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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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02. The Gaze and Surveillance

Transforming Space...

Throughout the history of American cinema, the figure of the woman has most commonly been represented within (or as related to) the space of the home⁶². This domestic space connected the figure of the woman primarily to the realm of the ‘private’; a realm connecting to the personal, the inwardly directed, the family-oriented, catering to the sustenance of the home (and by extension, the patriarch), rather than to society at large. But the late 1970s and the 1980s – as a direct result, possibly, of the accomplishments of Second Wave feminism in the 60s and 70s in the United States⁶³ - brought the representations of women on film out of the home, and into the public workplace and commercial/trading space (examples include *Baby Boom*, *9 to 5*, *Working Girl*, *Broadcast News*, and so on). For the teenage girl, in the 1980s (which, I argue, was the most formative decade for her depiction on screen) these three different locations were therefore inherently connected to her representation from the start, and, and as we have seen in the previous chapter, they frame and capture her image in confining and conservative ways. What is interesting to note, however, is that the delineations between what is ‘public’ and ‘private’ space for teenage girls on screen are constructed in a different way than they are (and were) for their adult counterparts. Whereas for representations of adult women, the two realms remain generally disconnected on film (romance, family, motherhood, the expression of the woman’s individual, ‘true’ identity, and her private/personal successes are tied to the private realm, whilst work, societal productivity and active citizenship are confined by the outlines of the ‘public’, more uniform office cubicle), for the representation of the teenage girl, the two have always been more readily interchangeable. The ‘private’ and the ‘public’ state of settings for the teenage girl on screen appear to function in a more organic manner, in a flow of sorts, where either can be appropriated to act as the other.

If we look at the representation of the mall in *Smooth Talk*, for instance, the traditionally ‘public’ space of the mall is readily transformed into ‘private’ space by the leading teenage girl and her two friends; the identities that they must hide at home from their parents, are freely constructed and exposed in the ‘space’ of the mall. Upon Connie (Laura Dern) and her friends’ arrival at the mall, a montage sequence reveals how they change

⁶² See for instance *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, Christine Gledhill, ed. (British Film Institute, 1987).

⁶³ Amongst the most significantly publicised accomplishments were the Equal Rights Amendment in 1972, and *Roe v Wade* in 1973.

clothes, dress their hair and put on make-up and accessories in an open corridor (not in a bathroom), before properly commencing their mall visit (I will come back to the transformation aspects of this sequence at greater length in chapter four and five). We then see them spending their day there; running past shop windows, whispering/gossiping amongst themselves, giggling and flirting with boys, laughing and yelling in an up-market clothing store. They perform/act as though they were completely uninhibited in/by these surroundings. Their big movements, loud giggles and excited yells in this scene suggest they are ‘outside’ – away from societal regulation - when in fact they are still within the closed, controlled environment of the mall (a fact the audience is reminded of, when a shopkeeper suddenly shushes them and sends them away, only to have them run off and burst into excited laughter further down the corridor⁶⁴).



Figure 17 - Connie and her friends run, laugh and giggle through the mall, performing otherwise hidden parts of their identities away from parental supervision, in *Smooth Talk*.

Through their actions of re-dressing their own appearance, the girls are presented as able to transform ‘public’ space into (seemingly and temporarily at least) a freer, ‘private’ space. The mall as a ‘private’ and less inhibited space for teenagers is, again, a common trope in teen film, and continues to be used this day⁶⁵. The re-appropriation of mall space illustrates a peculiar duality to the character of this location; it appears to reside on the very periphery

⁶⁴ The fact that a shopkeeper sends them away presents a contradiction of sorts; there is supervision, or societal regulation, at the mall, and this does seemingly ‘steer’ the behaviour of the young girls, but the point I wish to make here is that the behaviour of the young girls is initially shown to be relatively ‘freely’ expressed and unbounded at the mall.

⁶⁵ The lead girls of contemporary teen films are all shown to play with their identities more freely at the mall, in recent titles such as *Clueless*, *Mean Girls*, *Bratz*, *She’s the Man* or *The House Bunny*, amongst many others.

between public and private space in the teen film. This observation reiterates comments made by Bailey and Hay that I also addressed in the previous chapter, where: "... 'the mall' carries so many connotations of conformity and mindless consumerism which are at least partly at odds with its status as the space for the realization of a kind of personal freedom and mobility...".⁶⁶ This contradiction, or tension, presented by the location of the mall in film, was also observed by Anne Friedberg, who wrote extensively on the mall in contemporary American consumer culture and cinema:

The mall is not a completely public space... It keeps the streets at a safe distance... It defers urban realities, blocks urban blights – the homeless, the beggars, crime, traffic, even weather. While it is a temperature-controlled refuge from hostile environments, it contains trees and large plants that give the illusion of outdoors. Visitors can walk from store to store without encountering wind or rain and without taking off or putting on garments at each entrance and exit. The mall creates a nostalgic image of a clean, safe, legible town centre...⁶⁷

Friedberg's observations here, where she notes that the suburban setting for the mall itself already implies it is somewhere between urban/public and private space, between conformity and mobility, illustrates the very complexities and contradictions brought into play by the dominance of this setting. Moreover, the 'nostalgic image of a clean, safe, legible town centre' that she attributes to the mall, again suggests there may be a connection between Reagan's neo-conservatism (and its accompanying nostalgia for 1950s America) and the prominence of this setting in teen film during this decade. The mall is, perhaps, *the* quintessential neo-conservative space, both on film, and in American culture at large. This setting, in any case, provides plentiful material for continued debate. But what I want to point out here, specifically, is that the very character of the mall, with all its dualities, lends itself particularly well to the possibility for re-appropriation and re-contextualisation by the teen girl characters that roam its corridors, *because* it is an in-between space.

Nevertheless, the very idea that teenage girls on film could transform/adapt their environment into either a public or private realm on demand is an uneasy one. It implies the characters would be able to exert some sort of agency, or power, over their surroundings,

⁶⁶ Steve Bailey and James Hay, "Cinema and the Premises of Youth", 225.

⁶⁷ Anne Friedberg. "Les Flâneurs Du Mal (L): Cinema and the Postmodern Condition." *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, Vol. 106, No. 3 (1991): 424.

through the very nature of their ‘performative’ acts – if we look, for instance, at the *Smooth Talk* scene. (The *Smooth Talk* example itself might provide a fruitful addition to another one of Friedberg’s observations, which she makes in relation to William Kowinski’s work *The Mall of America*, where she notes that his grand equation of “the mall as theatre” remains a suggestive but undeveloped one⁶⁸; in this scene, the girls *transform* the location (and their roles in it) through the very ‘performance’ they put on - “the mall as theatre” indeed). But I will come back to the complex issues of performativity and agency in relation to my analysis of the representations of teenage girls on film, extensively, in the second part of this thesis. For now, however, I wish to continue my observation wherein the teenage girls might be able to exert some sort of power over their environments by illustrating how this trope is manifested in film, with some slight naiveté, just to see what it opens up for these locations. I do so following a point made as well by Alison L. Bain, in her article “White Western Teenage Girls and Urban Space: Challenging Hollywood’s Representations”, where it’s stated that “...young women [on film] appropriate both public and private space, often transforming the one into the other.”⁶⁹ As Bain suggests, the ability to transform space from public to private and vice versa appears to extend beyond the mall in teen film, and examples can also be found within the other ‘public’ space common to the genre; the high school.

In *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, the leading teen girls are presented progressively, as wise beyond their years and actively pursuing and undertaking sexual experiences. During Stacy’s (Jennifer Jason Leigh) first day at High School - she is fifteen – she engages her friend and confidante Linda (Phoebe Cates) in rather intimate conversation over lunch. Upon revealing she has never given a blow job before, Linda passes Stacey a carrot and teaches her how to perform oral sex, in the middle of the busy lunchtime cafeteria. In doing so, the public space is again transformed into private space, where intimate exchanges between friends take centre stage freely. In *Sixteen Candles*, a similar, but more individual/personal transformation occurs, when we see Samantha (Molly Ringwald) fill in a personal sex test during class time, while she is surrounded by other students. Upon different question prompts on a piece of paper, ranging from if she has ever touched it to whether she has ever done it, and if no, who she would do it with, Samantha writes down her answers. Her fantasies coalesce with the realities of her surroundings, when she looks over her shoulder and catches Jake Ryan’s (Michael Schoeffling) eye, before quickly, appearing shy and embarrassed, returning to her paper, and noting down his name. She then attempts to pass the test onto her friend behind

⁶⁸ Anne Friedberg, “Les Flâneurs Du Mal (L)”, 425.

⁶⁹ Alison L. Bain, “White Western Teenage Girls and Urban Space”, 201.

her, by dropping it over her shoulder, at her friend's feet. This scene suggests Samantha is able to use this public space as her own private space - as space where she is free to convey confidential secrets about herself, even if she does so in a cautious manner. These exchanges of 'unofficial knowledge' and peer-to-peer education again attribute a certain level of agency to the teen girl on film within the high school, where they are represented not only as able to adapt their surroundings to their needs, but also as individuals who are confident in their active pursuit/exchange of 'sexual' knowledge and personal development.



Figure 18 - In *Fast Times*, Linda teaches Stacey how to perform oral sex on a carrot, during lunch in the school cafeteria.



Figure 19 - In *Sixteen Candles*, Samantha (centre left) fills out a personal sex test in class, and is unaware that Jake is watching her from behind.

All of this progressive 'action', however, is strongly negated by the camera's revelation to the audience, right from the start of both scenes, that the girls, as they discuss their 'private' in 'public', are being monitored by male counterparts. In *Fast Times*, the two

girls are unaware they are being observed throughout the ‘carrot lesson’ by a group of boys at a nearby table – even though the editing of the film ensures this is pointed out to the audience right from the start. When the boys eventually cheer and applaud the girls for their ‘performance’, the girls blush and burst into giggles, appearing to recognise (and enjoy) the boys’ awareness of the content of their exchange.



Figure 20 - The boys applaud the girls' 'performance' in *Fast Times*.

In *Sixteen Candles*, Samantha is unknowingly observed - stared at – throughout, by her future love interest, Jake Ryan, as she fills out the sex-test. When she drops the test behind her, for her friend, Jake leans over and slides it towards him underfoot. Having filled it out privately and ‘anonymously’, Samantha’s answers, her moments of private self-reflection/self-knowledge, are dropped directly into Jake’s possession, without her knowledge or consent. In both scenes, the boys thereby re-appropriate the content of the exchange, as though it were intended for them. These films suggest then, that boys can, or inevitably will, re-claim the girls’ public/private exchanges for their own (sexual) gratification. This again brings many contradictory suggestions into play; on the one hand, the audience is invited to laugh and enjoy the boys’ participation, because they ‘cheer’ on the girl characters (and push forward the narrative; we ‘want’ Jake to know Samantha likes him so that we can celebrate in his romantic pursuit of her), and on the other hand, it appears to act as a moral warning of sorts too in these films, where ‘girls need to be careful with what they share in public’ because it can be taken away from them, and this could lead to their public embarrassment (a line that is also stipulated in *Sixteen Candles* by the plotline that involves Samantha giving

her underwear to the Geek (Anthony Michael Hall), as a favour to validate his reputation, only to have it be publicly auctioned off by him, at her expense). Most importantly, however, I believe these inserts and framing structures (shots of the boys as onlookers function as ‘bookends’ in the editing of these scenes) serve to *reassure* the audience that the actions of the girls are being supervised, and that their outward sexual explorations are always being perceived and re-appropriated within a heterosexual structure, rather than allowing them to perform inwardly, for and amongst girls only (and by extension, denying any non-heterosexual exchanges that this would imply). These scenes illustrate that the power to transform space, from public to private and vice versa in these films, is always temporary for teenage girls on film; the spaces quickly ‘turn’ on the girls, confining, monitoring and regulating them instead.

Endless Stages, Endless Gazes....

This brings us back to previous points made in the first chapter, about the art direction and cinematography in these films, where teen girl bodies are framed (by the locations and the camera) in a strongly confining, limited and controlled way. The ‘on-looking’ group of boys in *Fast Times* re-emphasizes how all these locations are set up to accommodate scenarios constructed around looking, seeing and being seen. The boxes within boxes, the frames within frames, the limited mobility for the girls, all function to support one structural recurrence; girls are there to be looked at, like pictures within picture frames. The hallways in the high school act as runways, the changing rooms in the mall, with its curtains, like little stages, the podium in the gymnasium becomes a theatre, and the cafeteria becomes an arena. The girls in these films are endlessly ‘revealing’ themselves; whether or not they are performing to be seen, they are always being looked at.



Figures 21a and b - A scene in *Lucas* where cheerleaders perform for their peers illustrates that on film, the high school offers plenty of stages for girls to be gazed at.

Furthermore, the boys in these films are always represented as eager onlookers; whether they are applauding the girl's direct 'performance' (from the carrot lesson in *Fast Times*, to the cheerleading sequence in *Lucas*), observing the girl from afar (in, for instance, the classroom scene from *Sixteen Candles*, or in *Some Kind of Wonderful*), or spying on her through peepholes, to catch a glimpse of her nudity/body as she undresses/dresses/showers (a common generic trope in the more male oriented teen films/teen sex comedies from the 1980s, featured in titles such as *Private School*, *Class*, *The Last American Virgin*, *Porky's*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, and even *Fame*, where boys peep into the dancing girl's changing room), the boys are shown to enjoy looking at girls. Their readiness to see/look/gaze/spy on the girls is presented as 'normal' in teen films; the activity passes by unquestioned in these films, it is normalised because it is shown to be part of convention (both in the narrative worlds the films present, and within the genre), and the power dynamic that goes with it (whereby the boys have more active seeing powers, and the girls are just passively looked at) is consequently neutralised.



Figure 6 - A Peeping Tom perspective, in *Porky's*, illustrating a common trope in the genre where teen boys spy on teen girls, here in their locker room showers.

The neutralisation of this construction, where boys are actively looking and girls are passively being looked at, on film, is not only achieved through its continuous repetition within the genre, but also, as mentioned, at the narrative level (the locations often cater to this construction, and the teen girls are often represented as 'condoning' being looked at), *and* at the level of the camera 'eye', that readily takes on the boys' perspective through point of view shots - thereby equating the audience to this position. In *Porky's*, for example (see Figure 6), the viewer is automatically placed in the teen boy position, when the shot takes over his 'peephole perspective' through a point of view shot, as seen through a drain opening into their

locker room, at the high school. In this way, the viewer is automatically aligned with male desire, with male active viewing, and the construction of the ‘Peeping Tom’ perspective itself is broadened out to incorporate the audience, and hence made generally acceptable.

Even when the ‘Peeping Tom’ perspective becomes character fantasy, the camera, and the audience is aligned with the male’s subjective perspective. In *Fast Times*, a mentally subjective fantasy sequence is introduced and built up through an array of looks and gazes. The male gaze is presented as omnipresent, in group or individual form, at the high school, the mall, and even at the home, when the parents are away. In the sequence illustrated in figure 7a and b, showing the girls at the home, the camera first lingers on Linda and Stacey’s bodies as they lie sunbathing in their bikinis at the edge of the pool outside Stacey’s house. They lie low on the ground, allowing two boys, Mark (Brian Backer) and Mike (Robert Romanus), to literally look ‘upon’ their bodies from over the fence.



Figures 22a and b – In *Fast Times*, Linda and Stacey lie on display, as the boys look down upon them.

When Linda later gets up to sit at the end of the diving board, we see Bradley (Judge Reinhold) peek at her from behind the curtain inside the house, suggesting that the boys’ observations are coming at the girls from all directions. Bradley’s peeping leads him directly, and the audience too, into (what is later revealed as) a fantasy sequence. In this fantasy sequence, Linda dives into the pool, then comes out and walks towards Bradley, as she undoes her bikini top and reveals her breasts to him, and kisses Bradley, amidst a mist of water droplets. With the camera almost directly positioned to take on Brad’s perspective, it appears as though Linda is walking towards the audience, and revealing her breasts to them. Again, this aligns the viewer with the male gaze, and the male fantasy. But it also suggests the boy is actively able to create an imagined space, in which he commands the stage, and where he is able to ‘control’ the movements of the girl he admires. Even though it is ‘only’ a fantasy sequence, all power in this scene is attributed to the male perspective and to teen boy desire.



Figures 8a - d - Linda sits on the diving board, allowing Bradley to sneak a peek from inside the house, leading into a fantasy sequence where she approaches him and undresses, and where Bradley creates the space and controls the action, and the viewer is aligned to his subjective, mental perspective.

If we look at one of the opening scenes in *Private School*, it becomes clearer how the ‘neutralising’ of such an image construction is set up in teen film. The camera from the beginning shows us a shot from an implied Peeping Tom perspective (see Figure 9a), where we see a girl dressing herself in her room, and seductively stretching out her leg. The camera not only catches her image, but also her reflection in the mirror – a mirror positioned as though her very action is aimed at being ‘seen’, as though her dressing (or the vision of her moving body) is meant to cater to someone looking. This subtly suggests the girl is performing to be seen, and thus that she condones her own external observing. When the boys climb on top of one another (see Figure 9b), in order to spy into the girls’ bathroom, the top boy peeps into the window and gazes at a girl as she takes a shower. The audience is immediately positioned to take on his perspective – we see his point of view shot of her naked body - and the boy is then shown to take a photograph of her as she steps out of the shower (Figure 9c). The doubling of the camera here (both within and behind the frame) again aligns the audience with an active male gaze, suggesting it is all-pervasive, and capable of capturing. When the girl he is spying on catches a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror (Figure 9d), a game commences in which she plays with, and ultimately caters to, his observations. This scene, which presents in fact an extremely complex array of exchanged gazes and looks, of

seeing and pretending not to see, ultimately implies that the girls in these films are either unknowingly observed, or knowingly ‘happily’ observed, by which I mean, they are shown to actively condone their own objectified, desired status. These films do not present either option (unseen or acknowledged voyeurism) as creating any ‘serious’ problems for the characters; there is no sense of victimisation, no perpetrator, no crime implied by this construction in the teen film genre.



Figures 9a - d (left to right, top to bottom) – Selected shots from the opening Peeping Tom scene in *Private School*.

Of course, the essence of this construction was already laid bare by Laura Mulvey in 1975. In her renowned and pioneering essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, Mulvey introduced her theory of recurring structures of seeing in cinema, using psychoanalysis and semiotics as the basis for her observations. Mulvey suggested the very fabric of cinema is intricately interwoven with constructions of seeing and desire. The pleasure we (the audience) take in looking, our *scopophilia*, defines how film incorporates structures of seeing; and the resulting *gaze* that is constructed on screen to cater to our desires is, inherently, a male one, and one that contributes to the sustenance of a patriarchal hegemony. Upon analysing recurring seeing structures on film, Mulvey writes:

...[T]he look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content [...]. In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.⁷⁰

This split between active/male and passive/female, wherein the female appearance is coded to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*, I would like to argue, not only applies to the adult women Mulvey addresses in her article (she analyses Hitchcock's representation of women in his films, and films featuring Marlene Dietrich, in order to establish her perspective on Classical Hollywood Cinema), but also appears to apply to the representation of teenage girls in 1980s teen film. If we look at the aforementioned examples from *Porky's*, *Fast Times* and *Private School*, we see that teenage boys are the active lookers, whilst teenage girls are presented as passive sexual objects, there 'to-be-looked-at'.

In her article, Mulvey suggested the male *gaze* functions at three different levels; i) within the narrative, where the male character is repeatedly shown to look at the female body, ii) within the camera eye, that readily takes on his perspective, and iii) within the audience, where the male spectator is therefore assumed to be dominant (or, more controversially, all-encompassing). This triple-layered gaze is driven, she argues, by male desires; in particular, an enquiring eye intended to explore the woman's 'lack' (her absent penis symbolises a castration threat)⁷¹ that ultimately requires to be (re)solved. The examples from *Porky's*, *Fast Times* and *Private School* all contain observed images of naked teen girl bodies, and suggest their nudity is directed at the gratification of male sexual desire. But the exploratory viewing of the female, teen girl body, in order to investigate her 'lack' is by extension, another aspect of the teen boy 'Peeping Tom' gaze.

⁷⁰ Laura Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema.", *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), 11.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.



Figure 10 - A layered 'gaze' in *Lucas*, exploring the teen girl 'lack'.

In Figure 10, for example, we see a quadruple layered gaze (the three layers Mulvey introduced, and then an additional camera prop, which additionally extends and reiterates the boy's gaze on screen) exploring the crotches of cheerleaders as they perform their routine, in *Lucas*. In this shot, the 'extended gaze through camera' seems, literally, to be investigating the female genitalia, in order to identify her possible 'lack'. But in doing so, the boy and his camera are also almost literally 'invading' the female genitals as well – the camera not only extends the gaze, and makes it more explicit, but it also acts as a phallic prop that seems prepped and ready to enter female territory. This shot again places all dominant action (of gazing/observing, of investigating/exploring, of capturing, of invading, of phallic power) with the boy character, and the male gaze, as well as reminding the viewer that the boy does carry a phallus, as opposed to the implied female 'lack' within the frame.

Extensions of seeing, in the shape of (phallic) props, are commonly used in the teen film genre to amplify and reiterate the power of the gaze, making it even more explicit and confining; especially in scenes where the teen girls are unaware of their onlookers, where the boys are mere distant voyeurs, as opposed to Peeping Toms, and in scenes where the girls are not necessarily exposed or made additionally vulnerable through their nudity. In *Sixteen Candles*, we see the Geek (Anthony Michael Hall) and his friends look at Samantha through a pair of gaze extending, phallic, night goggles at the school dance, capturing her in an enclosed frame, with his very vision. In *Can't Buy Me Love*, Ronald catches sight of Cindy's (Amanda Peterson) distress at the mall, by looking at her through a telescope, as the camera again switches to his point of view, and presents a frame that confines her movements. In *Smooth*

Talk, Arnold Friend's (Treat Williams) 'dark' gaze is stressed by the presence of his sunglasses. At the bar, where Connie and her friend Laura (Margaret Welsh) have come to meet boys, we see Arnold Friend staring at them through the window. As Connie plays a song on the jukebox and dances her way back to the bar, his gaze at her is captured and framed by the window he looks through from the outside. The window appears to double the cinema screen, a screen that fragments/confines her body within smaller, visually outlined, boxes. In this frame, Connie is unknowingly "...isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualized..."⁷², as the darkened male gaze upon her becomes increasingly threatening, and powerful.



Figure 11 - Ronald captures and frames Cindy with his sight, and looks at her through a phallic telescope, in *Can't Buy Me Love*.



Figure 12 - The Geek captures Samantha's image with his night-goggles, in *Sixteen Candles*.

⁷² Laura Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema." *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), 13.



Figure 13 – In *Smooth Talk*, Arnold Friend looks, through sunglasses (unseen in picture), at a captured/framed Connie, dancing inside, as though on another cinema screen.

These ‘confining’ gazes and types of extended visions act, in a way, as a form of punishment for the teen girl’s appearance. Laura Mulvey argued that the female ‘lack’ discovered by the gaze can only be countered in three ways; through fetishism, whereby a replacement phallus reassures rather than disconcerts the male spectator, as present in the figure of the vamp for instance, through the ‘saving’ of the female figure within the narrative (in which she takes on her ‘rightful’ position in the patriarchal order through marriage and/or motherhood), or lastly, through sadism/punishment for her ‘lack’. For the figure of the teenage girl, the first two options, fetishism and marriage, are less obvious solutions. (Even though close-ups do tend to present fetish objects, such as earrings and lipsticks, and most narratives do conclude with her attaining a boyfriend, leading her to a prospect of marriage, but I will back to this later in this chapter and later on in this thesis). Punishment/sadism, however, is presented as a viable solution, when we recognise the aforementioned controlling ‘confinement’ of the teen girl movements and actions as such. And these films often present other ‘punishments’ as a result of the male gaze too; in *Sixteen Candles*, Jake’s gaze at Samantha at a school dance leaves her incapable of uttering even a single word – she is struck dumb - and Steff (James Spader) suspended gazes at Andie in *Pretty in Pink* make her demonstrably uncomfortable, and often forces her to flee the scene. In *Smooth Talk*, Arnold Friend’s gaze ultimately leads to an extreme form of punishment; a rape, in which Connie (Laura Dern) is forced to surrender her virginity to him.

But these are the more extreme examples. In general, the punishment is much more subtle for the representation of the teenage girl. As we have seen in the previous chapter, in teen film narrative ‘punishment’ most often works together with the settings of the film, the

three principal locations, to capture, confine and ‘possess’ the girl, so that she may cater to the teen boy’s desire and advantage. In the gentle romantic comedy *Some Kind of Wonderful*, Keith (Eric Stoltz) is in love with popular girl Amanda Jones (Lea Thompson). His gazes at her are perhaps not as aggressive and possessive as those of her unsympathetic and jealous boyfriend Hardy (Craig Sheffer), but they are shown to be powerful none the less. Keith is an aspiring artist, and his gaze allows him to literally capture and ‘possess’ Amanda, when he draws a portrait of her in his notebook, and later paints her portrait (without her knowledge) and hangs the resulting framed picture in an art gallery. But mostly, and this is the key point I want to make in this section, his gaze is supported through the cinematic techniques and especially the settings in the film, in order to confine her image in almost unnoticeable ways. If we look at a scene in which he admires her from afar, for instance, illustrated in Figures 14a to d, Keith’s gaze is first securely established in the opening shot of the sequence, and then, through a cut to an over-the-shoulder/near point of view shot, given prolonged weight for the viewer, as the camera lingers upon an approaching Amanda. An extended back and forth sequence follows, in which the unknowing, approaching Amanda is observed and contained by Keith’s gaze, and this is supported by the editing, the camera distance and the setting (note the sports’ field/chain link fence that literally holds her prisoner within the frame in Figure 14c). As pensive, non-diegetic music overlays the soundtrack, the communication of Keith’s mood even surpasses the conversation that Amanda has with her Physical Education teacher for the viewer; Amanda remains muted, confined, passive and unaware of her surveillance, throughout the scene.



Figures 14a - d - Keith's gaze, working with the settings and the camera, confines and mutes Amanda Jones, in a scene from *Some Kind of Wonderful*.

The dominant locations in these films therefore are shown to play a key role in the girl's 'punishment', then, by creating endless confining boxes, stages, theatres, podiums and arenas where the girls' passive *to-be-looked-at-ness* is constructed and contained. But it is not just the linear construction of the settings that supports this; it is also the generic events and activities that these locations supply, that promote the male gaze. In the genre of the teen film, many specific events and activities are featured again and again, across locations, across public or private delineations, that all invite and uphold the male gaze; from the prom, with its prom-pictures, centralized dance floors, and its prom-queen elections, to yearbook photo shoots, to house parties, to sporting events (where spectators look down upon the field, and the cheerleaders perform), to their shopping and trying on outfits, or working as uniformed waitresses at the mall, girls are there *to-be-looked-at* by boys. It's quite the spectacle.

The Panopticon and Surveillance

The gaze that Mulvey introduced in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in 1975, however, only addresses half of the gazes at play in 1980s teen films. The teenage girl is, after all, a figure in transition – she is in-between childhood and womanhood, she is both and she is neither at the same time, she is daughter as well as potential girlfriend, she is in a continual process of becoming... But the gaze Mulvey analyses is essentially focussed on set, fully

grown, fully formed, female adult figures. Mulvey's gaze is therefore implied to be inherently sexually oriented (with its psychoanalytic base); it takes place between a male, active pursuer, and a female, passive but 'willing' object of desire. Given that the teenage girl figure *is* still partially child/daughter, though, and still in transition, it would appear that it is not necessarily just a sexual gaze that controls and confines her movements, within the three dominant locations, but that she is also subjected to a fatherly, patriarchal and authoritarian gaze; one that monitors and corrects, as well as confines, her movements. If we return to the observing shopkeeper who shushes away the three lead girls in *Smooth Talk*, for instance, we find that this gaze is not predominantly exploring a 'lack', or resulting in a fetish or a 'saving', of the teen girl figure. The gaze here is not presented as sexual. It is rather one that 'corrects' behaviour, it is a gaze of surveillance, of maintaining the continuance of a particular cultural and societal code.

"Our society is not of spectacle, but of surveillance"⁷³, Michel Foucault wrote in his book *Discipline and Punish* in 1975 – the same year in which Mulvey's article was first published. It would seem fruitful, therefore, to explore this other angle of seeing, in relation to the representation of the teenage girl; after all, she may be half sexual spectacle, half-woman (she is becoming-woman), but she is also half 'growing member of society/civilisation', she is a 'citizen in formation'. In Foucault's book, we find, in Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland's words, a "different account of vision"⁷⁴. Foucault's interests lay with exposing invisible power structures in contemporary, Western society at large; his work was devoted to understanding underlying ideologies, the hidden, 'unconscious' super-structures that inform our culture and society, but in a way that deconstructed the "power relationships inherent in the discourse of psychoanalysis"⁷⁵. When Foucault examined the power dynamics and constructions of public institutions, Foucault invoked Jeremy Bentham's 18th century proposal for a new prison structure, entitled the *Panopticon*. Foucault describes the structure as follows:

Bentham's *Panopticon* is the architectural figure of this composition. We know the principle on which it is based: at the periphery, and annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is then pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of

⁷³ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 2nd Edition, 1995), 217.

⁷⁴ Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland. *Studying Contemporary American Film* (USA: Bloomsbury, 2002): 261.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible.⁷⁶

It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, or hierarchical organization, of disposition of centres and channels of power, of definition of the instruments and modes of intervention of power, which can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons.... It can in fact be integrated into any function.⁷⁷

What Foucault is describing here, leading into an analysis of public institutions in Western society, is a structure – I would call it an *archistruktur*⁷⁸ – that informs a wide range of institutional buildings dependent on a particular hierarchical organization of power; where an *unseen surveyor* (and ultimately, possibly even just an implied one) is placed in a central tower, from where they can observe all outward cells. The mere suggestion of their constant surveillance will already invoke a sense of control and self-confinement in the movements of the ‘inmates’. This presents hugely commanding relations of power and domination within hierarchical organizations, and hence within our society. But I am interested in the point where Foucault argues this structure can “in fact be integrated into any function”, because it seems to me that his idea is formidably relevant to cinema – an industry so dependent on unseen seers, and so powerful in how it commonly reproduces (or rather just ‘produces’?) acceptable, normalised behaviour; after all, we could ask is the screen mirroring the audience, or does the audience mirror the screen? Particularly for teen film, a genre that caters to an

⁷⁶ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*, 200.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁷⁸ The term *archistruktur*, as much as I would like to claim it as my own, is in fact used commonly used in the street (it has an entry in the urban dictionary) to describe the art and design of buildings, and in the computer world, to describe a way a computer system is organised and integrated. I think it is interesting that these two definitions come together in one word; it makes it particularly acute in describing Foucault’s idea, as well as implying some kind of inherent ‘soul’ or character in the building-structure that raises it above mere architecture.

audience on the cusp of becoming ‘active citizens’, this needs to be further explored. But for now, I want to illustrate how Foucault’s *Panopticon*, its power dynamic and hierarchical organisation, appears to inform the representation of the three dominant locations, the high school, the home and the mall, in 1980s American teen film, because it is the *surveying gaze* that fuels the other half of the ‘looks’ on the teen girl body.

If we return to the opening shots of locations in the teen films that I analysed in chapter 1, what we notice is that the structures they imply closely represent the descriptions that the *Panopticon* offered. Each building, the high school, the home, and the mall, has a series of outward cells (classrooms, bedrooms, or shops), that can be accessed and looked into from a central platform (the hallways, the mallways and in all three, a central hall or staircase). If we look again at the shots that introduce the home and the high school in *Sixteen Candles*, for instance, we notice that the building not only fragments their cells into cells, into cells (through intricate window-paning that suggests an almost prison-like confinement), but that both buildings wrap around a kind of central, authoritative tower.



Figures 15a and b – The facades of the home and the high school in *Sixteen Candles* both present cell-like structures with an authoritative central ‘tower’ at its heart.

In *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, the opening shot presents the Ridgemont mall to the audience, even before the title of the film appears. The facade of this building stands out clearly from the surrounding night sky, because it features a large glass front/dome that is brightly lit from within. Again, the very design of the building introduces a cell-like structure (the dome itself appears covered in cells) wrapped around a central 'tower'. As the film cuts to the inside of the mall, the opening sequence, underlying the titles, presents a music-driven montage sequence that introduces all the different characters to the audience, through a range of connecting looks and gazes, exchanged between them. Straight away, the mall then is introduced to the audience as a location driven by seeing and being seen, where the 'inmates' within it are connected through vision and surveillance. The opening sequence introduces both boys and girls, and implies, rather progressively, that both genders are looking at and seeing one another. But as the music brings the sequence to a close, it is one particular boy, later introduced as Mike Damone (Robert Romanus) who is followed by the camera as he walks through the mall, eyeing up girls. He then enters and moves up in the central glass elevator, from where he, briefly, turns around over both his shoulders to look out over the whole mall. This glass elevator appears to allow him to rise up within the 'central tower', from where, relatively unseen, he is shown to survey the entire mall.



Figure 16 - The Ridgemont Mall facade, with its brightly lit, cell-inducing central dome, in *Fast Times*.



Figure 17 – Inside, Mike Damone rises up 'the tower' in a glass elevator, from where he is shown to oversee the whole mall.

Since Mike Damone is the first character to be followed at greater length in *Fast Times*, his presence at the mall is given additional weight, as well as a more powerful status, through his position as central surveyor. In Foucault's description of the *Panopticon*, he refers to its contemporary use as follows: "The seeing-machine was once a sort of dark room into which individuals spied; it has become a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole."⁷⁹ I think the mall, as it was constituted in 1980s American culture does indeed act as a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole, but within its representation on film, 'society as a whole' almost always takes the shape of single, individual *male*. It is surprising that Foucault makes little reference to gender in his text, when, after all, the hierarchical organisation that he addresses is essentially, in Western society, a patriarchal one.

In her article "Pretty in Pink: John Hughes Reinscribes Daddy's Girls in Homes and Schools", Ann De Vaney also observed recurring structures of surveillance in popular 1980s teen film:

Another Foucauldian issue, surveillance, is at play in Hughes' teen films. Most of his narratives are set in safe spaces and give special emphasis to safe geographies where teens are under surveillance – classrooms, gyms, locker rooms, libraries, shop

⁷⁹ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 2nd Edition, 1995), 207.

classrooms, halls and lockers, principals' and vice principals' offices, bathrooms, janitor's storerooms, teen bedrooms and kitchens.⁸⁰

What she seems to be addressing here – even though she does not analyse the representations of the locations in a very detailed way – is exactly my point of analysis as well; the way these films present their locations is superficially, seemingly teen-friendly (and shows the locations to be individually appropriable, as we have seen in the opening of this chapter), but underneath that, these films present the spaces as fundamentally rooted in a *Panopticon*-like archistructure, catering to male/'daddy's' surveillance. Because even though Mike Damone in *Fast Times* may be a boy/peer, most surveyors introduced in teen films are adult men. From the shopkeepers, to teachers, janitors and principals at the school, from guidance counsellors, to bosses and security guards, from parking attendants and ticket-collectors to presidents, and of course, the all-encompassing fathers; authority figures in 1980s teen film are deeply and effectively male – more specifically, they are consistently middle-class, white, suburban, Midwestern and middle-aged men.



Figures 18a - d – (left to right, top to bottom) Ray Walston as Mr. Hand in *Fast Times*, Paul Gleeson as Richard Vernon in *The Breakfast Club*, Jeffrey Jones as Mr. Rooney in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* and Jerry Orbach as Baby's father in *Dirty Dancing*.

⁸⁰ Ann De Vaney, "Pretty in Pink – John Hughes Reinscribes Daddy's Girl", 207.



Figure 19 – And John Capelos, as the janitor in *The Breakfast Club*, claims he is "the eyes and ears of this place".

Ann Devaney suggests these figures appear primarily as "...armed against burgeoning sexuality and 'on the lookout' for deviance..."⁸¹ in these films. Even though I wholeheartedly concur (and it seems an unlikely a coincidence that the fathers of the more 'sexually' active dancing teen girls in 1980s teen films, such as *Dirty Dancing*, *Footloose* and *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*, all fulfil strong patriarchal roles in their society, as a doctor, a preacher and an army colonel respectively), I would personally add that the adult men are above all shown to monitor and refrain the girls from threatening the continuance of patriarchal rule (through their sexuality or otherwise); the way the shopkeeper in *Smooth Talk* urges the girls to stop giggling and flirting with boys, for instance, carries with it the connotation that they are not allowed to 'loosely' pursue boys. In *Just One of the Guys*, Mr. Raymaker refuses to submit lead girl Terry's article for an internship at a newspaper, choosing instead to submit articles by boys, and thereby curtails her ambitions. In *Fast Times*, when Stacy has to have an abortion towards the end of the film, it is her brother Bradley who, in the absence of a father and a partner, drives her to and from the clinic and 'chaperones' the process, thereby ensuring she does not become a single mother. And in *Sixteen Candles*, in a rather extraordinary final scene, after Jake has come to the local church to meet Samantha, her father (Paul Dooley) is shown to give his approval of 'the boy' Jake, before Samantha gets into his car for a date. The sequence not only posits Samantha as a bride at the church (Jake is initially under the impression she was there to get married, and she carries her sister's 'forgotten' veil), but ultimately reassures both Samantha and the audience that her father condones their union, as though he has given her away at the altar, and passed her on from daughterhood into future wife-hood, before she rides off with Jake. The film ends when Samantha's 'marriage', and the

⁸¹ Ibid., 204.

continuance of patriarchal rule, consummated with a kiss. It is a neo-conservative scenario indeed, where the girl is allowed to date and be sexual in order to become a woman, as long as she remains within the patriarchal ideal; the boy may take her away as his bride, as long as her father has given his consent, or in this case, his thumbs-up.



Figure 20 – In *Sixteen Candles*, Samantha resembles a bride as she waits at the church with her sister’s forgotten veil, unaware that Jake (Michael Schoeffling) is coming to pick her up.



Figure 21 - Samantha gestures to her father: "This is the boy....", as they walk towards his car.



Figure 2223 - Father's approval/consent is granted to both Samantha *and* the audience, before she leaves with Jake to form a new union.

The relationship between the teen girl and her father as represented in 1980s American cinema is very complex, and I shall return to it at length in chapter 4. However, what this example shows here, is that both within *and outside* the three dominant locations, the teen girls appear subject to controlling surveillance; and in the very fact that it is assumed to be everywhere, and accepted to be everywhere, lies again the normalisation/neutralisation of this construction. So whether the girl is looked at with desire, and confined or punished by a boy's gaze, or observed, monitored, corrected and 'saved' by surveying adult men, the girls in these films are represented and maintained to "legitimate a female role that is convenient for the continuation of a certain way of men ruling."⁸² Any progressive, transformative powers the teen girls may have conjured over their surroundings seem then to be outdone by an underlying superstructure that insists on conforming their behaviour to the traditional and conservative gender norms that inform the very ways these teen girls are looked at on screen.

⁸² Ann De Vaney, "Pretty in Pink – John Hughes Reinscribes Daddy's Girl", 204.