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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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CONCLUSION

“Those girls created themselves.”²²⁶

The 1980s provided an interesting landscape for the representation of gender in American popular cinema. Amongst the representation of adult men and women on screen, male wish fulfilment was generally privileged and traditional power divisions were upheld. Even though some films increasingly presented women taking to the work floor and gaining more independent strengths²²⁷, the main undercurrents in popular culture and discourse enunciated a backlash against the new liberties acquired during the Second Wave of feminism, as has been argued by Susan Faludi in her book *Backlash*, and in other analyses of ideology in the cinema of the time²²⁸. The representations of teenage girls have often been overlooked in these analyses, and this is odd, because its numbers were considerable (both in the amount of representations and the commercial value her image provoked within the new teen entertainment markets), and this image was speaking loudly, and from all corners, to a new, post-Second Wave generation of children and teens.

Inspired by the essays in the collection *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice*²²⁹, this thesis has taken a closer look at the representation of teenage girls in 1980s teen film, focusing predominantly on the teen romantic comedies and dramas that the decade produced. On the whole, its findings have illustrated that these images were, as Ann De Vaney proposed²³⁰, highly conservative in nature. The three dominant settings of the high school, the home and the mall emphasise a sense of confinement and the lack of mobility for teenage girls within the frame, and uphold traditional gendered divisions in the allocation of props and activities. In these settings, the to-be-looked-at-ness of teenage girls is consistently accentuated, conforming to the classical Hollywood construction that privileges the male gaze and female,

²²⁶ A quote from the film *Ladies and Gentlemen - The Fabulous Stains* (1982).

²²⁷ This is discussed in Yvonne Tasker's *Working Girls* (1998); the feisty heroines Tasker analyses in the films of the 1990s, such as *Thelma and Louise* and *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, Tasker poses, stemmed from powers attained amongst the representations of women in the 1980s.

²²⁸ From Wood (1987) to MacDonald (1995) – also see the introduction of this thesis.

²²⁹ As well as the essays in Pomerance and Sakeris' *Pictures of a Generation on Hold* (1996), Jeffers McDonald's *Virgin Territory* (2010), Karlyn Rowe's *Unruly Girls Unrepentant Mothers* (2011), Radner and Stringer's *Feminism At The Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema* (2011), Pomerance's *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls: Gender in Film at the End of the Twentieth Century* (2001) and Mary Celeste Kearney's *Mediated Girlhoods* (2011).

²³⁰ Ann De Vaney, “Pretty in Pink – John Hughes Reinscribes Daddy’s Girl in Homes and Schools” in *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice*, eds. Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance (Detroit: Wayne State Michigan Press, 2002).

passive objectification (as was proposed by Mulvey (1975)). Even when the teenage girl is not subjected to sexually desirous gazing, she is positioned under male surveillance, reassuring the audiences that any possible deviance, or liberties, will be quickly reined in. In these ways, the interests of the patriarch (the father, or the prospective husband) are sustained. Teenage girls are increasingly assigned their own gazes in these films, but these have little power over their subjects, because they are fleeting, veiled, fragmented, or comparative in nature, and ultimately redirected (at times even back at the teen girl's own body). Within the setting of the mall, the teenage girls are shown not to have any consumer power of their own, and are often reduced to the state of commodities themselves. Through these structural recurrences, the representation of teenage girls in 1980s American teen films become imbued with strong neo-conservative values that emphasise materialism, consumerism, Christian norms and certain power divisions to ensure the continuation of a certain male ruling, and this supports the observation that the dominant discourse in these films played an important role in the backlash against feminism.

These currents are further endorsed by the narratives of these teen films that present the teenage girls in a limited array of stereotypical characterizations (delineated along highly conservative lines), and that strictly follow a set of linear trajectories. In these storylines, the teenage girl often shares a special relationship with her father, a troubled relationship with her absent or working mother, while her rite-of-passage into adult, sexually contained womanhood is often visualized through a makeover transformation (and secured by a prospective marriage). Nevertheless, from within these confines, the representation of the teenage girl does offer some potential for resistance. Some aspects of the teen girl gaze and her transformative powers invoke a sense of agency that belies the solidity of these images' set constructions. Through specific elements of the performing teen girl body – as an agent in her own transformation/makeover, in dance and movement, in gendered constructions that blur the boundaries between male and female identities (in shape of the tomboy or a temporary cross-dresser), in embodied male gazes in front of the mirror and during scenes that transgress her loss of her virginity – contradictions are consistently thrust to the surface. These contradictions become visible not so much through singular examples, as though a collective of sequences that highlight, readjust and suspend specific instances in the representation of teenage girls. Within these instances, the image of the teen girl itself is exposed as an abject-like figure that is defined most by a perennial 'in-betweenness', and it is from this position, and in such moments, that she attains her unique affective powers.

Such suspended moments of contradiction carried potential pockets of resistance that, in my opinion, opened doors for the incredible proliferation of the more progressive media images of teenage girls that followed in the 1990s. These images emphasised the teen girl's subversive and powerful potential, in titles as diverse as *Pump Up The Volume*, *Foxfire*, *Election*, *Hackers*, *Manny and Lo*, *Gas Food Lodging*, *Girls Town*, *Fly Away Home* and *Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead*²³¹. These films can often be placed within 'strands of influence' that run, most evidently, from the second wave of teen film in the 1980s, through the 1990s, to popular American teen films today. As Kimberly Roberts writes: "Veronica Sawyer's teenage 'power' in *Heathers* (1989) is a direct precursor of the 1990s popular feminist groundswell known as *girl power*, a structure of belief and a set of consumer practices that centre on the individual teenage girl's power to effect change in her universe."²³² A film such as *Heathers*, I would concur, has had a widespread effect on the depiction of teenage girls that came after. The film featured diary-writing expressed in a voiceover, and celebrated Veronica's outspoken, embodied morals, her active sexuality and strong survival instincts. In doing so, the depiction of Veronica heralded a renewed emphasis on the teen girl's subjective, intellectual reflection, in *My So-Called Life*, for instance, or the teen-girl rebellion against school cliques that drives *Mean Girls*, the clever teen girl outsider's sleuthing and active sexuality in *Veronica Mars* (where the lead girl is aptly named Veronica), the cynical attitude of Olive (Emma Stone) in the recent *Easy A*, and even Katniss' (Jennifer Lawrence) fighter and survivor spirit in *The Hunger Games*. In a similar 'strand of influence', the Valley girls that featured prominently in 1980s teen films such as *Valley Girl* and *Fast Times* gave birth to a generation of newly empowered teen girl blondes in *Clueless*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Jawbreaker*, *Bring It On*, *The Hills*, and *Legally Blonde*, to name but a few, whereas the makeover, witchcraft and dance/performing artist tropes that gained notoriety in 1980s teen film, have since translated into empowering retellings in *The Princess Diaries*, *Never Been Kissed*, *The House Bunny* and MTV's *Plain Jane*, *The Craft*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, and Willow's (Alyson Hannigan) character in *Buffy*, as well as *Save The Last Dance*, *Hanna Montana*, *Center Stage*, *Step Up* and *Make it Happen*.

I do not wish to propose, however, that the representations of teenage girls since the late 1980s have consistently become infused with a rebellious, subversive and progressive discourse; the representations of teenage girls in the 1990s have, for instance, been criticised

²³¹ And also in more recent 'progressive' examples, such as *Ghost World*, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* films, *Aquamarine*, *Juno*, *Bandslam*, *Wild Child* and *Nancy Drew*.

²³² Kimberly Roberts, "Pleasures and Problems of the 'Angry Girl'", in *Sugar, Spice and Everything Nice*, eds. Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance (Detroit: Wayne State Michigan Press, 2002), 217.

for their neo-liberal nature and the anxieties over individualisation that they present²³³. Alongside this, more recent representations of teenage girls, in cross media-phenomena such as the *High School Musical* and *Twilight* series, films like *Bratz* and *A Cinderella Story*, or television series such as *90210* and *Gossip Girl*, have presented a backlash of their own, as they returned to a more traditional dichotomy, where they either present teenage girls as naive and unthreatening girl-children, whose only purpose is securing a heterosexual relationships, or as sexually manipulative, dangerous young ‘women’ whose powers must be dismantled at all costs. This demonstrates that the representation of teenage girls remains an area of discourse subject to swift and effortless (re)appropriation. As Gateward and Pomerance have observed:

It is the girl who is the most profound site of patriarchal investment, her unconstrained freedom representing the most fearsome threat to male control. That her capabilities are unexplored and that her potentialities as an adult female are undeveloped are therefore values in themselves, to be appropriated and colonized at the expense of spirit and some considerable expense of capital.²³⁴

This observation reiterates the urgency for further analysis and study of this construction; the representation of teenage girls is easily appropriated and infected, and it is for this reason that feminist film theorists, film scholars and cultural analysts alike must keep her image closely in check.

There are many possible areas within the study of the representation of teenage girls, where additional research might contribute to more fruitful discussion and debate. Further studies could address the representations of more ‘deviant’ teen girls identities within the scope of this project, for instance, including the representation of pregnant teenage girls, teenage prostitutes, dangerous babysitters, or female juvenile delinquents in 1980s teen films (possible case-studies that have remained relatively side lined in this project). I would also like to continue to work on an argument that came to me towards the end of this project, which presents how key aspects of Carol Clover’s Final Girl (the surviving teenage girl popularised in 1970s and 1980s commercial American horror films, that could be identified by her tomboyish competence in practical matters, her sexually unavailable or virginal state,

²³³ See for instance Marnina Gonick, “Between ‘Girl Power’ and ‘Reviving Ophelia’: Constituting the Neoliberal Girl Subject.” *NWSA journal* 18, no. 2 (2006): 1-23.

²³⁴ Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance, introduction to *Sugar Spice and Everything Nice*, (2002), 13.

and her relentless fighting spirit and survival strengths)²³⁵ overflowed the boundaries of the horror genre in the 1980s, and began to appear across other subgenres in 1980s teen films, as well – including, for instance, in more progressive titles such as *Heathers*, *The Legend of Billie Jean* or the relatively unknown film about a teen girl’s self-constructed punk band, called *Ladies and Gentlemen: the Fabulous Stains*. The Final Girl of the 1980s was, after all, another influential precursor for the *girl power* provoked by series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Alias*, and *Dark Angel*, and the recent *The Hunger Games*. I also feel that the representation of teen girl’s active sexuality, and especially the complex lines involved in the depiction of the loss of her virginity, have remained somewhat overlooked and sidelined in this project. Tamar Jeffers McDonald’s recent anthology of essays, *Virgin Territory: Representing Sexual Innocence in Film* (2010), has provided fertile groundwork in this area, but its relation to the representation of the teenage girl, specifically, could still be further developed. Alongside all this, the evolvments of the representation of teenage girls could be mapped and traced more carefully throughout film history and other cultural outlets, such as literature, pop music, art, celebrity, sport, and television – as well as spread out more widely, to incorporate the representation of queer teen girl identities and, of course, the representation of non-white teenage girls, in American culture and in the rest of the world (Indian culture has a longstanding tradition of presenting sprightly, feisty teen girl heroines, for instance, that are bound by a completely different set of confines than its American counterparts, and might provide valuable comparisons).

We need to keep addressing, analysing, debating and entering into a dialogue with the representations that surround us. In a world that is radically globalising, where tensions are consistently shifting to form new political arenas and alliances, and all this is increasingly defined by and through its media, constructions of identity, and how we relate to them, how we come to understand them, are too crucially influential to be ignored; the imagery that surrounds us *must* be constantly negotiated, poked at, stretched out, torn apart, and exposed, even if the resulting findings prove contradictory, complex and defy a singular reading. As Laura Mulvey wrote:

History is, undoubtedly, constructed out of representations. But these representations are themselves symptoms. They provide clues, not to ultimate or fixed meanings, but to sites of social difficulty that need to be deciphered, politically and

²³⁵ See Carol J. Clover. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in Modern Horror Film* (Princeton University Press, 1993).

psychoanalytically ... even though it may be too hard, ultimately, to make complete sense of the code.²³⁶

It is through the journeys, then, and not the destination, that we arrive at new questions, new discussions and new ways of understanding how we might (re)construct more progressive, forward-thinking images in the future. The study of the representation of teenage girls in 1980s American teen film has provided me with such journey. What began as a personal interest, developed into prolonged academic research, and ultimately provoked me to redefine how I understand representation as well as the purpose and value of feminist film theory itself. The figure of the teenage girl provides us with a unique construct that presents both an easily filled vessel, yet that also, somehow, creates itself, in the instances that arise on film, precisely *when and as* she remains transitory, undefined and appropriable. Now that important filmmakers are increasingly turning their attentions this figure (from Sofia Coppola, in *The Virgin Suicides* and her soon to be released *The Bling Ring*, to Sally Potter's forthcoming *Ginger and Rosa*, Joe Wright's *Hanna*, Lone Sherfig's *An Education*, Floria Sigismondi's *The Runaways*, Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* and Kimberly Peirce's upcoming remake of *Carrie*), the representation of the teenage girl is sure to continue to provide fruitful tensions and areas for debate that might resurrect, and possibly further, the field of feminist film theory; as the teen girl lingers and thrives amongst onscreen representations that are articulated by, and through, the very enigmas she presents.

²³⁶ Mulvey, Laura. *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Indiana University Press, 1996), 11.