. There, the teen girl gaze is (re-)directed as a consumer gaze, aiming at commodities. How is this gaze visualised within the setting of the mall? How does it relate the teen girl body to the commodities it observes, and how does this gaze ultimately engage with the consumer address and power it implies?

I begin this project by looking at the most popular films that defined the teen film genre in the 1980s (featuring strong teen girl lead characters), in order to examine the dominant tendencies of the genre. In the first chapter, I therefore look particularly closely at the John Hughes films (*Sixteen Candles*, *Pretty in Pink*, *The Breakfast Club*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* and *Some Kind of Wonderful*), and at other box-office hits such as *Lucas*, *Adventures in Babysitting*, and *Can't Buy Me Love*. In the second chapter I counter these popular examples with two films that prominently address the teenage girl's subjective experience, that are both directed by women: *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (Amy Heckerling, 1982) and *Smooth Talk* (Joyce Chopra, 1985). In the final chapter of this first part, I venture out to include the borders of the decade, and address lesser known teen films, such as *Little Darlings*, *Better Off Dead*, *Mermaids* and *Lambada*, to see whether dominant structures could, there, more readily be replaced by alternative models.