



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

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

Wilkinson, M.C.

Publication date
2013

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Wilkinson, M. C. (2013). *Wonder girls: Undercurrents of resistance in the representation of teenage girls in 1980s American cinema*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

03. The Teen Girl Gaze

Representing Averted and Veiled Desire

Over the course of the previous two chapters, I have aimed to illustrate that the dominant structures of representation in 1980s teen film – taking the three recurring settings of the home, the high school and the mall as a starting point – cater to uphold a particularly conservative and patriarchal ideal, wherein the movements of the teenage girl (and therefore the prospective woman) remain limited and controlled. The representations of teenage girls in these films, at first sight, keep their bodies confined and ready to-be-looked-at on screen, as either sexual objects for peeping boys, or as dutiful daughters moderated by an array of ‘powerful’ surveying father figures. In order to examine whether this decade also provided opportunities for ‘rebellion’, however, (by which I mean other alternative, more progressive models that paved the way for the teen girl ‘agency’ so visible in the 1990s - a tendency that I map out a greater length in my introduction), it is important to consider the teen girl character from a less polarised perspective. The representations of the teenage girl might continuously position her as passive, in opposition to the ‘active’ boy/male, but through the very fact that her figure often takes on the primary subject position in these films, it seems likely the film language invites the audience to empathise/identify with her as well. So where and how does this happen? The alignment that Laura Mulvey suggests to be evident, between the audience and the dominant, male, ‘active’ perspective, happens both within the narrative and in the camera, through the triple nature of the male gaze and the strong enunciation of the male point of view. But does the teen girl have her own ‘point of view’ in 1980s teen films? Do we share her perspective at times? And what do we see the teen girl looking at? How does this ‘teen girl gaze’ relate her representation to notions of desire, power and/or ‘active’ agency?

In his article ‘Don’t Look Now: The Male Pin-up’, Richard Dyer explores the structures of seeing involved with looking at men, in film and photographs. In the opening of his article, he describes a common trope in cinema, where an exchange of glances and looks takes place between a boy and a girl:

We have all seen, countless times, that scene of *Young Love*, where, in the canteen, at school, in church, the Boy and the Girl first see each other. The precise way it is done is very revealing. We have a close-up of him looking off-camera, followed by one of her looking downwards (in a pose that has, from time immemorial, suggested maidenliness). Quite often, we move back and forth between these two close-ups, so

that is very definitely established that he looks at her and she is looked at. Then, she may look up and off camera, and we may go briefly to the boy still looking – but it is only briefly, for no sooner is it established that she sees him than we must be assured that she at once averts her eyes. She has seen him, but she doesn't look at him as he looks at her – having seen him, she quickly resumes being the one who is looked at.⁸³

Within such an exchange, Dyer suggests, there is room then, albeit ever so briefly, for a returning female, teen girl 'look'. Even though it never attains equal footing, this countering girl 'glance' does provide a brief break from the active, and all pervasive, male gaze. In the teen romantic comedies of the 1980s, this type of scene is a key structural occurrence, and it is here that we first encounter the teen girl glancing/looking (if not gazing) at the boy she desires, and are invited to share her perspective. I wish to argue, here, that the structural recurrence (taken collectively) of this brief instance actually indicates there might be *more* opportunity, *more* room, *more* space for resistance to the male gaze than Dyer proposes. It is at this starting point that we can begin to look at the teen girl gaze and its potential.

If we return to the scene in *Sixteen Candles*, for example, where Jake Ryan stares at Samantha in class as she privately fills out a sex test, there is an instance of her glancing back at him that follows the exact exchange that Richard Dyer describes. The scene first establishes Jake's gaze at Samantha, but as she is shown to consider whom she would sleep with if "she had to do it with someone", we see her tentatively - as though in doubt, she bits her lip - glance back over her shoulder, ever so briefly, at him, and the camera cuts to a point of view shot from her perspective. As soon as she appears to catch his eye – after Samantha's point-of-view shot of Jake, not pictured in the illustrating stills below - she averts her gaze, and rubs her chin on her shoulder, as though that were the intention for her movement. The camera cuts to a front close-up of Samantha, and as she returns to her 'test', appearing flustered and embarrassed, Jake's gaze is re-established as the dominant and pervasive one:

⁸³ Richard Dyer, "Don't Look Now: The Male Pin-Up" reprinted in *The Sexual Subject – A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, edited by Screen (London: Routledge, 1992), 265.



Figures 1a - f – In *Sixteen Candles* (read stills left to right), a shot sequence shows an exchange of looks/glances between Jake Ryan (Michael Schoeffling) and Samantha (Molly Ringwald).

The most common instance of the teen girl ‘looking’ then, seems to be bookended (like the re-appropriation of public space in the canteen in *Fast Times*) by ‘reassuring’ shots that affirm the *real gaze* and its male propriety. But it has to be noted that we *do* see a teen girl looking here, at the object of her affection; her desires are enunciated and communicated within this sequence, and this in itself illustrates that such ‘normalised’ constructions – here in the shape of an actual exchange – can and do support the opportunity for a counter-acting voice (even though, admittedly, it is perhaps not quite a *force* yet; a glance or look is after all not quite a gaze) that redeems the teen girl somewhat, even if only briefly, from the realm of an entirely passive, observed/objectified state.

Over the course of the 1980s, the teen film genre did provide some other opportunities for teen girl looking and gazing within the teen film genre. Some girl gazes even occur from a distance, and pass by unnoticed by the observed object (the boy) within the narrative, thereby

following the more voyeuristic setup that is generally associated with Mulvey's male gaze. In *Better Off Dead*, for instance, we see 'new girl next door', French exchange student Monique (Diane Franklin), as she gazes out of her window at her neighbour boy Lane Meyer (John Cusack), who is unaware of her presence.



Figures 2a - f – A selection of stills from a sequence in *Better Off Dead* that presents a female voyeuristic gaze, from out of a window above, where the boy that she observes, who remains unaware of the gaze directed at him, becomes the object.

The sequence shows us a shot of Monique staring out of her bedroom window, as the camera proceeds to cut back and forth between her point of view (on Lane coming out of his house and placing ski-equipment in his car) and shots of her smiling at what she sees. Although this sequence appears to attribute a great deal of activity and power to its teen girl subject, there are several points to be made about Monique's particular gaze that do set it apart strongly from its 'captivating' male counterparts (such as the one presented in the *Sixteen Candles*

sequence). As soon as the camera cuts to an inside shot of the bedroom, after Lane drives off, the frame shows us Monique as she moves away from her viewing position at the window. As she steps back, she ‘unveils’ herself, by uncovering from the sheer fabric curtains that previously enwrapped her (see Figures 2e and 2f). In doing so, she reveals herself to the audience in a tomboy-like state; she wears a large, unfeminine shirt, and a baseball cap, and has her hair pinned up beneath it. Throughout the film, Monique is presented to the audience as a tomboy; she fixes cars, is good at sports and only came to America because she wanted to visit the baseball stadium of her favourite team. Moreover, she is also presented as foreign, and she cons her host family and school into believing she doesn’t speak English, underpinning that she perhaps doesn’t quite understand the American language/‘code’. Such narrative elements appear to account, in a way, for her gender-bending activities, and her gazing at Lane. But the figure of the teen girl tomboy is tremendously complex, and I will come back to her (and Monique) at much greater length in chapter five, when I discuss gender and performance. For now, it is important to understand that the shot in Monique’s bedroom that reveals her, after we have seen her gazing out of the window at Lane, strongly establishes her as a tomboy through her appearance and thereby disavows some of the ‘power’ that the teen girl character might have gained through the gaze, because she is presented as an uncategorizable, undefinable, half girl/half boy.

But the ‘veiling’ of Monique also fulfils another purpose. In her writings on the *masquerade* and *the veil*, where Mary Ann Doane explores an in-depth analysis of female desire, subjectivity and its relation to the female subject/object on film, Doane introduces the vision of the close-up of Marlene Dietrich’s face in Josef von Sternberg’s *The Scarlet Empress*. She suggests Marlene’s veiled face becomes a second screen-like surface on film that reveals and obscures, provokes, seduces and rejects all at the same time. Doane writes:

The veil serves as a form of protection – against light, heat, and, of course, the gaze.... To take the veil is to become a nun, to seclude oneself in a convent... [The] veil is characterised by its opacity, its ability to fully block the gaze. When it is activated in the service of the representation of the seductive power of femininity, on the other hand, it simultaneously conceals and reveals, provoking the gaze.⁸⁴

⁸⁴Mary Ann Doane, “Veiling over Desire” in *Femmes Fatales: Film and the Masquerade, Theorizing the Female Spectator* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 48-49.

The complexities of the image that Mary Ann Doane introduces here, whereby the veil manages to ‘protect’ from the gaze, yet provoke it, yet also deny its bearer a sexual drive, brings into play various ideas that can be applied (albeit it loosely) to the image of Monique in *Better Off Dead* as well. If the veil can protect the woman from the gaze, can it not also strip the female gaze beneath it, of its powers? A protective shield would, after all, appear to work in both directions – whereas it may protect the woman wearing it from the male gaze, it can also avert the force of the female gaze away from the observed man/boy. Additionally, the veil positions Monique as a ‘secluded nun’ here, thereby reassuring the audience that her gaze is perhaps not sexually desiring in nature (even though, of course, it *is*, and this illustrates just how complex the imagery is). And as Monique reveals herself from underneath her veil, the audience is above all provoked to gaze at *her*, again, to figure out who she is and what she is, and whether she has a phallus (this is additionally motivated by her tomboy status), thereby re-establishing the ‘natural order of things’, wherein woman/girl is there to-be-looked-at. I would also personally add, that alongside the nun-imagery provoked by the veil, the white, sheer covering of Monique’s figure here appears to foreshadow her prospective ‘bridal state’ with regards to Lane; an image that re-establishes her inevitable return to a more conservative, patriarchal order. In these four ways, the shot that has Monique veiled by the sheer curtain ultimately undoes the powers attributed to her, through her gaze at the beginning of this sequence.

Alongside all of this, we mustn’t forget that Lane (John Cusack), the perceived, desired object in this sequence, is far from passive. He is observed loading sporting equipment, which doubly connects him to physical activity, into his car - a symbol of movement and virility - before driving off. In “Don’t Look Now: The Male Pinup”, Richard Dyer writes: “...women do not such much look at men as watch them...”⁸⁵. Dyer thereby suggests that the female gaze/look (or queer gaze/look) must be set apart from the male gaze, because it is merely observational; it ‘observes’ men doing, achieving, moving, or otherwise being involved in activity, which counters any passivity that the ‘traditional’ gaze might induce. Dyer illustrates that the image of the desirable male, in film and photography, always connotes activity through hardness, tightness, muscularity and poses that suggest movement, if not through the representation of ‘actual’ activity on film. Because of this characteristic, the image of man can never be gazed at in the same way as woman. Unlike the female, passive object-like state (they are there ‘to-be-looked-at’, Laura Mulvey’s construction exemplified in

⁸⁵ Richard Dyer, “Don’t Look Now: The Male Pin-Up”, 267.

the previous two chapters), the male figure evades any passivity through his embodying of a perennial “potential for action”, and “promise of activity”⁸⁶. In *Better Off Dead*, and in most other instances of teen girl looking in teen film, the boys perceived are always associated with action and activity, whether it be through their sport activities (football players watched by cheerleaders, for instance, or dancing boys observed by their girl partners), their demonstration of strength and ability (Stacey admiring Damone as he opens a locker by banging it with his fist in *Fast Times*), or their independent movement in and related to vehicles, as was suggested through various examples in chapter one.

At the very beginning and the tail end of the decade, examples of teen girl looking on screen are at their most powerful and most different, yet here too the films present structures around the teen girl gaze that obscure and redirect any possible agency that may be derived from it. In *Mermaids* (1990) we see Charlotte’s (Winona Ryder) stare intensify, as she catches the ‘vision’ of a romantic prospect through the windshield of their approaching car. In the first shot, we see the car move towards the camera and ground to a jilting halt, before the camera cuts to Charlotte’s point of view. Because we see *her seeing* the boy first - and this shot has her moving towards the camera and places her centrally within the frame - the scene establishes her as an active seer; it gives her gaze movement, focus and force, and this places the act of teen girl looking prominently at the start and the heart of the action. Her point-of-view shot then reveals that her looked-at object is Joe (Michael Schoeffling), whom she sees through a windshield that reflects a sun glare, as a darkened silhouette.



⁸⁶ Ibid., 269-270.



Figures 3a - d - In *Mermaids*, Charlotte's (Winona Ryder) gaze is thwarted and redirected in a variety of ways, including by the addition of/redirection through her mother's gaze in the frame...

Although Joe is passively standing/waiting in this moment (and his eyes, obscured through the backlight, are denied their own gaze), the dirtied windshield and glare act as a sort of veil to Charlotte's gaze here (see figure 3a and 3b), again stripping it from some of its force. The dialogue proceeds to reveal quickly, when her mother (Cher) introduces the family to Joe, that Charlotte wants to become a nun – a line that, in an act of back-directed commentary, de-sexualises any weight the gaze might have had (but it must be noted that her gaze *did* suggest sexual desire to begin with).

The sunlight that wraps around the back of Joe in Charlotte's point-of-view shot turns his figure into almost a two-dimensional silhouette or outline, whereby he becomes a mere suggestion of a man/figure, rather than an actual, 'active' representation of a man. This again undoes the powers of the gaze somewhat (it degrades the object to 'inactive' and therefore to an 'unreal/lesser' masculinity), but it also makes the figure of Joe more passive, as though Charlotte's gaze is able to emasculate his image – and this would empower her gaze. At the same time, the shot creates a parallel between her image of Joe and that of her father, whom we have seen in a mentally subjective flashback that took place during a solar eclipse, where, in her point of view, he too stood out against back light as a silhouette only, as well. This repetition establishes a motif that runs throughout the film, where Joe is equated to the absent father that the character of Charlotte longs for, but importantly, this connection again de-sexualises the image in a way. The sequence is rife with contradiction; in Charlotte's look, Joe is presented as inactive (and therefore possibly as less of a man), as vapid (a mere outline), and as a stand-in replacement for her father, but all of this endorses as well as complicates the validity of the male/sexual objectification that Charlotte's gaze brings into play. The last aspect, of Jake as a stand-in father figure, is a particularly layered one since it provokes further analysis over various psychoanalytic aspects of the storyline, but it also

unconsciously invites a third party into the gaze-play, in the character of the mother (as would be expected in an Oedipal triangle) – her involvement is played out on the level of looking and gazing over the rest of the sequence.

As the scene progresses, Charlotte remains seated in the car, while her mother and Joe converse, and is struck silent in apparent awe of Joe (she is muted by his appearance throughout their first encounters, as though she were perhaps struck dumb as punishment for her gaze/visions of him). Her mother then leads Joe up the porch, asking him to fix the swing. When Charlotte gets out of the car to continue to observe them, her mother (now part of the scene/her point-of-view shots) is shown, in an odd re-direction of Charlotte's gaze, to admire Joe's behind and then turns around to 'perform' her satisfaction, on the stage of the raised porch; she strikes a seductive, playful and confident pose aimed at the gaze of her on-looking daughter (who replies with an eye-roll, and is thereby literally made to avert her gaze). All the while, we see Charlotte observing her mother and Joe, as she remains silent, with her face cut off on screen by the roof of the car (in Figure 3d, we see how the shot literally strips her of a mouth, thereby visually muting her onscreen). In this way, the proximity to Joe/the object, and the communicative force of the mother's adult and sexually more confident (or 'experienced'?) gaze, ultimately becomes the more powerful and commanding player in the scene, outranking Charlotte's silent observation. The mother's gaze extends, redirects and replaces Charlotte's gaze, and in this more mature, playful and less forlorn form is attributed a voice with the force to command Joe into action and 'active manhood', namely to fix the porch swing. Interestingly, however, it ultimately does appear the two female gazes in this sequence are somehow emphasised and *strengthened* by their doubling, even if, at the same time, the gazes are *denied focus*, distracted and made humorous because of the multiple engagements they invoke.

The doubling or multiplication (and consequent de-stabilisation) of the teen girl gaze is a trope we find at the earlier tip of the decade too, in *Little Darlings*. In this film, a group of young teenage girls meet at summer camp, where two of the girls, Angel (Kristy McNichol) and Ferris (Tatum O'Neale) are soon taking part in a bet to see who can lose their virginity first. As their surrounding group of friends attempts to help, the girls are shown to undertake an expedition to locate potential targets. After a short trek through the woods, the girls spot a group of boys swimming in the distance, and they take out their binoculars to observe them. The binoculars, props that extend the teen girl gaze and place emphasis on their acts of looking, as well as assign them a phallus of sorts, are normally restricted to the realm of the teen boy gaze within the genre (see my examples in chapter two), but here are allocated to girl

gazing. This reversal is progressive, yet it is undermined by a cut to a singular point of view, that pulls into question who exactly is doing the looking (whose perspective are we seeing?). The very distillation of the girl gazes into one gives their gaze focus, yet simultaneously destabilises the identity of the seer. At the same time, the point-of-view shot demonstrates the sheer distance between them and their objects; the observed scene, even seen through the binoculars, is still so far away that it leaves an unsteady focus and a lack of clarity over who or what the girls are observing exactly (this in great contrast to the Peeping Tom / binocular shots that cater to male seeing, illustrated in chapter two). Additionally, the shot of the girls leaning over the rock staring through their binoculars becomes the ‘butt of the joke’⁸⁷ in this scene – the film invites us to laugh at the ‘incompetence’ and slight ridiculousness of teen girl looking, a quality further emphasised by the fact that the lead girl Angel (positioned at the left in figure 4b) does not spy through binoculars, but instead stands idly by, appearing annoyed by this ‘childish’, futile act.



Figures 4a and b - In *Little Darlings*, a group of girls observe boys from a distance at a nearby camp...

⁸⁷ Mary Ann Doane has written extensively on how the female gaze often becomes the butt of the joke in its representation. See for instance her chapter entitled “Men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses”, in *Femmes Fatales: Film and the Masquerade*, starting at p. 26.

When the girls steal a school bus from the camp, Angel (presented as a tough, no frills, street-wise tomboy throughout the film) drives them to a local gas station in an attempt to secure ‘protection’ for her prospective sexual encounter. There, one of the girls climbs into the men’s room and pulls a condom machine of the wall, as the other girls wait outside and cheer her on. Remaining seated in the bus, Angel sees a boy she desires, Randy (Matt Dillon), arriving in the parking lot. In a rather progressive shot sequence, we see Randy approach the other girls and engage them in conversation, as he leans against the school bus and is unaware that Angel is observing him from behind. The camera shows us Angel leaning out of the driver’s seat window behind him, blowing a bubble gum bubble (an odd phallic symbol/fetish, but it extends and collapses all the same). As a cut to a close-up of her reveals her eyes move down to up, the scene strongly establishes her gaze running along the back of his body. The camera cuts back and forth between this shot and her point-of-view shot, which, through a tilt, mimics her eye movement, until her gaze rests (and the camera lingers) on a close-up of his jeaned behind. When the camera cuts back to the close-up of Angel, we see her raise an eyebrow in apparent desire and approval.





Figures 5a - h - Angel (Kristy McNichol) has an active gaze in *Little Darlings*, but it is redirected and diffused by her teen girl friends, until she is re-established on equal footing with her object of desire, Randy (Matt Dillon).

When Randy sees the other girls smiling at someone behind him, he turns around and engages Angel in a bantering introduction. At first, she is positioned higher in the frame than he is, keeping him relatively small in proportion (see Figure 5e) and this visually reinforces her powers over him. But what takes centre frame in this shot is the ‘other audience’ to their scene; the group of girls observing their encounter who look back upon them (and in a way, back towards the camera) are positioned directly in the middle of (or in between) their encounter in the frame. Aside from the chaperoning role that this connotes, the girl group redirects, fragments and re-distributes the girl gaze and its potential weight within the frame. This is further emphasised by the cut to a close-up of Sunshine (Cynthia Nixon), who winks and smiles encouragingly at Angel and playfully pretends to take a photograph of the scene. This gesture brings various aspects of seeing into the game; it reminds the audience of the power of seeing (of capturing an actual image with a camera), yet at the same time, it also suggests that the girl’s ability to take a ‘photograph’ is mere pretend and that the teen girl can therefore perhaps mimic a gaze, but never quite grasp its full or actual potential. More importantly, the emphasis on this gesture multiplies the teen girl gaze again, through a mock doubling, and sets it apart from the solitary male gaze within the scene. In this way, the ‘playful’ act quickly strips the teen girl gaze of its focus and sexual desire (this ‘gaze’ is aimed at the success of Angel after all, and not at Randy; it suggests we need to be looking at Angel instead), thereby redirecting and fragmenting it once more.

As the camera relays its emphasis back onto Angel and Randy, who move in closer during their encounter, their positions within the frame are adjusted and they end up at an almost equal height and size in the frame (see Figure 5h), as though the balance between them were being restored. When Angel blows another large gum bubble at the close of their conversation, Randy pokes it with his finger (a phallic act that seemingly foreshadows how Angel will lose her virginity to him). As the bubble collapses, so does Angel’s ‘masculine’

gaze, her tomboy-like state (she resorts to acting like more of a ‘girl’ in scenes with him) and her agency. Randy takes the gum off his finger, and pops it into his own mouth, thereby reclaiming the ‘power’ and the other phallus between them, before walking off triumphantly.

This scene in *Little Darlings* nevertheless prominently introduces an active teen girl gaze as a desiring one, capable of capturing a close-up of a fetishised part of the male anatomy; the behind. And it invites the audience to share in the delights of this teen girl point of view. This construction and/or perspective comes back often in the genre, and gains strength and prominence throughout the decade. (On a side note, this type of ‘butt shot’ as a representation of the teen girl point of view on the male body has since become a popular convention. One could wonder what the attraction to the image of the male behind is exactly. It does not connote activity *per se*; for even though it is hard and tight, it is also round and soft. Is it perhaps the part of the male body that most reminds the female onlooker of her own; of the breasts, of the mother? And does this shot thereby involve and avert her own separation anxiety? Could this be the countering, ‘narcissistic’ (and therefore reassuring) image that opposes the replacement phalluses so often sought through fetishism, by the male gaze? In biology and evolutionary theory, a connection between the buttocks and the female breasts has long been suggested - whereby the female breasts are proposed as having evolved as a counterpart for the previous attraction to the behind⁸⁸. It would be interesting to explore this further, both in psychoanalytic theory and with regards to its representation in cinema). The emphasis on girls gazing at the bodies of boys is also relayed in *Fast Times*, where one of the opening scenes shows the teen girls working at the mall and discussing the appearance/look of a male client: “He’s a fox! ... He looks like Richard Gere! He has a cute little butt – he’s cute!” Say the girls, as they groom each other and prepare a plan of action so that Stacey may “take him”. The image is not extended to a point-of-view shot, but the very existence of the teen girl look is made ‘visible’ (present) and viable through this dialogue.

⁸⁸ See for instance the work of Desmond Morris, including *The Naked Ape* (1999, originally printed in 1967).



Figure 6 - In *Fast Times*, the girls discuss the vision of a boy, and prepare each other for action...

In *Lambda*, the teen girl point-of-view shot of a male behind is at its most sexualised, direct and uncompromised. In math class, we see Sandy (Melora Hardin) gaze at, discuss and admire her teacher's behind with a friend, without him noticing (there is no shot that reveals a recognition of his being looked at). Sandy's enjoyment of the image of her teacher's behind becomes visible when she licks her lips with desire afterwards, as if to imply she wants to taste what she sees. It is a sequence that is very progressive and empowering, and that strongly objectifies the mature, male body:



Figures 7a, b and c - Sandy (Melora Hardin) and her classmate admire their teacher's behind, in a shot sequence that invites the audience to share this point of view...

Although the teen girl gaze is seemingly split over two subjects in this sequence, if we look closer, it becomes clear that only Sandy's gaze is directed downward, and that it is her focused and direct gaze that we share in the point-of-view shot, communicating and amplifying the direction and strength of her desire, without compromise or negation.

With regards to the representation of the teen girl gaze directed at boys in the 1980s teen film genre, it seems, then, that the construction developed rather unevenly throughout the decade. The teen girl gaze was often stripped of its powers by being veiled, averted, redirected or multiplied on screen, and it often remained heavily outranked and outweighed by its male counterparts. Most commonly it was simply 'too fleeting' in its presentation to bring forth any actual consequence, both within the narrative and within the filmic language. But its recurring presence across a wider selection of films does, collectively, set it apart from the fleeting and non-consequential framing of the girl gaze that Richard Dyer described; these teen girl characters *are* granted point-of-view shots on occasion, and these shots are shown to be fuelled by desire, and at times even as capable of 'capturing' their male objects in an erotic hold, through a close-up (of the face, upper body and especially the male behind). It seems then that the teen girl gaze, and the teen girl subject at large, carry with it the potential for agency, the potential for a more progressive and complex representation of female identity. I will come back to this at greater length, later in this thesis, when I address the (desiring) virgin and the loss of virginity (both the examples from *Mermaids* and *Little Darlings* explicitly present their looking teen girl leads as virgins), the self-directed gaze in the mirror and the cross-dressing teen girl on film. For now, I want to have introduced the fact that the representation of the teen girl gaze engages with the many possibilities of its own subjective state; in a virgin or tomboy form, she manages to embody both male and female traits, and through her fluctuating stages of development/becoming, she manages to slip between child and mother-like states and is thus granted departures from the constructions/adult norms that Laura Mulvey introduced in 1975. The figure of the teenage girl projects an arena for enunciated female desire that can, perhaps more readily than her adult counterparts, be voiced on screen, but that has thus far remained underexplored and, potentially, underdeveloped.

The Teen Girl Gaze: Girl-On-Girl Looking

Aside from the glances, looks and gazes directed at boys in 1980s teen films, the other most common instance of teen girl looking in the decade reveals the characters as preoccupied with the image and bodies of other girls. Here too, veiling, averting and redirecting come into play, but the girl-on-girl gaze should perhaps not so easily be equated to the gaze that Mulvey

identified. Is it not rather different in nature, to begin with? The gazes between girls are not presented as sexually desiring in these films, they are rarely presented as potentially (let alone potently) homosexual; the popular 1980s teen films were produced by a Hollywood that was aiming at a broad, heterosexual audience and therefore was, perhaps, simply too careful and conservative at this time, to break with hetero-normative, narrative trajectories⁸⁹. Instead, the girl-on-girl teen gaze presented in the 1980s brings an investigative and comparative quality with it that, I would argue, is specific to the representation of gazing between teenage girls. Although this gaze does not attain the erotic holding power of a desiring gaze, it does attribute a certain active curiosity and reflective intelligence to the teenage girl who is doing the looking, and thereby engages with a different type of agency and desire than its male, objectifying counterparts. The teen girl gaze also invokes an engagement with particular teen girl affects, such as envy and admiration. I will illustrate this with an example first, before I continue to explore and define the workings of the girl-on-girl gaze.

Sixteen Candles presents a scene that exemplifies the structure of the representation of girl-on-girl looking on film, in which Samantha and her friend Randy are shown to admire the body of a schoolmate in the changing room showers after gym class. In some ways, this scene is similar to the Peeping Tom scenes we encountered in films such as *Private School*, because it presents a voyeuristic-like gaze aimed at a naked girl who remains unaware she is being looked at. In other ways, however, it is very different. In *Private School*, for instance, the audience is made an accomplice to ‘the male gaze’ from the very beginning; we are made aware of all the intricacies of the setup through a long build up (we see the boys approach the girl dormitory and carefully position themselves into an optimal arrangement for gazing, by climbing up on top of one another to gain access to a window, before we share their point of view). The scene of girl-on-girl looking in *Sixteen Candles*, however, begins with a sudden cut from the previous scene in a gym, where Jake (Michael Schoeffling) and another boy discuss Samantha and compare her to Jake’s girlfriend Caroline. Jake’s friend tries to convince Jake he need not be interested in Samantha, because she is “void... Maybe she’s retarded... she’s a child... She’s obviously too young to party serious.” As the two walk off screen, Jake’s friend exclaims loudly: “Come on Jake. You act like you’re hard up. You got

⁸⁹ For more information on the conservative nature of Hollywood teen film production codes during this decade, see Timothy Shary’s *Generation Multiplex* (2002) or *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* by Stephen Prince (2002). The industry has developed more ‘mainstream’ queer teen films since then, that feature explicitly desiring ‘lesbian’ teen girl gazes, in films such as *But I’m a Cheerleader* (1999) and *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (1995), but these were released a decade later, when the genre diversified and reached out to a more widespread audience in the 1990s.

Caroline!” And curling his hands downward in a brief, apelike gesture as he follows Jake off screen, he continues in a low voice: “She’s a... wo-man!” At the last exact beat of this comment, the camera cuts to the next shot that presents an abrupt close-up of Caroline’s (Haviland Morris) naked breasts in the shower; a shot that turns out to be a shared point-of-view shot from Samantha and her friend Randy’s (Liane Curtis) perspective. But the connection between the end of the last scene and the opening of this one, even before we have come to realise it is the girls who are looking at Caroline’s breasts, suggests that the boys have already seen Caroline’s body and her breasts too (moreover, it suggests they saw her first), and it frames any vision of her in a comparison with their opinion/vision of Samantha; where Caroline is a *woman* and Samantha is still a *child*. By having this scene introduce the teen girl gaze on the teen girl body, the film again bookends any possibly teen girl agency within an overarching, more potent patriarchal realm; the look and appreciation of the teen girl body has, after all, already been safely positioned within male ‘possession’.

The intensity of the unexpected cut to the close-up of Caroline’s breasts is accompanied by a strong comic sound effect; a “boing” that would appear to emphasise both the sudden size and the ‘bounciness’ of the breasts, as well as the surprise impact of this direct access to a female body, seen from a female point of view.



Figure 8 - The point-of-view shot accompanied by a comic "boing" sound effect in *Sixteen Candles*...

The combination of the sound effect and the suddenness of the cut encourages the viewers to be jolted back in their seat. The audience is invited to laugh then, and thereby the teen girl gaze again becomes ‘the butt of the joke’. The comic aspect of this point-of-view shot appears to ease and avert any tension that the sexual nature of this type of gaze might normally bring with it, but it also ‘allows’ the audience to enjoy and express their pleasure at the shot, and

enhances the force of impact of the gaze through the very directness of this response. At the same time, however, the omission of an establishing shot and the abruptness of the cut suggest the point of view is accidental, and therefore ‘must be’ unpremeditated - especially, again, if we compare it to the scene in *Private School*, where the viewer/accomplice was carefully positioned in advance to ‘secure’ the male gaze. The Peeping Tom sequence in *Private School* also continues to lure the viewers into suspense about whether or not the voyeurs would be found out. But in this scene in *Sixteen Candles*, any suspense over possible discovery is never brought into play; as though the scene carries no illegal connotations, as though this gaze is ‘obviously’ innocent and non-threatening in nature. The very validity of the teen girl gaze remains uncertified throughout the scene. As the camera stays with the close-up of the breasts, we hear Samantha say the first word of dialogue in the scene: “Unbelievable!”, a word that conveniently expresses her emotion, as well as calling into question whether what *we* are seeing – a teen girl gaze aimed at another girl’s naked body – is actually ‘real’ and/or ‘really happening’.



Figures 9a - d - "She's perfect... Impossible to cut up.... And supposedly she's really sweet, her brother's deaf and everybody worships her... And she's going with Jake!"

When the camera cuts to a medium close-up of the two observing girls, Samantha and Randy are positioned instantly at a safe distance from the body they are observing; in the

frame a partially blocking wall holds them at bay, and reintroduces the confining linear play so familiar to the genre (see my examples in chapter one and two). With this cut, the reverse shot simultaneously incites a comparison of sorts between the girls (thereby continuing the comparison started by the dialogue of the two boys in the preceding scene); the reverse shot introduces these girls as equal yet different to their observed body, at opposite ends of the same space. Samantha and her friend, as seers/onlookers, are represented as vulnerable in their nudity too, even though they are not completely exposed. But they are covered by wrapped around towels, as though their bodies are not 'worthy' of (or inviting) to-be-looked-at-ness in the same way. The (side-)lighting in the scene emphasises the three different hair and skin tones of the girls; where Caroline is blond and tanned and golden, Samantha is a redhead, with pale and freckled skin, whilst Randy has dark untamed curls, and more olive or Mediterranean skin. Even before the girls enter into a commentary on what they are seeing, then, the audience is invited to compare and contrast the three bodies on screen, and this renegotiates and repositions the gaze between the girls, to function along similar lines.

As Samantha and Randy proceed to evaluate Caroline's body - they discuss how she must surely have skipped nine grades (and thus be much older) to have that kind of body - the camera cuts back to a wider shot of Caroline, showing her body now from her legs up, as a dark, side-facing silhouette against a white lit and steaming background (see Figure 9b). Multiple showers spray her body from both sides, creating an overtly dreamlike, 'tunnel vision' image of Caroline that emphasises the surrounding symmetry. This shot presents her body in the centre of the frame as though it were a prominent but flattened two-dimensional cut out. It is an image that communicates on various levels; it offers visual pleasure on the one hand (it undoubtedly does cater to a voyeuristic, sexually desiring gaze both within the camera and in the audience), and at the same time, by reducing the figure to a flat silhouette, places emphasis on the outline, rather than the content of the body, thereby denying it any implications (such as the threat of castration) that the nude female body might otherwise provoke. Caroline's body is thus shifted into a different 'type' of objectified/observed state, whereby the gaze is not invited to focus on any lack or fetish, but rather on its feminine outline, form, shape and silhouette.

This type of shot recalls a tradition of imagery that most women/girl viewers, in particular, are already familiar with; the glamour shots used for advertising beauty or fashion products in printed magazines or on television. This type of photography is safely recognised as pleasing, because it caters to a different kind of 'eye' - a different kind of seeing - that is not sexually fuelled, but rather calling on particular 'female' affects used in this genre of

representation, such as envy, admiration and the desire to emulate the observed object. It seems that the teen girl gaze is repositioned to align with a different type of gaze, where the female viewer/onlooker/subject is engaged to compare herself to another female object, and positioned to admire her. The sense of glorification that informs this ‘vision’ of Caroline is made intrinsic to the teen girl gaze, throughout the rest of the scene. As the girls’ dialogue continues to affirm that Caroline is “perfect” and “impossible to cut up [because] she is supposedly really sweet, her brother is deaf and everybody worships her”, it seems Caroline’s body is placed on a pedestal at the narrative level as well, through the girls’ spoken review. Not only is Caroline’s beauty aptly placed within a ‘deserving’, almost angelic category (she is sympathetic and worthy of admiration because she has a deaf brother), she is also repositioned as a mythical, godlike creature, because she is “worshipped” by everybody. The fact that her eyes remain closed throughout the scene further emphasises Caroline’s revered image; she is presented as an isolated, disconnected statue, almost, because any active ‘contact’ (through opened eyes) is deferred. At the same time, the steam of the showers softens and diffuses her image even further, as though it were a filter evening out any rough spots or edges (as well as providing another veil of sorts). The scene thus creates an evaluative, comparative and admiring girl gaze, that impossibly contains Caroline erotically, because her body is veiled by mist, “unbelievable” and held at a distance, as well as being possibly much older and there to be worshipped. In order to redirect any last confusion that might tie this teen girl gaze to sexual desire, however, the final line of dialogue brings Caroline’s body promptly back to earth, by re-placing it firmly at a boy’s side and within patriarchal propriety once more; Samantha rolls her eyes, averting her gaze, and sighs with apparent desperation and envy: “And she’s going with Jake!”.

The complexity of the representation of the teen girl gaze in this sequence demonstrates just how many different lines of engagement are brought into play here. Laura Mulvey’s binary oppositions of active/passive, or voyeur/to-be-looked-at-ness, may be transposed onto girl-on-girl looking in film, but that would fail to address, let alone cover, the intricate dynamics of this represented gaze. Much of feminist film theory since 1975 has, in one way or another, engaged with, or reacted to, Laura Mulvey’s seminal article on the gaze. Many feminist film theorists have attempted to understand, or deconstruct the female gaze⁹⁰, and the female pleasures that might be derived from women looking, especially at other women – a possible gaze that Mulvey’s article does not address. Mary Ann Doane’s work on

⁹⁰ See the special issue “The Spectatrix” of *Camera Obscura* 7, no. 2-3, 20-21 (1989).

the masquerade and the female gaze was notably informative here, but since she engages with a construction that involves the performance of sexual identity and femininity, I will address these writings more specifically when I analyse tomboys, desire and performance in Chapter Five. Most other feminist film theorists agree, however, that the female gaze upon the female body invokes two main lines of engagement, namely ‘desire’ and ‘identification’.⁹¹ Teresa De Lauretis, in her work on films such as *Desperately Seeking Susan*, *All About Eve* and *Rebecca* conflates the two lines and suggests the films are essentially dealing with the (im)possibility of the representation of love between women, and lesbian desire⁹². Jackie Stacey, on the other hand, in her article on the same films, ‘Desperately Seeking Difference’, separates the two lines and proposes they invite a different kind of pleasure altogether:

I shall argue that these films offer particular pleasures to the women in the audience which cannot simply be reduced to a masculine heterosexual equivalent. In so doing, I am not claiming these films as ‘lesbian films’, but rather using them to examine certain [other] possibilities of pleasure.... Interestingly, the fascinations which structure [these films’] narratives are precisely about difference – forms of otherness between women characters which are not merely reducible to sexual difference, so often seen as the sole producer of desire itself.⁹³

It is with this line of thought that I find the teenage girl gaze most commonly resides; with the fascinations about difference and the forms of otherness between women/girls, and the pleasures (or other affects) that they provoke. I believe the analysed sequence in *Sixteen Candles* calls precisely upon the recognition of forms of otherness between girls, and that it presupposes a certain familiarity with, or the ‘naturalness’ of, this construction involving admiration, curiosity, appreciation and envy. Sianne Ngai, in her article ‘Jealous Schoolgirls, Single White Female, and Other Bad Examples: Rethinking Gender and Envy’ (2001) also proposes this construction as a widespread phenomenon. However, Ngai suggests the relations and gazes between women in films such as *All About Eve*, *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* and *Single White Female* cannot be easily reduced to the rather positivist notion of

⁹¹ Sianne Ngai. "Jealous Schoolgirls, Single White Females, and Other Bad Examples: Rethinking Gender and Envy." *Camera Obscura* 16, no. 2 (2001).

⁹² Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality And Perverse Desire*. (Indiana University Press, 1994).

⁹³ Jackie Stacey. “Desperately Seeking Difference”, originally printed in *Screen*, but reprinted in *The Sexual Subject – A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, edited by *Screen* (London: Routledge, 1992), 249. Brackets indicate my own addition/emphasis.

‘pleasurable’, since they rely on the innate feminisation of the particularly ‘monstrous’ affect ‘envy’. Ngai suggests the construction of this particular affective relation between women on film is essentially antagonistic and aggressive, and inevitably leads to violent destruction and images of female hysteria. Even though Ngai skilfully turns this reading upside down by suggesting such representations of envy can be reappropriated to reflect certain feminist critique, she fails to address the representation of non-antagonistic envy, as this would commonly occur, for instance, in teen films such as *Sixteen Candles*.

The representation of non-antagonistic envy between women/girls on film, has remained rather underexplored (other than in *Desperately Seeking Susan*) and perhaps can, or should, be related to notions of female fandom. Jackie Stacey, in her book *Star Gazing* (1995), explores desire and cinematic identification by “examining the multiplicity of processes connecting female spectators to Hollywood stars”⁹⁴. Stacey identifies three sets of female identification processes, both within and outside the cinematic context. She identifies “Devotion”, “Adoration” and “Worship” as the more rigid, hierarchical (one-directional) pleasures released within the cinematic context, “Transcendence”, “Aspiration and Inspiration” as more fluid engagements between female viewers and stars, and “Pretending”, “Resembling”, “Imitating (Behaviour)” and “Copying (Appearance)” as extra-cinematic, creative practices, involving fantasy and self-adaptation.⁹⁵ If we look at the scene in *Sixteen Candles* again, it seems the represented teen girl gaze relies on many of Stacey’s identified practices; in their non-threatening, non-antagonistic admiration/envy and worship of Caroline’s body/spectacle, Samantha and Randy are equalled to female ‘fans’, gazing at the glamorous, unknowing, isolated and disconnected film star. Because the viewers in the audience are familiar with this type of gaze (they are its subjects), the represented gaze on screen is more easily recognised as non-threatening – making this a very circular and continually dependent process. At the same time, of course, this recognition increases the identification (and possible admiration) between the female viewer and lead girl Samantha as well, because she appears in this gaze just like a girl in ‘the audience’ – she becomes ‘one of us’. The lines of admiration and comparison drawn by the girl-on-girl gaze in this scene (between Caroline and Samantha/Randy’s bodies, and in the cinematic context, between Caroline and the viewer’s bodies, and Samantha/Randy and the viewer’s bodies), attempting to read equality and difference between girl-bodies, may have been sparked by the boys’ dialogue, but is ultimately made ‘real’ by the very nature of the teen girl subject on screen,

⁹⁴ Jackie Stacey. *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994), 137.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 138-158.

and the implied teen girl spectator in the audience, who, in this way, is made into a different kind of accomplice to the construction of the gaze.

Gazes that explore equations measuring difference between girls may, at such times, be non-antagonistic, but even so, they are not without their force or consequence. In their investigation, their curiosity, their reflective attempts to perhaps “solve the riddle of femininity”⁹⁶ presented before them, these gazes poke and pry their objects. And these gazes are connected, as was suggested by Stacey and Ngai, to envy, and to the desire to emulate; to learn, to mimic, to copy, to become, to transform, to adopt, and to adapt, *towards* the other. Such consequences of the female gaze are qualities that are, of course, also fundamental to our understanding of the teen girl subject; a figure that is inherently in transition, inherently in a state of becoming more like – or *towards* - woman. Which leads me to ask, how do these teen films present *this* part of the girl-on-girl gaze? How do these films propose the teen girl solves her inequality, depleting her provoked desire to become more like the other? The aspects of learning, and the desire to become more like the other, are explicitly presented in another example of the teen girl gaze, in the 1980s teen film *Some Kind of Wonderful*. In *Some Kind of Wonderful*, as was the case in *Better Off Dead* and *Little Darlings*, the girl doing the looking is presented as a tomboy; Watts (Mary Stuart Masterson) has short, cropped hair, wears ‘boy’ clothes, plays the drums and is often mistaken for a lesbian (because her appearance is ‘queer’) by other characters in the film. This aspect to her character is important, because it perhaps ‘allows’ her, in her pre-sexualised girl body, to take on male qualities, such as the more prominent, active ‘gaze’ (and again, I will come back to this more extensively when I address the performance of gender and femininity in Chapter 5). But nevertheless, when we see her looking at another girl – the object of her best friend Keith’s affections, Amanda Jones (Leah Thompson) - the structure of her gaze is re-styled and re-framed to fit the teen girl gaze, calling upon affects such as envy, admiration, learning and emulation.

In this scene, Watts enters a changing room after, presumably, a gym class. Dressed in a long male boxer short and yellowish t-shirt, we see her towelling her boyish short hair in front of an open locker. As she glances off screen to the right, her eyes appear to rest on an object of interest. The camera cuts to her point-of-view shot, a long shot, of popular girl Amanda Jones, who is grooming herself at the other end of the busy changing room. In Watts’ point of view, Amanda’s body catches the light. She is framed by lockers on both sides, by

⁹⁶ Jackie Stacey. “Desperately Seeking Difference”, 254.

other girls getting dressed in front of her, an office behind her, as white steam (from the showers) fills the air around her. The dense framing here appears to secure the parameters of the frame within the frame, and thereby keeps Amanda contained, disconnected, unaware and at a safe distance.



Figures 10a - d - In *Some Kind of Wonderful*, tomboy Watts (Mary Stuart Masterson) is caught gazing at popular girl Amanda Jones (Leah Thompson) in the changing rooms...

In the first point-of-view-shot, Amanda has her right foot up on a bench in the middle of the changing room, in a seductive pose reminiscent of images of a femme fatale (but without the fetish of the high heel). This image emphasises the curves of her body, and hides (or redirects the gaze away from) her genital area. The light from above highlights her figure, both its softness and its outline, and gives her an almost ethereal, glamorous quality. Unlike Watts, Amanda is dressed all in white, in traditionally feminine, dainty underwear and a tight and short camisole revealing the skin of her stomach. The camera (and by extension Watts' gaze) lingers on Amanda's body, as she pushes her chest outwards and tilts her head back to brush her long hair, while steam from the shower rooms slowly diffuses her image.⁹⁷ The scene positions Amanda, like Caroline in *Sixteen Candles*, as though she were a model in an

⁹⁷ The steam not only evens out Amanda's image (like a veil), it also obscures and mystifies her, as though there was a curtain between her and Watts, bringing about suggestions of a theatre and a stage. This curtain, in can perhaps also be seen as the cinema screen, which separates the viewer from the observed star, and acts as a mirror of sorts to, whereby one is made to relate to, or copy the other.

advertisement – and even the script insisted on this: “Amanda Jones. Bra and panties, combing her hair. Perfect light, perfect pose. She looks like she’s in a French Lingerie commercial.”⁹⁸ It seems the film was intent on insisting a connection between Amanda Jones and the women/girls presented in advertisements.

When the scene cuts back to Watts, the camera reassures the audience that she is barely looking after all; her chin is pointed down and her eyes are only half-directed, in a casual and a seemingly embarrassed way, as if trying to go unnoticed, into Amanda’s direction. We then see Watts push her own chest out in an apparent mimicking of Amanda’s pose. The camera cuts back to a closer shot of Amanda, from the torso up, and back to a close-up of Watts’ face, whose gaze now visibly quiets down, steadies and focuses in Amanda’s direction. On the soundtrack, a pensive and slow piece of music sets the tone as one of reflection and thought. When the camera cuts back to Amanda’s body, we see her brushing her long hair, and running her fingers through it. A shot of Watts, still gazing in Amanda’s direction, shows how she copies this gesture; she touches her own hair, and brushes her fingers through it, as though feeling and recognising its shortness. When the camera cuts back to Amanda, it slowly tilts down her body, from her face to her neck, her breasts, down her stomach to the top of her leg. In the subsequent shot, the camera tilts down Watts’ body, repeating the previous shot of Amanda, and reveals Watts’ hands moving down to touch her own stomach, which she proceeds to visibly suck in, before she rests her hands, one by one, still demonstrably feeling her own body, on her narrow hips.



⁹⁸ Note in the full script of *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987), written by John Hughes, available as PDF at www.somekindofwonderful.org, p 33a, accessed on November 26, 2012.



Figures 11a - f - Watts gazes at Amanda, before the camera repeats a tilt shot down their bodies, and reveals how Watts is comparing herself to, and emulating, Amanda's appearance.

By repeating the tilting shot down Amanda and Watts' bodies, and cutting back and forth between the two bodies in similarly distanced shots, the film appears to compare and contrast the two bodies (or at least invites the viewers to do so), while at the same time illustrating Watts subjective experience and reaction to her gaze. Watts, whose body is less developed and perhaps less explicitly feminine than Amanda's, is presented to transfer her observations of Amanda onto her own body, as though she is measuring their likeness. The repeated camera movement reinforces this emulation; Watt's desire to copy, to equate, to become more like the other, is made visible through the filmic techniques, in this poignant scene that emphasises the ways in which the girl/gaze is preoccupied with bodily ideals and difference.

Watts' delicate exploration of her own body, and her gaze, are abruptly interrupted by another girl in the locker room, who laughs at her from off screen. The girl is then brought into the frame in a subjective point-of-view shot (she looks directly at Watts/into the camera) and loudly proclaims: "Hahaha – are those *boys* underpants?" When Watts replies: "(imitating fake laughter) Hahaha... Yeah. So?", the tone of the scene shifts, as Watts' presence and her gaze are suddenly 'exposed' to the other girls in the changing room. The girl answers: "So I've never seen a girl wearing boys' underpants before!", after which Watts reaches into her locker, abruptly pulls out one of her drumsticks and holds it up aggressively towards the girl,

as though it were a weapon, exclaiming: “You ever seen a girl with a drumstick up her nose?”. The sharp breaking of Watts’ gaze here acts in three different ways; it appears to punish Watts’ for gazing by drawing all the attention back to her ‘flawed’ appearance (thereby restoring her to-be-looked-at-ness) and making fun of her look, in doing so it also breaks the identification process/or alignment between the viewer and her character (literally, by breaking the fourth wall) who perhaps recognise – and thereby validate - her admiring, envious girl gaze since it is similar to that of the viewer towards the star, and lastly, it ‘justifies’ Watts’ gaze by equating her to a boy/man - she has a phallus, in the shape of a drumstick, and re-establishes her masculine character with her un-ladylike, aggressive reaction.⁹⁹



Figures 12a and b - A girl interrupts Watts gaze, looking directly into the camera, before Watts responds defensively.

The scene ends with Watts walking towards a full-length mirror in the changing room. She stands in front of it, and gazes up and down her own body, portraying a pensive and serious look that conveys a sentiment of judgment and critique over her own reflection. But then she grimaces in the mirror, throws her towel over her shoulder before exiting the frame, as if *this* mirror image has not taught her anything she didn’t already know.

⁹⁹ Though it must be added that, in the context of the film, this reaction is more complex than I’m making it appear – the viewer is invited to cheer for Watts, as she defends herself against a bullying girl, and her reaction does not invite the traditional to-be-looked-at-ness – the representation of Watts is more progressive and alternative than that of, for example, Amanda Jones in the same film, precisely because she is not depicted as the popular beauty.



Figure 13 - The final shot in the girl gaze scene in *Some Kind of Wonderful*, shows Watts realigning with her own mirror image, and acknowledging her own appearance.

What lingers most from this particular girl-on-girl gazing scene, is the recognition of difference that resides in the girl gaze, and the consequent desire for emulation that this provokes. The desire to *become* or *be* more like the other is so often naturalised in this way, in the depiction of the relationship between girls. The scene plays with mirroring and doubling, where the steam, like a screen, simultaneously obscures and reveals an image of idealised femininity. But that image of idealised femininity, in the shape of Amanda, and Caroline in *Sixteen Candles*, is thereby presented as a riddle of sorts¹⁰⁰ that can be solved through observation and mimicry. The fact that the observed girls are constructed to resemble advertising photography suggests that their image, their status, their body, their femininity need not only be admired, but can be copied and attained through consumption, through “acquisitive desire”¹⁰¹ (whereby a mimetic performance is enabled through the purchase of consumer goods). The teen girl gaze therefore, and its implied nature linking comparison, admiration and envy to emulation, is positioned as though it were being addressed in an advertisement, making the subject of its gaze, its own passive object at the same time. This teen girl gaze – which has an accomplice in, and is made possible through the recognition by the teen girl viewer - is henceforth set up in a consumer address; it is ready to be ‘interpellated’¹⁰² (by which I mean, to be appropriated in a pseudo-individualised subjectivity towards a commercial end). And this particular ‘looking to consume in order to emulate’ gaze, with its connections to 1980s materialism and the possibilities of self-transformation

¹⁰⁰ Jackie Stacey. “Desperately Seeking Difference”, 254.

¹⁰¹ Sianne Ngai. “Jealous Schoolgirls, Single White Females”, 191-193.

¹⁰² Louis Althusser. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” (1970). In *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy, eds. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

through consumption (the 1980s popularity of seeing ‘the body as project’) is then ready to be moved into that other recurring, neoconservative, teen film setting - the mall.

The Mobilized Teen Girl Gaze and the Mall

In chapter one I introduced Bailey and Hay’s observation about 1980s and 1990s American teen cinema, in which they stated that the representation of teenagers could be read as (at least partially) progressive, because the teenagers are presented as mobile subjects in these films; they are able to shift between different roles and tasks, and move freely between locations and identities. Bailey and Hay solidified this observation through their analysis of the representation of the teenager and the car, whereby the automobile literally provides teenagers with (urban, upward and/or other) mobility¹⁰³. I argued that this observation was perhaps more valid for the representation of teenage boys in 1980s teen films than for the representation of teenage girls, because boys are more readily represented as having access to technology and fast, expensive cars, while girls are often contained by their environments and kept passive and immobile. But how does this mobility work within the third generic setting, the mall? How is the teen girl gaze presented there? We have already seen that in this ‘protected’ environment (chapter 2), the girls are often presented as able to roam freely, running past shops and through the food court, and demonstrating more unbound behaviour. Does this behaviour influence the representation of their gaze? How do the multiple directions/distractions offered by the architecture of the mall affect their looking? Does it attribute a sense of mobility to the teen girl? Does this particular gaze assign her any agency, or power(s)? And, most importantly, what do these films suggest the teen girl looks at in the mall?

In her book *Window Shopping* (1994) and her article “Les Flaneurs du Mal(l): Cinema and the Postmodern Condition” (1991), cultural theorist Anne Friedberg writes extensively on the nature of the (female) gaze in mall. She suggests the structure of the department store (and by extension the mall) pre-conditions a ‘mobilized gaze’, because the people within it are subject to a huge range of visual stimuli, provided by the multitude of shops and consumer goods, and are therefore provoked into a ‘moving’ gaze. Friedberg traces this type of gaze back to early modernity and to the writings of Walter Benjamin:

¹⁰³ Steve Bailey and James Hay, “Cinema and the Premises of Youth”, 219.

...the origins of the mobilized gaze [can be situated and identified with a] paradigm of modernity, the *flâneur* – the male dandy who strolled the urban streets and arcades in the nineteenth century. As the department store supplanted the arcade, the mobilized gaze entered the service of consumption, and space opened for a female *flâneur* – a *flâneuse* – whose gendered gaze became a key element of consumer address.¹⁰⁴

...[the *flâneuse*'s] perceptual patterns – distracted observation and dreamlike reverie – became a prototype for those of the consumer, whose style of 'just looking' is the pedestrian equivalent of slow motion.¹⁰⁵

The teenage girl in 1980s teen film, as we have seen in the previous section, offers a "gendered gaze" particularly susceptible to becoming "a key element of consumer address". If we look at how her gaze is presented in the mall, and at the teenage girl as a *flâneuse*, her perceptual patterns conform to the characteristics of the mobilized gaze Friedberg describes. In the opening credit sequence of *Valley Girl*, a montage sequence set to upbeat pop music presents a group of four girls shopping at the mall. The quick montage reveals a series of 'point-of-view' shots (even though we are left in the dark over whose point of view we are taking on) in the shape de-contextualised close-ups of bracelets in a wooden tray, tops hanging on racks, nail-polished fingers running past such items, credit cards being run through a machine, hands on a register adding amounts, and girls holding up various clothes on hangers in front of themselves (as though they were the mannequins), posing and smiling, as though their friends off screen were commenting on how these pieces of clothing look on them. In *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, the opening montage sequence at the mall (again set to upbeat pop music) relays a quick succession of gazes at other teens, by connecting one look between a girl and a boy to another and to another, while intermittently showing close-ups of food and other consumer goods, and a shot presenting a stretch legging being pulled apart by two girls in an tug of war. In *Night of the Comet*, the two lead girls spend some time at a deserted mall halfway through the film, in a montage sequence set to Cyndi Lauper's *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* on the soundtrack, built, again, out of close-ups and medium shots rapidly cut together; we see the girls try on various outfits, shoes and makeup, whilst dancing, posing and laughing with each other. In *She's Out of Control*, Katie's makeover (which assumedly takes place at a mall as well as in a range of doctor's offices) also presents a

¹⁰⁴ Anne Friedberg. "Les Flâneurs Du Mal(1)", 420.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 421.

montage sequence, of her braces being removed, contact lenses being fitted, her trying on heeled shoes and lipstick, having a skirt fitted and going to a hairdressing salon. The shots within this montage sequence are often her point of view (including the scenes at the doctor's offices), and the scene at the hairdresser's demonstrates her gaze from one 'spectacle' to the next. The shot moves through the salon at high speed; it presents a swaying and unsteady perspective, past the various customers and exotic hairstyles on display, with the customers turning to look back into the camera (and at Katie). In *Smooth Talk*, lastly, Connie and her friends' perspective of the mall is brought to the screen through a series of fast-paced shots and scenes with them in it, figuring shops and details only in passing. The camera never stays with a particular item long enough to focus on it, but it nevertheless manages to create an impression of the array of surrounding goods, shops, escalators and restaurants.

In such scenes (which set the standard for the genre and are still common practice today), the teen girl *flâneuse's* gaze is not so much presented in 'slow motion', but rather in 'sped up' time. The perceptual pattern Friedberg describes, of "distracted observation and dreamlike reverie" has transformed for the teenage girl in the era of MTV; it is a gaze that is still unsteady, unfocused and 'uncapturing', but not because it is dreamlike, but rather because it is fleeting, fast-paced, fuelled by quick movements and distraction, it is scattered and in a permanent state of 'disconnect'. The lack of establishing shots, or a slower build-up of proximity that normally informs Hollywood editing, has given way to a state of rapid, perennial present/presence. There is no real sense of cause and effect here, where the gaze focuses and moves in closer, or where a window display leads to a close-up of a particular product, or where one object leads to another, or directly to a scene of purchase. The mobilized teen girl gaze, then, is ultimately presented as having no particular focus at all, and with this lack of focus comes the lack of power or control over what is there to-be-looked-at.

The female consumer's gaze has often been 'redeemed' by the notion that she would have consumer power (see for instance, Doane in "The Economy of Desire" (1989)). It is striking to note then, that the teen girls in these teen films, for all their time spent at the mall, are never shown to actually *buy* anything. The (shopkeeper's) hands in *Valley Girl* may tally up amounts, and swipe credit cards, but we never 'see' the shopping girls hand over a card, or pay at the register. In *Night of the Comet*, the teen girls only go to the mall because they can shop without paying (in this teen horror/sci-fi, the people of the world have been vanquished and survivors have turned into zombies), and even then they are caught on camera and attacked by violent male workers for 'taking' goods. In *Pretty in Pink*, Andie (Molly

Ringwald) goes to a shop to look for a prom-dress, but she discovers she can't afford to buy it (she looks at the high price tag), and leaves downtrodden and empty-handed.



Figure 14 - Andie checks the price of a dress but leaves the shop without buying.

And in *Smooth Talk*, Connie consistently ‘forgets’ to buy a paint-roller and pan for her mother, with the five dollars given to her. On the few occasions the girls in *Smooth Talk* go into a shop at the mall, they only ‘pretend’ to want to buy something; a jacket, in order to draw the attention of boy buyers at the same store, and a leather bag. There, they soon proclaim they are “just looking” (and therefore not buying). Even at the mall’s cinema, we see them stand in line, but when they finally reach the cashier at the box office, they ultimately do not purchase tickets, because they are unable to agree over what to see. In these films, teen girl looking is thus not intimately connected to buying¹⁰⁶, but rather strongly disconnected from it.

So if the representation of the teen girl’s gaze denies it focus and the follow-through of a purchase, who does have consumer power in these films? In *Can’t Buy Me Love*, Cindy (Amanda Peterson) goes to the mall to replace the suede, white outfit she secretly borrowed from her mother, but has accidentally ruined at a party, by spilling wine over it. Since she does not have the money to purchase the replacement outfit - it costs 1000 dollars – she first tries to exchange it under a returns policy, and then desperately tries to come to an arrangement with the shopkeeper, offering ‘her services’ instead; she would work at the shop on Saturdays for as long as it takes, if he would give her the replacement outfit as an advance.

¹⁰⁶ Mary Ann Doane, “The Economy of Desire: The Commodity Form in/of Cinema”, reprinted in John Belton, ed. *Movies and Mass Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 1995), 124 and 129.



Figure 15 - Cindy desperately attempts to come to an agreement with the shopkeeper. Because she has no money for purchase, she proposes to work in exchange for the dress.

While this is going on, the scene is bookended and intercut by shots of Cindy's neighbour boy, Ronald (Patrick Dempsey), who observes (and gazes at) her from the other end of the mall. Ronald has earned and saved 1000 dollars with his lawn mowing services and is there to buy a telescope for this exact amount. In the shop across the mall, we see him stare through the telescope at Cindy (the scene makes an interesting pun over its status as a phallic symbol; the salesman tells Ronald the telescope offers an "erect image", and we then hear Ronald reply, over his point-of-view of Cindy through the lens, that he "can see the erection", thereby explicitly marking his desire for her and emphasising her *to-be-looked-at-ness* once more). As Ronald continues to observe Cindy through the telescope, she enters the dress shop with its glass facade in the mall. He observes her distress, as we cut back and forth between Cindy negotiating with the shopkeeper inside the shop and Ronald looking at her from across the mall, and discerns that Cindy is unable to persuade the shopkeeper to let her have the outfit (not only does she not have consumer power, Cindy is unable to conclude her negotiations successfully). Upon seeing this 'damsel in distress', Ronald takes his money, leaves the telescope shop, and runs towards the dress shop, holding up his money outside the glass doors/window.



Figure 16 - Ronald shows Cindy the money, as he looks at her through the glass doors/shop window.

After enthusiastically knocking on the glass window to catch her attention, Ronald goes inside and offers Cindy the money by proposing he wants to “rent” her; he offers her the money in exchange for pretending to go out with him for a month, since this will make him popular. Cindy first suggests he is crazy, but then, looking back and forth at Ronald, his money and the replacement outfit, she accepts his offer.

In this scene, that undeniably plays with notions of ‘teen girl’ prostitution (Ronald’s “I want to rent you” line ultimately offers a similar transaction to Richard Gere’s proposal for renting prostitute Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*), the purchasing power is markedly attributed to the teen boy. Meanwhile, the girl remains dependent on his consumer power. Not only is she dependent on his financial holdings, she becomes ‘object’ to its exchange; the exchange value of the object, 1000 dollars, becomes *her* value, as she transforms from consumer to consumer-good, to the commodity. Ultimately, it is Cindy’s ‘service’ (pretending to be Ronald’s girlfriend) that is sold and bought at the mall – *she* becomes the product on display in the window, the product to be purchased. And this construction is demonstrably presented to outrank her ability and ‘desire’ to acquire and consume independently.

The fact that Cindy is equated to the product she desires (and is subsequently transformation into a commodity) plays with complex notions that involve the relaying of the female gaze and the displacement of female desire back into the patriarchal realm. It seems the window display at the mall becomes yet another screen, another mirror of sorts, in the 1980s teen film. When the teen girl gazes into it, to look for/at what she desires with her subjective gaze, she soon finds herself equated to the headless mannequin on its other side. In

her studies of the mall, Anne Friedberg observed: “The shop window succeeded the mirror as a site of identity construction...”¹⁰⁷ And Laura Mulvey, in her work on commodity fetishism, noted a similar alignment: “One commodity acts as a mirror, reflecting and thus expressing the value of the other...”¹⁰⁸. It seems the representation of the teenage girl in 1980s teen films upholds this rather conservative notion, whereby the female consumer subject becomes the commodity/object. But this observation is not necessarily new to feminist theory. In 1985, while analysing the role of women in a consumer society and female sexuality on display, Luce Irigaray already remarked that:

In our social order, women are ‘products’ used and exchanged by men. Their status is that of merchandise, ‘commodities’... The use, consumption, and circulation of their sexualised bodies underwrite the organization and reproduction of the social order in which they have never taken part as ‘subjects’.¹⁰⁹

A similar use, consumption and circulation of the teen girl ‘sexualised’ body is visibly procured by teen films too; the exchange of money between boys/men over the services (and/or appreciation) of the female form has become a recurring trope of the genre. Alongside the abovementioned example from *Can’t Buy Me Love*, set directly in the mall, other teen films offer comparable illustrations. In *Adventures in Babysitting*, Dan (George Newbern) gladly hands over 45 dollars to “help Chris out”, after sharing a dance with her at a party. In *Some King of Wonderful*, Amanda is repeatedly presented as a commodity from the very beginning – she is her boyfriend’s ‘property’, and he is presented as able to buy and sell the very ‘look’ of her. With Amanda sitting next to him in his car, Hardy (Craig Sheffer) comments to gas attendant Keith (Eric Stoltz), throwing money at him: “I’d recommend you keep your eyes and your mind off my property.... Here’s ten for the gas, and ten for the look!” Later in the film, Keith too attempts to ‘buy’ Amanda by purchasing the diamond earrings she so desires and requires to fit in with her friends. After Watts, his tomboy best friend, chooses “the right pair”, Keith spends his entire college savings on the earrings, and gives them to Amanda at the end of their date, hoping to make her his own.

¹⁰⁷ Anne Friedberg. “Les Flâneurs Du Mal(1)”, 422.

¹⁰⁸ Laura Mulvey. *Fetishism and Curiosity*. (Indiana University Press, 1996), 3.

¹⁰⁹ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, (trans. by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke) (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 84.



Figure 17 - Watts selects the diamond earrings Keith should buy in the shop window. "That's the ticket!" she says.

In the end, when Watts recognizes that she actually wanted the earrings for herself (the film thereby returns her to ‘proper’, commodity desiring and purchasable girlhood first), Keith offers her the earrings instead, and, after they kiss, he tells her she “looks good wearing his future”, before they walk off together. Examples such as these present the teen boy as the sole possessor of consumer power, and this is a power that, by extension, can ‘attain’ the girl. But the boy’s consumer power is still outranked by the consumer power of the ultimate patriarch in the 1980s teen film, the father. In *The Breakfast Club*, it is implied Claire’s father got her expensive diamond earrings for Christmas. In *She’s Out of Control*, Katie’s father buys her a giant teddy bear and a ticket to Europe for her birthday, and in *Pretty in Pink*, it is ultimately Andie’s father who buys the shoes and fabric (another dress) that she needs to make her prom dress. Gifts such as these don’t even require the teen girl to gaze into windows, or to go to the mall, let alone leave the home; they lead the teen girl directly into the most neo-conservative of all places, right into daddy’s arms.

In conclusion, it seems the representation of the teen girl gaze is riddled with contradiction; her sexually desiring gaze at boys is often veiled or redirected, her gaze at other girls is comparative and positions her to desire the emulation of a certain type of idealised femininity that connotes to-be-looked-at-ness, through consumerism. The gaze at the mall, lastly, is presented as distracted and unfocused. It becomes a gaze directed back at the self through the window/screen/mirror, by which the teen girl subject ‘becomes’ the object of an exchange, fuelled by male consumer power. The teen girl presents an odd subjectivity then, or as Mary Ann Doane suggests in her article ‘The Economy of Desire: The Commodity Form in/of Cinema’ - where she points out that *adult* female consumer power sustains a double

bind, in which, briefly put, female consumer agency ultimately aims at to-be-looked-ness and thereby upholds patriarchal relations (another way of looking at the connections between the reproduction and the commodification of femininity) - it presents “a curiously passive desiring subjectivity”.¹¹⁰ But although the teen girl gaze can be read as conservative, regressive and lacking in agency, this reading would only tell part of the story. The sheer amount of teen girl gazes presented in 1980s teen film, all be they ever so brief, splintered, unfocused or redirected, imply a character and a correlating subjectivity on screen that engages with, and acknowledges, the teen girl viewer/ spectator in the audience. On top of that, there are suggestions of an active curiosity reflected in the teen girl gaze, and qualities of learning, of emoting, of affect, of enunciated desire, and of intelligent emulation, that may indeed have paved the way for more progressive representations of the teen girl subject on film, in the 1990s and beyond.

¹¹⁰ Mary Ann Doane, “The Economy of Desire”, in *Movies and Mass Culture*, 132.