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

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## **01. Location, Location, Location....**

“By the 1980s, women’s spaces at home, in classrooms, and in workplaces had become extremely politicized.”<sup>39</sup>

“...Hollywood depicts adolescent girls using few spaces. Young women tend to be confined to washrooms, hallways, classrooms, and cafeterias, with little attention to the many other spatial possibilities and the complex social and cultural dynamics that shape them”.<sup>40</sup>

### **The Three Dominant Locations: the Home, the High School and the Mall**

The first cycle of teen films, in the 1950s and the 1960s, tended to present teenage characters predominantly in schools (for example, titles such as *Blackboard Jungle* or *High School Confidential!*), or engaging socially *outside* the home and school; in holiday resorts and summer camps (*Where The Boys Are* is set in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, for instance, or most of the *Elvis* films, *Last Summer* and *The Summer of '42*, to name but a few), or at the beach (the Gidget series starting with *Gidget* and the Beach Party films of the early 1960s)<sup>41</sup>. Most other action in these films also took place at locations outside the home and school; at social clubs, drive-ins, drive-thru’s, city viewpoints, and, occasionally, at cinema theatres. Lesley Speed (1998) quotes an original study by Lawrence Grossberg, entitled *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (1992), in this light, and defines these spaces *outside* the home and school as ‘in-between locations’, catering to an opportunity for rebellion against authority:

Grossberg expands on the “moral and sociological indeterminacy” of youth to reveal how adolescent social activities express a reaction against authority (p. 178-179). For instance, youth since the 1950s has become associated with “space[s] of transition between... institutions,” as exemplified by the tendency for adolescents to congregate

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<sup>39</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), 202.

<sup>40</sup> Alison L. Bain, “White Western Teenage Girls and Urban Space: Challenging Hollywood’s Representations”, *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 10, no. 3 (2003), 206.

<sup>41</sup> For more information, see for instance Doherty (2002), Shary (2002 and 2005), Lewis (1992), Tropiano (2005), Pomerance (2005), and Pomerance and Gateward (2005).

“in the street, around the jukebox, at the hop [and] the mall.” Such spaces, which the onlooker might equate with “no place at all” (p. 179), constitute locations for teenagers to assert a collective identity, establishing a physical and cultural distance from adult institutions (such as schools and the family home).<sup>42</sup>

The *physical and cultural distance from adult institutions*, Speed thereby argues – provided by the spaces and settings teenage characters traditionally inhabit in teen film – are fundamental to whether or not the teenagers are perceived as able to engage in rebellion or escape adult authority, and for the teen films of the 1950s and 1960s this appears to have been an essential component of the genre.

Upon first reviewing and researching the dominant locations in the second major wave of teen films, in the 1980s, however, I found that a striking transition had taken place. During this decade, most 1980s American youth films presented narratives based around three principal, ‘closed’ settings: the home, the high school and the mall. The actions of the teenage characters, and their burgeoning sexualities, appear to have moved away from the open spaces (and their associated opportunities for rebellion) of the beach and summer towns, viewpoints or parking lots. Most action in the teen film of the 1980s takes place within the ‘secure’ walls of *suburban* buildings instead. Early titles of the decade, such as *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Pretty in Pink* and *Some Kind of Wonderful* all adhere to the three dominant settings of the home, the high school and the mall<sup>43</sup>, while later examples, such as *Can’t Buy Me Love* and *She’s Out of Control* reinforced this construction to such a degree that, I would argue, they affirmed these three locations as *the* staple component of the contemporary teen film. This ‘reconstitution’ of the genre in the 1980s has lasted to such a degree that most of the teen films of today still follow these primary settings. Particularly where representations of teenage girls are concerned, our screens still predominantly show them at home, at school and at the mall (contemporary examples range from *Clueless*, *Never Been Kissed* and *Mean Girls*, to *Bratz* and *High School Musical*).

The recurrence of these three “critical sites”<sup>44</sup> was also observed by Steve Bailey and James Hay, who conclude that: “These sites...are spaces in which the social identities of

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<sup>42</sup> Speed, Lesley. "Tuesday's Gone: The Nostalgic Teen Film." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 26, no. 1 (1998), 28.

<sup>43</sup> Though at times, the ‘mall’ is refigured as a smaller shopping centre or the high street, these locations still feature (a collection of) shops and window displays prominently.

<sup>44</sup> Steve Bailey and James Hay, “Cinema and the Premises of Youth: *Teen Films* and Their Sites in the 1980s and 1990s”, in Steve Neale, ed. *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*. British Film Inst, 2002), 218.

youth find articulation.”<sup>45</sup> In their article, ‘Cinema and the Premises of Youth: ‘Teen Films and their sites in the 1980s & 1990s’, Bailey and Hay look at how teen characters engage with these three locations in the genre, and how these locations inform their onscreen ‘social’ identities. Perhaps because of the broader scope of the article (Bailey and Hay look at both the 1980s and the 1990s, and do not identify smaller sub-genres, such as the sex comedies, or school dramas, or differences in representation of gender), the authors do not particularly look into reasons for the dominance of these three locations, nor do they link the popularisation of these settings directly to the contextual, neo-conservative *zeitgeist* of the 1980s. However, I would argue these can indeed be connected, since the advent of the predominance of the settings of the home, school and the mall did not only coincide with a changed context for the target demographic of the genre during the 1980s (by which I mean that the audience itself would now often be viewing the films at home, at school, or most commonly at the mall<sup>46</sup>), but also with the fact that these settings strongly reflected the (neo-)conservative values of the time; inviting teenagers to remain supervised and act as ‘active’ citizens amongst their local communities and families - as opposed to allowing them to ‘escape’ such responsibilities, through outside locations such as holiday settings and/or travel. Additionally, these suburban settings presented the teenagers as decidedly middle class, which presented them firmly within new ‘Reaganomic’ ideals for the nuclear family. Catherine Driscoll (2011) makes a similar observation about the effects of the representation of teenagers in the cinema of the 1980s:

The US image of adolescence had become more symbolically middle class and more normatively applied regardless of class. In this context 1980s teen film has been strongly associated with ‘Reaganomics’. Ronald Reagan’s pro-business, low-tax policies and the economic recovery linked to them is understood to have enthused teen film with entrepreneurial spirit.<sup>47</sup>

Driscoll hereby seems to suggest that the advent of the centralization of these locations could be tied to the ideologies of the decade, and that they narrowed the representations along particular neo-conservative political lines. However, I would add that alongside the qualities of a more general ‘suburban’ setting, the mall *specifically* solicited teenagers to

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> See Timothy Shary’s book *Generation Multiplex* for more information on how the popularization of the in-mall multiplex cinemas changed the location for cinema viewing for teenagers in the 1980s.

<sup>47</sup> Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction*. (Berg Publishers, 2011), 52-53.

(re)appropriate strong notions of consumerism and materialism (and/or Driscoll's idea of an 'entrepreneurial spirit'<sup>48</sup>) during this decade; connecting the representations strongly to a newly attainable/purchasable level of 'individuality' (an idea that was strongly promoted in the American culture of the 1980s<sup>49</sup>).

Bailey and Hay also reflect on the influences of these locations on the narratives/characters within the genre, and stress the importance of how the teenagers are represented 'moving' between the three locations:

The use of spaces such as these settings for narrative action, and the representation of a capacity to move between them and to cultivate knowledge and practices appropriate to each, becomes ... a critical element in the depiction of the teenage experience. Here, the articulation of the teenager as a 'mobile' subject becomes linked to a sense of the teen as a kind of well-rounded individual, occupying the place of a family member, a citizen-in-training and a consumer, and developing the ability to shift between all three subject positions as circumstances demand. Adding an additional level of symbolic complexity is the tendency in many films to treat all three locations with a fundamental ambivalence, posing each as the site both of possibility and of restriction of an increasing personal autonomy and of a simultaneous conformity to social norms. Along with these sites comes an emphasis on the automobile as a means of mobility and, consequently, of potential liberation from an excessively narrow material and symbolic milieu. The continual tension between practices of freedom and practices of discipline works as a kind of technology for youth and as a means for the cultivation of a 'teen subject' who is both mobile and self-disciplined.<sup>50</sup>

Bailey and Hay stress several important points here; that the representation of space and the ability to move between spaces is *critical* to the depiction of the teenage experience, that the three locations create an 'idealised' citizen out of the teenage characters depicted and that, through movement between the three locations (mostly by car), the characters are engaged in practices that require them to be simultaneously mobile/free/liberated and contained/conforming. This last observation is precisely the larger tension that I wish to address in this thesis, when it comes to a 'wider' depiction of teenage girls in the 1980s, but

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<sup>48</sup> Though I would suggest the entrepreneurial spirit was advocated more strongly amongst the representations of teenage boys than it was for girls, if we look at examples such as *Ferris Bueller*, *Fast Times*, and *Risky Business*.

<sup>49</sup> For a more elaborate exploration of this tendency, see for instance Irene Taviss Thomson (1992) or (2010).

<sup>50</sup> Steve Bailey and James Hay, "Cinema and the Premises of Youth", 219.

for now I must insist that these ideas and tensions can, firstly, again be strongly connected to the neo-conservative value set of the 1980s (promoting idealized, nuclear citizens and consumers), and secondly, that this observation does, nevertheless, warrant closer, particular inspection for the representation of teenage *girl* characters, in the romantic comedy/drama subgenre of the teen film in the 1980s. For I would like to contest their findings and illustrate that the locations for these characters are not necessarily “treated with a fundamental ambivalence”, nor do the girl characters demonstrate a clear ability to become ‘mobile’ subjects (they are rarely shown to drive, for instance), let alone are they presented as equally mobile to their male counterparts. I will therefore now embark on a closer inspection of the locations and the visual depiction of the teen girl characters within these settings, in this subgenre, in order to explore this relation further, and to see how my findings relate to those of Bailey and Hay.

... Hollywood has disseminated an oversimplified image of teenage girlhood that reinforces the notion that girls participate only peripherally in the daily life of exterior urban spaces. An analysis of ...Hollywood movies... reveals a limited palette of spaces appropriated predominantly by white middle-class American adolescent girls.<sup>51</sup>

When looking at the opening sequences of some of the most popular teen films of the 1980s, it is notable that most films begin with an establishing shot of the principal location / the dominant setting of the film, introducing audiences straight away to the home, the school or the mall. These films thereby suggest that, even before introducing the characters, the settings will be key to our ‘understanding’ of the characters and the situations or surroundings they are in. The films seemingly privilege contextual settings *over* character, or at least remind us that in order to understand the characters we must understand/acknowledge and recognise the settings they inhabit. The *way* these films visualize these settings is also revealing. The opening shots often suggest an idealized, cleansed version of 1980s middle-America suburban life. In *Sixteen Candles*, the opening shot shows a car driving up a green, tree-lined road in a suburban neighbourhood. As the car approaches, it becomes clear that newspapers are being thrown out of the windows, onto the lawns of the houses; thereby establishing that in this neighbourhood, the paper-route is not run by a young teenager on a bicycle (by physical labour), but by the ease and comfort that means provide (it is suggested a

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<sup>51</sup> Alison L. Bain, "White Western Teenage Girls and Urban Space", quote taken from abstract.

parent is driving). As the camera pans to the right, we are introduced to the family home of the lead character Samantha (Molly Ringwald); a large house bathed in light that, through the use of a slight low angle, appears to sit proudly atop its front yard. It is a picture-book image of an American suburban house, that introduces and normalises, without question, a certain American standard of living. The solidity of the house, the weight of it, counterbalances and ‘normalises’ the introduction to the family inside, that follows.



**Figure 1 - The opening shot of *Sixteen Candles*, establishing an idealized, middle-class suburban setting, where the papers are delivered not by the ‘traditional’ boy on a bicycle, but by a driving car.**



**Figure 2 – The second part of opening pan of *Sixteen Candles* introduces the audience to Samantha's suburban, picture-book family home.**

The second location that is introduced in *Sixteen Candles* is the high school, which is featured as the opening shot to a montage sequence running underneath the opening credits. The school is presented to us visually as framed by a leafy tree, again emphasising a picturesque quality normally associated with storybooks. The wide paths and patches of green mirror the white paths and lawns from the previous suburban streets, and the image as a whole presents a solid, linear structure that radiates a certain calm and regularity. This image of an idealised, wealthy, middle-class suburban school is repeated throughout the decade in this genre (see, for example, also figure 4, an illustration from *Lucas*) and presents the school buildings, from the outside at least, as solid, structured and constant institutions (at times even with grand, churchlike doors and entrances).



**Figure 3 - The high school in *Sixteen Candles*.**



**Figure 4- The high school in *Lucas*.**

Two examples that seemingly break with this generic trope, can be found in *The Breakfast Club* and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, where the emphasis on the buildings as establishing (middle-class) locales is nevertheless the same, but the constructed associations differ. The opening sequence of *The Breakfast Club* presents a black frame, with a white lettered title presenting a quote from a David Bowie song, reading: “And these children that you spit on / As they try to change their worlds / Are immune to your consultations / They're quite aware / of what they're going through...”. As the camera lingers on this text for a moment, the image is then suddenly broken, as though it were shattering glass, towards the camera, to reveal an establishing shot of a high school underneath. As we hear one of the character’s voices introduce us to the time and date of the ‘suspension day’, the spoken year “1984” appears to inform the image with an Orwellian quality. Altogether, this image suggests a more critical take on the institution of the high school, where the building, in its austere, deserted and cement-laden form, breaks the ‘very truth’ about teenagers (in the shape of the Bowie quote), and seemingly refuses to recognise their individuality or agency. This mirrors the larger ‘message’ the film as a whole attempts to convey; that the students, who were lead to believe by their surroundings that they all embodied but one ‘stereotyped’ identity, in truth, and upon closer inspection, pertain to a far richer array of identities and possibilities.



**Figure 5 - The high school in *The Breakfast Club*; an establishing shot that shatters a 'printed' opening quote by David Bowie.**

In *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, the high school is also introduced in a less formal and idealised way; where the grounds (and the frame) surrounding the school are filled with the

chaotic movements of high school students, and the scene shows evidence they have previously ‘tp-ed’ the school (a common American ‘teenage’ act of vandalism, achieved by throwing toilet paper rolls into the trees). This introduction suggests the high school students perhaps do not take the institution as seriously as its stone and windowed façade would demand; and that the students have as valid a presence (they are able leave their mark on their surroundings) as the very authority the building implies.



**Figure 6 - The high school in *Fast Times at Ridgmont High*.**

Nevertheless, in both *The Breakfast Club* and in *Fast Times*, the school – in spite of a seemingly more critical undertone – ultimately proves the ‘saving’ location, where knowledge is exchanged, and advanced insight is achieved. The films’ narratives redeem the institution in the end, and thereby idealise it in much the same way as the opening shot of *Sixteen Candles*.

These three settings, the home, the high school and the mall (I address the introduction of the mall, which also often opens teen films, at greater length in my second chapter) are in any case universally introduced, and presented as key players in these films; they perform particular ‘generic’ roles as settings to the teenage characters that inhabit them in the frame. Roughly divided, the three different locations present settings for three different idealised ‘social identities’ of youth on screen, that are in tune with certain 1980s Reaganite values; the home is where the teenage characters interact with the nuclear family and reflect upon the self, the high school is the place where knowledge is exchanged and social relations are built up, and the mall represents the public space (standing in for ‘the rest of the world’), where the characters perform their roles as citizens on a miniature scale; where they work, sell, consume

and purchase, in order to develop their individual identities. As we begin to look closer, however, at the representation of these buildings, and examine the smaller compartments/cells they incorporate (the rooms, the classes, the shops, etc.), the conservative nature of their construction becomes even more clear.

### Gendered Divisions

The first observation to be made about the smaller compartments within these settings, in the 1980s teen film, is that their decoration often follows a strong, traditional and conservative gender divide. This is markedly visible when looking at the mise-en-scene of the bedrooms of the leading teen characters, and particularly at the allocation of prop pieces. Most of the boys are presented as having computers in their bedroom in the 1980s teen film; in *WarGames*, *Weird Science* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, for example. But none of the teenage girl leads of popular 1980s teen film are presented as 'owning' a computer, or even having regular access to one<sup>52</sup>. The girls' bedrooms are instead filled with mirrors, dressing tables, large wardrobes, romantic iron beds layered with (floral/heart-shaped) pillows, pink wall paper, cuddly toys, clothes and jewellery, and at most a telephone or a cassette player (in *Sixteen Candles*, *Adventures in Babysitting* and *Smooth Talk* respectively). These props associate the teen girl characters with conservative gender connotations; the girls are aligned with an emphasis on outward appearance and looks, with dressing and makeup, with striking poses in front of the mirror, with communicating (gossiping with girlfriends on the phone) and with being asleep, or even with being in a more permanent, dreamlike state. There is often not even a desk present, or a space for them to work at (Andie in *Pretty in Pink* studies on her bed), which again provides a contrast with the boy bedrooms. It seems the boys in the teen films of the 1980s are 'allowed' regular access to knowledge and technology - they even 'own' grown-up and technologically advanced equipment in their bedrooms - whilst the girls are denied such privileges, as their bedrooms are kept young, pink and pretty, 'girly' and almost infantile in tone.

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<sup>52</sup> The closest one of the girls comes to a computer is Andie (Molly Ringwald) in *Pretty in Pink*, who is seen to do research on a computer in her school library. After a few moments, however, the scene shows how a boy, Blane (Andrew McCarthy), takes over her controls from another computer, and 'hijacks' her screen, making it evident once more that this technology 'caters' predominantly to (the desires of) boys. Towards the late 1980s, in *She's Out of Control*, a computer is visible in the lead girl's bedroom, but we never see her use it. In 1995, two films prominently broke with this coded tradition, but in two very different ways. *Clueless* presented a computer in Cher's (Alicia Silverstone) bedroom, but this computer is linked to her rotating wardrobe and she uses it only to select and match her outfits - the computer is thereby re-appropriated for domesticated and 'female' use. Angelina Jolie's character Kate in *Hackers* is one of the first female characters on screen (let alone the first teenage girl), who is shown to demonstrate computer literacy.



Figure 7 - Andie's pink and frilly bedroom in *Pretty in Pink*, shown through a mirror....



Figure 8 - ...compared to Samantha's typical girl bedroom in *Sixteen Candles*, where she is trying on different poses in the mirror (a 'female' tradition affirmed by the ballet pose on the wall)...



Figure 9 - ...and she only has access to a telephone to communicate with friends...



**Figure 10 - ...compared to Wyatt's bedroom in *Weird Science*, who has a whole range of electronic, and technologically advanced, equipment.**

Such 'gendered' labels and stereotypical representations are established and repeated across the different locations. Girls are predominantly seen shopping (though they're never shown to buy anything - I will come back to this later), trying on clothes in changing rooms and mirrors, or sitting in bedrooms and chatting with their friends. Boys are often seen on sports' fields, playing the arcades or parking their cars. Their activities tend much more towards the 'physically active' than the girls<sup>53</sup>. Otherwise relatively gender neutral territories, such as the school hallways, the cafeteria and the classrooms, are often subdivided too, into boy-sections and girl-sections, where boy groups walk, run, hang out, and where girl groups stand and meet. Even the character of the classes the students attend are visibly divided into less gender neutral areas: the girls are shown taking Home-Economics classes, or segregated Physical Education lessons, whilst the boys take Mechanics or (Work)Shop classes, and gather for football meets after school.

The mall too appears in these films to be divided into 'gendered sections'. The girls in *Fast Times* work as waitresses in a pizza parlour, whilst the boys, across the mall, check tickets at the cinema and scalp concert tickets. This representation again connotes certain conservative observations about the gender divide, where the girls are presented as serving, offering food and care to customers, whilst the boys are in control of 'access to spaces' and handle the money. Even at a more seemingly insignificant level, boys are shown to be more 'in control' of their environment than the girls. In *Fast Times*, when Stacey (Jennifer Jason Leigh) can't open her locker, she's lucky to have Mike Damone (Robert Romanus) walk by,

<sup>53</sup> Richard Dyer has also written extensively on this divide, between the physically active male and the passive 'to be looked at' consumer; see for instance his article "Don't Look Now: The Male Pin-Up", in *The Sexual Subject – A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, edited by Screen (London: Routledge, 1992).

who just has to hit the locker once with the side of his fist to have it ‘magically’ open, leaving her to stare after him with visible admiration. This illustrates how in these films the boys are often represented as having a more powerful impact on and over their environment, as well as having ‘knowledge’ of the functioning, and the ins and outs of their surroundings, whilst the girls are portrayed as more passively dependent on (male) aids in order to get around and to properly perform their roles within these locations.



**Figure 11 - Damone has power over his environment; with a quick bang he 'magically' opens Stacey's locker.**

Alongside the ‘gendered’ decoration of certain spaces and settings, and the disparate allocation of access and control over the environment, the three dominant locations are visually subdivided into smaller compartments that visually ‘box’ in the characters within them. After the establishing shots that open the films, the locations are introduced and presented to the viewer through an endless array of much smaller units/settings, such as bathrooms, bedrooms, boiler rooms, classrooms, hallways, gyms, libraries, locker rooms, parking lots, shops, diners, cars and cinemas. These locations are then subdivided into even smaller spaces, including washroom cubicles, corners, telephone booths, parking spaces, seating sections, changing rooms, showers, queues and rows. For the representation of teenage girls, these cubicles and smaller compartments are further, visually compartmentalised by extensive linear play within the frame. This appears to hold the teen girl characters captive within the frame, and places strong emphasis on the limitations of her movements.



Figure 12 – In *Smooth Talk*, Connie is boxed in by her environment.



Figure 13 - In the popular romantic teen comedy *Sixteen Candles*, Sam (Molly Ringwald) is constantly, visually confined by a linear play within the frame...



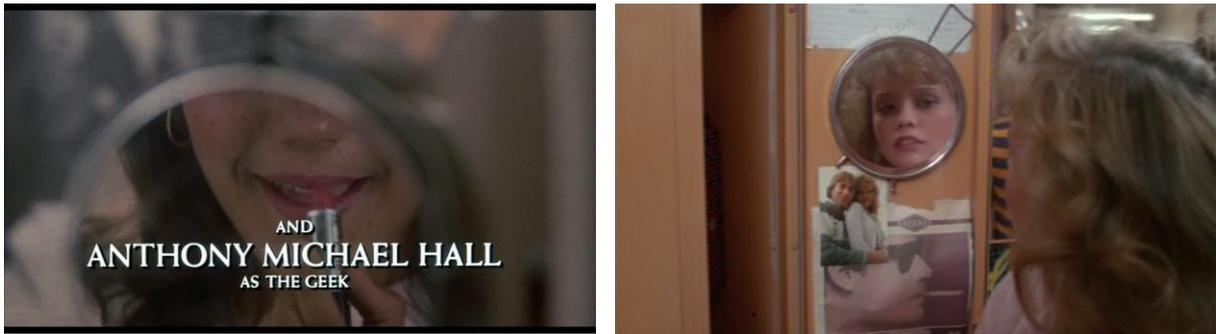
Figure 14 - ...even when she is moving through the location...



**Figure 15 - ...her surroundings continually suggest Sam has no 'unconfined' place to go.**

Even though a film like *Smooth Talk*, directed by a woman, Joyce Chopra, seems to use the visual construction of linear confinement to support and develop particular narrative trajectories for the lead girl (it is a rites-of-passage story, where lead girl Connie's attempts to break with a suppressed femininity are cruelly rejected), most teen films, like *Sixteen Candles*, demonstrate no particular purpose for the construction. Instead, the imagery remains unaddressed, unquestioned and, consequently, is neutralised. It has become part of a generic visual fabric for teen films that passes unrecognised, and perhaps because of its very familiarity, this imagery has since become intricately entwined with the genre. And it has to be noted, boy characters are *not* framed in the same way. This construction seems to cater to, and support, a certain tendency to depict teen girl characters as confined, as immobile, as framed within the frame, and as passive 'objects' on display (I come back to this extensively in the next chapter, when I discuss Laura Mulvey's work), with no apparent control over their environment.

If we look at another common trope of the teen film genre, where we see a girl applying or checking her makeup, two examples show that even this small action is framed within the frame, in a limiting way:



**Figure 16a and b - A 'familiar' shot in the title montage sequence of *Sixteen Candles* (left) reveals a fragmented and tightly framed image of an anonymous teen girl's appearance (doubly emphasised by her applying makeup), which is similarly constructed and repeated in *Fast Times* (right).**

Such shots – visual constructions catering to passive display and fetishism - are very specific to the depiction of the teen girl character in teen films, and relate their surroundings/locations to them in a particular way. I therefore want to stress that the three dominant locations aren't, and shouldn't, be treated with a “fundamental ambivalence”. Instead, the very way these settings are brought into the frame implies that the settings ‘manage’, control and confine the teen girl characters. The teen girls are subjugated by the locations they are in, as well as by the voyeuristic camera and its assumed male desire, and this, again, generally passes by unmarked and uncriticised in teen films.

### **Trapped**

The characters in these films are, however, not only confined in the frame at the visual level, but they are frequently *literally* confined to certain locations by recurring narrative structures as well. As was already briefly introduced, the girls in these films are often denied independent access to new spaces, or independency of movement. Moreover, they always require some kind of ‘male’ or adult help, in order to move around; a ride home, a drop off at the mall, a date to go to the prom, or a headmaster to get them out of detention (in *Some Kind of Wonderful*, *Smooth Talk*, *Pretty in Pink*, and *Some Kind of Wonderful* respectively).



**Figure 17 - In *Some Kind of Wonderful*, Amanda is dependent on her boyfriend and her other friends to drive her where she needs to go.**

Adults can also prevent them from moving around altogether, when the teen girls are ‘grounded’ at home (or forced to stay home to help out with chores), stuck in ‘detention’ after school, or when a driving instructor fails their driving test (in *Smooth Talk*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *Valley Girl* respectively); but rather than rebel against such restrictions, the teen girls in these films are shown to resign to them easily. Many of the 1980s teen films delineate clear boundaries between areas where the girls can and cannot go. In *Pretty in Pink*, these are class related; Andie (Molly Ringwald) is from ‘the wrong side of the tracks’ and does not have access to certain parties or privileges; the school areas have even been subdivided, with the corridors inside appropriated by the wealthier teens, whilst the courtyard outside is an assigned space for those from poorer backgrounds. In *Smooth Talk*, the proposed division is age related, with the other side of the ‘tracks’ (or in this case, the other side of the freeway) set as the place where ‘the bar’ is, where older kids hang out with their cars. Connie (Laura Dern) and Laura (Margaret Welsh) have to ‘cross over’ to the other side, risking their lives in oncoming traffic, to get there. In *Can’t Buy Me Love*, the allocation of space is status related, where each group of specific teenage ‘types’ - the popular cheerleaders and jocks, the geeks and so forth - has their own table in the dining area outside, and their own corridor to walk down to get to class. Who sits and walks where, and who has access to which spaces, is of vital importance (the main character Ronald, played by Patrick Dempsey, happily hands over a thousand dollars for a chance to walk down the right corridor), and inevitably binding for life. In the end, after a brief stint of popularity, Ronald too is exiled once again to the un-cool

areas.<sup>54</sup> I come back to this in my chapter on stereotypes, in chapter 4, but for now I want to point out that such defining boundaries, when class, age or status related, appear to follow a certain tendency for hierarchical thinking, conducive to traditional American notions about the American dream (where an individual is invited to climb the ladder) and relevant to Reagan's renewal politics in the 1980s. The fact that the teen girls in these films are particularly 'trapped' by these boundaries, however, suggests again a certain conservative 'backlash', towards women and youth, more than it does critical commentary, because the *status quo* of these boundaries ultimately remains set, and fundamentally engrained, in these films.



**Figure 18 - The outdoor cafeteria in *Can't Buy Me Love*, with its different sections for different groups of teenagers, delineates who is allowed to sit or go where.**

These confinements and boundaries prove but the beginning - the "trappings of affluence"<sup>55</sup> are more fundamental and deep-rooted than the surface images suggest. Most of the characters in these films, and especially the girls, never leave the suburbs. *Adventures in Babysitting* seemingly provides an exception, when Chris (Elisabeth Shue) has to drive into Chicago to rescue her friend Brenda (Penelope Ann Miller), who ran away from home and is

<sup>54</sup> This division of space according to teenage 'type' is a common introduction to student hierarchies, when establishing the school location in teen film. Roz Kaveney calls it "the anthropology shot" (in *Teen Dreams: Reading Teen Film and Television from 'Heathers' to 'Veronica Mars'* IB Tauris, 2006. 3), and Driscoll refers to it as "the guided tour of highschool groups" (in *Teen Film*, 59). I come back to this at greater length in chapter 4 when I look at stereotypes.

<sup>55</sup> Steve Bailey and James Hay, "Cinema and the Premises of Youth", 219.

now stuck in a phone booth at the bus station. Brenda's monologue presents a moral warning to the audience, when she exclaims with increasing hysteria:

Chris, I'm really in trouble... I did it, I ran away from home... I'm at the bus station downtown... I don't have any money, I spent it all on the cab here - Chris, I need help... Can you pick me up? Chris, I can't call anyone else, my dad doesn't know, and he'd kill me if he found out... Chris I'm begging you, it's really scary here; I've just seen three people shoot up, a bald Chinese lady with no pants on, and there's this old guy outside who wants his bedroom slippers... Ooh my God, there's a guy with a gun! Chris, get me the hell out of here!<sup>56</sup>

Not only does it become clear from this excerpt that the girl was incapable of properly planning her 'escape', her obvious panic and fearful screams highlight the surrounding space as scary, unwelcoming and ultimately dangerous. When a homeless man consequently knocks on the phone booth window, yelling "You're in my home!" at Brenda, the line provides one of the films' key jokes, but the scene again reiterates that there is no space for the teenage girl in the city; even the poor, homeless man outranks her status to claim space.



**Figure 19 - *Adventures in Babysitting*: "You're in my home!"**

When the 'responsible' Chris drives into the city to pick up Brenda, with the children she babysits for, she too falls from one unpredictable and perilous scenario into the next; from

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<sup>56</sup> Transcription of dialogue from the script for *Adventures in Babysitting* (1987), written by David Simkins.

encountering domestic violence, a car theft and dealing with the mafia, to finding herself trapped in a African American nightclub, where she and the children are forced to sing the Blues, before they are allowed to leave. In this way, the film continues to present the city as chaotic, unmappable, and ethnically ‘uncontrolled’, even for the ‘good/smart’ teenage heroine.

In contrast to the representations of teenage girls, teenage boys in 1980s teen films are shown to enter the city freely, where they do take up space and partake of urban ‘pleasures’. In *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, Ferris skips school and takes his girlfriend Sloane (Mia Sara) and best friend Cameron (Alan Ruck) to downtown Chicago for the day. There, he manages to perform in a parade, dine at a fine restaurant, visit the stock exchange, admire the city from its highest viewpoint, explore a museum, and generally roam the city, all without getting caught by his father or the headmaster of his school, hot on his trail. In *Risky Business*, Joel (Tom Cruise) enters and exits the city at will, independently, in his sports car. Bailey and Hay examined the depiction of Joel’s relation with the city in more detail, and concluded the following:

Both poles of the urban continuum are evident in *Risky Business*, a film in which the city, once again Chicago, serves as a space of both liberation and menace... However, the city also becomes the site of Joel’s sexual awakening and his first real steps away from the comforts and limits of his suburban life, epitomised in the film’s most memorable visual passage, in which Joel and Lana (Rebecca De Mornay) make love on an elevated train, an event presented in a luminous slow-motion sequence. The equation to sexuality with both mobility and urban space is important here, as it concretises the link between forms of adult knowledge and movement into a new territory, a theme which appears across a number of films and which is a critical part of the way that youth becomes conceived as a set of meaningful spaces in these films.<sup>57</sup>

This equation of sexuality with both mobility and urban space, I agree, is fundamental to our understanding of the representation of male rites-of-passage in teen film, and it is a common trope in films that feature boys in a leading role (ranging from *Rebel Without a Cause* to *Ferris Bueller*, to the more recent *The Girl Next Door*). It is, however, not common

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<sup>57</sup> Steve Bailey and James Hay, “Cinema and the Premises of Youth”, 228.

place in teen films that feature teenage girls in lead roles. Interestingly, when this ‘code’ is used there, rather than demonstrating liberation or supporting a state of sexual awakening, it acts again as a moral warning instead. In one scene in *Adventures in Babysitting*, Chris and the three kids encounter a street prostitute who reveals she is the same age as Chris; seventeen years old. When asked how she got there, the girl explains she “ran away from home”. Again, this scene equates sexuality with urban space and mobility, but since the result presents itself in the shape of a teenage prostitute, the film poses the alignment as a confrontation with the ‘realities’ of such an ‘escape’; burgeoning sexuality and the desire for an urban life (or a combination thereof) are to be punished, both morally and legally. This realm is not recognised as one of freedom and opportunity, or presented as an important component of the female rite-of-passage. Teen girls who travel to the city independently in these films, simply do not end up anywhere.

This brings us to the question of ‘independent’ mobility and the role of the car in these films. Bailey and Hay suggest that: “The automobile is perhaps the most important element in the attention to mobility in recent films ...[It] has a long history as a potent symbol in films about youth. .. [and serves] as an emblem of the kind of freedom and escape... [D]riving emerges as a particular form of knowledge, as a technology for self-development and for the cultivation of appropriate adult practices.”<sup>58</sup> The car does indeed have a long history in the teen film genre, as a symbol for freedom and escape, and it featured prominently in teen films in the 1980s. Films such as *Moving Violations*, *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, *Risky Business* and *License to Drive* all placed great emphasis on the relationship between boys and their cars, and the teen male desire to drive. It is perhaps interesting to note, then, that, as opposed to the teen boy characters, or the character of Chris in *Adventures in Babysitting*, most of the teenage girls in these films do not have cars, or are not shown to drive. Instead, they have to rely on their parents or boyfriends for rides (in *Smooth Talk* and in Amanda’s (Lea Thompson) case in *Some Kind of Wonderful* for example). In significant contrast to their male counterparts, the teen girls are generally *not* depicted as independently ‘mobile’; they are again reliant on men for their ‘access’ to spaces and places. With regards to Bailey and Hay’s previous observation, where an attained mobility plays a key role in the ‘freedom’ of their subject position, it is therefore crucial to recognise the difference between the representation of the two genders.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 229.

In addition, the cars the teen boys are shown to drive in these films are often expensive, sporty, flashy and new. The girl characters that *do* have cars, however, like Chris, Andie in *Pretty in Pink* and Watts in *Some Kind of Wonderful*, are shown to have vintage, ‘feminised’ cars instead, that often don’t run properly. Andie’s car is bright pink - it is outwardly, visibly marked by her gender. And even her propriety, or her active driving of her own car, is often brought into question in this film, when her entrance to the car is blocked by a boy, for instance, or she is driven, as opposed to driving, on her date.<sup>59</sup> In *Adventures in Babysitting*, the car Chris drives is a model of a more conservative, family geared, station wagon, equating her turn as a driver visually more to that of a parent than to the role of speedy, independent youth. In her car, she is presented as the ‘mother’ rather; the stand-in mother or ‘mother in training’ she already has become as a babysitter. And tomboy character Watts in *Some Kind of Wonderful* drives and owns her own car, but this car is not only miniscule in stature (and thereby feminised), but it is also presented as a collage of auto parts in different shades and states of decay, as though it were the product of a scrap heap assembly. Throughout the film, Watts’ car is often shown not to work properly and is characterised as an unreliable means of transport. In a rather telling scene, Watts sits in her broken down car, behind the driving wheel, as a boy pushes the car all the way home. In this shot, her status as a ‘driver’ is stripped, and both the car and the driver are visually incapacitated.<sup>60</sup> These ‘girl’ cars are stripped of their virile potency – they are castrated – through colour, type and/or their lack of independent (successful) mobility. These cars don’t, and literally couldn’t, compete with any of the sports’ cars that the boys drive (see Figures 20-23).

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<sup>59</sup> In *Pretty in Pink*, Andie does drive her friend Duckie (Jon Cryer) around, because he only ride a bicycle. But Duckie is therefore excluded as a potential love interest (Duckie professes his love to Andie in the film), I would argue, from the very beginning, simply *because* he does not drive; he has been ‘castrated’ of the most powerful symbol of male potency, the vehicle.

<sup>60</sup> In the final scenes of the film, Watts acts as a hired help to her love interest Keith’s (Eric Stoltz) date, by driving the couple around in a hired limousine, dressed as a ‘driver’. Her status as a driver here again caters to service and care, and is thereby again stripped of its potency. In the final scene, she leaves the car behind altogether, and walks off, to be (finally) pursued by Keith, when her status as forlorn, ‘walking’ teenage girl has been restored.



Figures 20a and b - Andie's car in *Pretty in Pink* is bright pink, and has thereby been visually feminised and castrated; its mechanical prowess is stripped away by its gendered/tailored appearance (left) and its access is commonly blocked by a boy, as seen here (right) by Steff (James Spader).



Figure 21 - In *Adventures in Babysitting*, Chris (Elisabeth Shue) drives a family car, which equates her status as a driver more to that of the family mother, than to one pursuing independence and freedom.



Figures 22a and b – In *Some Kind of Wonderful*, Watts' (Mary Stuart Masterson) car is not only tiny and takes up hardly any space at all, but also presents a scrapheap collage of different parts that doesn't run properly, and needs to be pushed home by a boy, visually incapacitating Watts' status as an independent driver.



**Figures 23a-d - The cars driven by boys in *Some Kind of Wonderful*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Sixteen Candles* and *Risky Business* (left to right, top to bottom) all present an unequivocal automotive excellence, associated with speed, wealth and virility.**

Like the smaller spaces within the school and the home, the car as a location is therefore ultimately ‘gendered’ in these films, by allocation, decoration, and the accessibility to spaces it provides. As a further nuance to the observations made by Bailey and Hay, I hope to have shown in this chapter that the recurring locations in 1980s teen films sketch, shape and frame the representation of the teenage girl in a specifically confining and conservative way. It seems, on closer inspection, that the locations consistently imbue the representations of the girls with particular (neo-)conservative values, and form a strong structural basis that supports the continuance of a certain patriarchal hegemony. In order to explore the sense of “potential liberation” and the “continual tension between practices of freedom and practices of discipline”<sup>61</sup> that teen films, and these representations, might also provide (according to Bailey and Hay), the representation of the teenage girl subject will have to be examined more closely and from a wider variety of perspectives. This chapter has retained its attention predominantly with the locations of the home and the school; but what potential freedoms might the location of the mall provide?

<sup>61</sup> Steve Bailey and James Hay, “Cinema and the Premises of Youth”, 219.