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

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Citation for published version (APA):

Wilkinson, M. C. (2013). Wonder girls: Undercurrents of resistance in the representation of teenage girls in 1980s American cinema.

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PART TWO: INTRODUCTION

In the first part of this thesis, I looked at how the representations of teenage girls in 1980s teen films were constructed at the level of the frame; how did the more ‘static’ visual components of these films, such as the three dominant settings, and the positioning of the teen girl body within these sets, connote their to-be-looked-at-ness? How did the representation of the teenage girl gaze engage with her surroundings and the other bodies within them? Although I discovered some potential pockets of resistance in these films (including an increasing ‘access’ to the perspective of the teen girl gaze), I found that, on the whole, the representation of teenage girls conformed to the traditional, structural hegemony of Hollywood imagery, supporting patriarchal hierarchies and the subordination of the female sex on film, and thus projected strong neo-conservative values that may have been a part of the backlash against the second wave of feminism, in 1980s American culture.

In the second part of this thesis, I continue to explore this discourse by looking at the representations of the teenage girl at the level of the narratives of the films. Ultimately, films featuring teenagers explore rites-of-passage; these films are coming of age films, presenting the teen girl figure in transition, *en route* to becoming woman. Understanding how this element of the representation works – and exploring its relations to the contradictions and tensions this figure brings into play on film – requires looking beyond the more ‘static’ image, and towards the narrative developments and transitions. How is the teen girl’s state of transformation presented on film? Does the teen girl’s process of ‘becoming’ allow her to elude passive confinement? How do these films present her movements, her transitions, and the possible escape from all that is ‘set’? What are typical narrative trajectories for the representation of the teenage girl; how do we perceive her changing, becoming, transforming on screen? And most importantly, how does this aspect of the representation of the teenage girl engage with feminist film theory - what might this contribute?

Before I subsequently move towards an engagement with the more fluid and evasive concepts related to the representation of the teenage girl in the concluding chapter of this thesis (including notions of performance and affective display in narrative elements, gendered tropes such as cross-dressing, and recurring motifs and themes such as the mirror and the loss of virginity), I first begin by establishing the conventional storylines and characterisations of the 1980s teen film – that which is structurally ‘set’, at the narrative level - and connect these findings to the context of the American zeitgeist of the 1980s, and the history of the genre. I look at three important narrative trends (still commonly used in teen films today) that began

around this time; the introduction of stereotyped teenage characters, the standardised staging of specific relations with the father and the mother, and the popularisation of a key, recurring teen girl ‘narrative trajectory’: the Cinderella or Pygmalion-like ‘makeover’. I begin this part of the thesis by, once again, looking at the popular John Hughes films (*The Breakfast Club*, *Pretty in Pink*, *Some Kind of Wonderful* and *Sixteen Candles*), as well as other box-office hits, such as *Can’t Buy Me Love*, *Lucas*, *She’s Out of Control* and *Mermaids*, before moving out to include more independent hits and obscure films, such as *The Legend of Billie Jean* and *Little Darlings*.

In the final chapter of this thesis, I then move away from looking at that which is set (both on the level of the frame and of the narrative) in teen films, and turn towards that which is in transition, in process of becoming, in movement, in order to explore the possible areas for resistance and agency amongst the representation of teenage girls. Having identified the makeover as an essential component of the transformation/rites-of-passage narrative trajectory in films that feature teenage girls in a lead role in the fourth chapter, I begin the final chapter by looking at some of these sequences once more, and at how they present an active malleability of the self, and the progressive celebration of (the onset of) femininity. What do close-ups and the persistent use of mirrors in these films add to the display of the teen girl body? And how is the teen girl body revealed (and celebrated) in movement, in performance, in dance? How does the teen girl’s appropriation of a female appearance, of ‘feminine’ characteristics, constitute a play with the masquerade – and how does this construction relate to her process of ‘becoming’? By refiguring the representation of the teen girl body as a celebration of femininity and as a performance, I present this figure in dialogue with the larger notion of the construction and performance of gender.

The 1980s teen film featured an array of tomboy and temporary transvestite films, where teenage girls are shown to take on (aspects of) the appearance of teenage boys, and other masculine traits. In this cross- or in-between ‘gender performance’, teen girls are often allocated powers normally attributed to the representation of masculine identities, including connotations of action and the gaze. How are these representations of gender constructed in teen film, and how are they ultimately ‘corrected’? What do they reveal? Do they present femininity as a more fluid construction, or as one that is strictly defined? And do these films present the construction/performance of femininity as (conservatively) innate, or as (progressively) appropriable? I engage with these questions through close-analysis of two particular case-studies; the representation of the tomboy Watts (Mary Stuart Masterson) in

Some Kind of Wonderful, and the representation of the temporary teen girl transvestite Terry (Joyce Hyser) in *Just One of the Guys*.

In my final section, I turn towards the instances where these films show the teenage girl's innate embodiment of contradictory characteristics, her straddling of boundaries, without the framework of cross-dressing (or other narrative 'excuses'); in mirror scenes where in the smallest, self-directed performances, she is shown to appropriate both male and female traits, or in scenes that present her loss of virginity, where she crosses from childhood into womanhood (the rite-of-passage scene *par excellence*), but ends up in a suspended, affective display of emotion, committed to neither realm. The teenage girl, because she is not yet adult, not child, not man, not woman, is a figure that resides on boundaries – she is both passive and active, she is both object and subject, she is both, and neither. Taking Kristeva's notion of the abject to refigure the representation of the teenage girl as perennially, momentarily, un-appropriable, un-confineable (and possibly un-representable), I conclude by proposing a new understanding of the representation of the teenage girl. Her image has emerged as a figure that is perennially suspended 'in-between', connoting tensions in spite of conservative confinements, the teen girl resides on and is defined by un-set boundaries. It is there that she has the potential to become a powerful, affective image, and it is in these moments that she becomes most compelling and progressive; in both looking back and moving forward, in simultaneously remaining child and becoming woman, and in being active and passive at the same time, the representation of the teen girl in the 1980s provides us with a new perspective that might reopen, or further, debates in feminist film theory.