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“SO VERY,” “SO FETCH”: CONSTRUCTING GIRLS ON FILM IN THE ERA OF GIRL POWER AND GIRLS IN CRISIS

by

MARY LARKEN MCCORD

Under the Direction of Amira Jarmakani

ABSTRACT

In the mid-1990s, two discourses of girlhood emerged in both the popular and academic spheres. Consolidated as the girl power discourse and girls in crisis discourse, the tension between these two intertwined discourses created a space for new narratives of female adolescence in the decade between 1995 and 2005. As sites of cultural construction and representation, teen films reveal the narratives of girlhood. The films under consideration serve as useful exemplars for an examination of how such discourses become mainstreamed, pervading society’s image of female adolescence.

INDEX WORDS: Girl studies, Film studies, Girls in crisis, Girl power, Teenagers on film

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MARY LARKEN MCCORD

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Mary Larken McCord

2008

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by

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1. INTRODUCTION

During the last decade of the 20th century, adolescent women in the US achieved a place of prominence in national media attention. Seemingly overnight, girls were the focus of education analyses, op-ed pieces, and marketing manifestos. Amid this flourish of attention, two discourses of contemporary girlhood emerged: girl power and girls in crisis. The former arose largely from reports of grassroots organizing by groups such as the Riot Grrrls in the early 90s. Growing out of the punk movement in music, the icons of girl power had an anti-consumerist ethic and became associated with "take-charge dynamism" (Aapola 2005, 19). While not consistently embraced as role models, the early icons of girl power did offer a salient message to young women. Their success at self-promotion through independently produced music and zines bolstered support for a do-it-yourself ethos and even presaged the rise of the internet, using such nascent technology to facilitate community building. On the other hand, some media attention focused on the serious challenges facing young women in particular such as eating disorders, peer pressure, and alcohol or drug use. The 1994 publication of Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* provided a shorthand for this discourse. Weekly news magazines and television news shows regularly featured information about teen girls, largely aimed at the parents and teachers who come into frequent contact with them. *Reviving Ophelia* and its progeny created the cultural preoccupation with these challenges referred to as "girls in crisis" (Mazzarella 2007, 7). These distinct, seemingly contradictory discourses circulated through multiple avenues including grassroots activism, magazines, professional organizations of psychologists and teachers, and the mainstream news media. At the same time, academic inquiry into the experiences of girls accelerated. Within the academy, feminist scholars and others began to situate girlhood and girl studies as discrete sites for analysis.

In the area of cultural studies, this emphasis on the experiences and representation of young women was seen by many as long overdue (Mazzarella 2007, 7). In recent years, many scholars have begun to fill in the gaps identified by pioneers such as Angela McRobbie in the area of girls studies and pop culture. The potential for pop culture to serve a crucial role in presenting models of adolescence continues to provoke both conservative and progressive critics to take notice. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the public discourse surrounding young female celebrities. While conservative critics may decry the decline of morality or family values in pop culture (e.g. the news that Jamie Lynn Spears is pregnant), progressive critics may look for the many subtle ways pop culture reinforces traditional institutions and ideologies (e.g. the news that Jamie Lynn is keeping her baby). Regardless of the ideology of the critic, pop culture in general and film in particular are poised to have a significant impact on the ideas and attitudes of contemporary society. As Susannah R. Stern states in an empirical study titled "Self-Absorbed, Dangerous, and Disengaged: What Popular Films Tell us about Teenagers," films "play a role in generating and promoting cultural messages… [as they] contribute to the public discourse about youth behavior, preoccupations, and attitudes" (Stern 2005, 26). In such an environment, the representation of female adolescence in contemporary cinema demonstrates an intersection of controversy and concern for educators, policy makers, parents, and adolescents themselves.

Scholarly attention to teen girls and film has increased recently; since 2004 at least half a dozen books have been published by academic presses addressing the issue. Critics have interrogated films along many lines: Do contemporary films represent the multiplicity of experiences which constitute female adolescence in the contemporary U.S.? From whose perspective are those experiences viewed? Are the representations of female adolescence ultimately liberatory or oppressive? These questions inform my feminist analysis of film and

have inspired this study. Specifically, this study examines the representations of female adolescence in teen films since the emergence of the girl power and girls in crisis discourses (approximately 1995-2005) in order to address the following question: does the cinematic representation of adolescent females contribute or respond to either the girl power or the girls in crisis discourse? Within this broad inquiry, this study will look specifically at narratives of the female body and those of female peer relationships. What narratives of the adolescent female body are portrayed in mainstream film? To what extent do those narratives rely on specific representations of the adolescent female body? Similarly, what narratives on female friendship are portrayed, and to what extent do those portrayals rely on specific discourses of girlhood? Underlying all of these questions is an awareness of the powerful commercialism of film; as such, this study also investigates the extent to which consumerism permeates these texts.

Review of the literature

Before approaching the research question, it is useful to clarify and articulate some of the theoretical underpinnings of this project. First, the entire notion of "girls studies" relies on many overlapping and occasionally discontinuous precepts which threaten to undermine the use of "girl" as a category of analysis. Second, the utility of film as a pop culture text can be critiqued on grounds originating both within the practice of cultural studies and from external forces. I hope to address these potential concerns and clarify my own position relative to them.

Girlhood's fluidity as a category has in some ways hindered feminist scholarship addressing the lives of girls. Both girl power and girls in crisis discourses reveal the mechanisms through which the dominant power structure can co-opt subversive ideologies for its own purposes. It has therefore been difficult for feminist researchers to address this situation without contributing to it. As Sandra Harding warned over two decades ago, how can we find "analytical

categories for the absent, the invisible, the silenced that do not simply replicate in mirror-image fashion the distorting and mystifying categories and projects" of those already in power?(1986: 648). Rather than existing solely as a biological reality, girlhood is one of many identities that have been produced by a collection of social, political, and economic forces. What this identity entails largely depends on contextual conditions. This assertion refutes essentialist claims and discourages proscriptive studies which seek to define or catalog aspects of universal girlhood. Even without clearly demarcated parameters to define girlhood and therefore shape any academic study, the persistence of the category in both biological and discursive analysis suggests it is worthy of academic attention. The construction of this category is paradoxical. It is at once premeditated and unconscious, reflexively ironic and cruelly pejorative. The unstable nature of this category yields provocative glimpses at the discursive practices which have created it. At first glance these glimpses might inspire feminist scholars in particular to deconstruct the category, possibly even refuting its existence. This act, however, would undermine the potential power in such an identity.

As a socially constructed identity, the category "girl" has been used as a coercive tool of patriarchy and consumer capitalism. Such systems subordinate girls in multiple ways, most obviously as females and as adolescents; this situation is only exacerbated for girls who are non-white, working or lower class, queer, or any combination thereof. While media representations of girls demonstrate – but tend not to interrogate – race and class distinctions, examples of young women from a variety of backgrounds embracing or embodying this term proliferate. Ironically for this demographic, both their achievements and their failures are seen as cause for alarm from concerned, responsible adults.[1] The most important coercive message is that girls are fundamentally not able to take care of themselves. This message begets the belief that girls are in

need of intervention, mentoring, monitoring, or any of a dozen other mechanisms of adult control. The power exerted on girls is largely unconscious, born out by well-meaning parents, educators, and even advocates. Both the girl power and girls in crisis discourses have been affected by the patriarchal and consumerist impulses of contemporary society: in many cases, the "power" suggested in the girl power discourse is merely buying power, while the girls in crisis discourse reifies the traditional family structure as a source of stability.

Taking the subject position known as "girl" to be not a fixed and natural state but rather a socially constructed one, an examination of the means of social construction is necessary to understand the category. While the imperatives of a market economy have made the consumer category "girl" a bankable identity, mass media is also at least partly responsible for constructing and maintaining subordinate positions for women and girls. Scholarly attention to mass media originated in the field known as cultural studies. With roots in Marxism, cultural studies examines the role of ideology and culture in developing, maintaining (and potentially subverting) oppression. A prolific writer and philosophical theorist of the early 20th century, Antonio Gramsci lay much of the groundwork for cultural studies examining the power relationships in hegemonic realities. Gramsci asserts that those in a position of power must convince those who are oppressed to buy into the very ideology which keeps them oppressed.[2] Although it was not a particular focus for Gramsci, one of the most efficient means of convincing this group is mass media. Attention to media and cultural productions would become a hallmark of the British cultural studies movement several decades later. This group introduced the idea of the dominant ideology, and correspondingly, resistance to it.

In describing the interplay of culture, ideology and identity formation, scholars of cultural studies often refer to frames or frameworks. Indeed, a frame is a useful metonym for

cultural studies. In its conventional usage, “frame” has many synonyms and connotations. It suggests immediately a form or structure, imposing visual or spatial limits on whatever it contains. These limits give shape and pattern to compositions which can then be built upon, or left as is. The frame connotes visual art, a world in which that which is contained within the boundaries of the frame is ostensibly more important than the frame itself.

Many of these terms or ideas appear in the classic essay “The Culture Industry” by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. In asserting that art is ideology, these cultural critics opened the door for later scholars to examine the role of art as part of larger cultural patterns. Some of these patterns, they argued, include regulated “individuation” and consumption. By complicating issues of artistic style and truth, Adorno and Horkheimer encouraged scholars to look at ways in which art “[lends] new shape to the conventional social forms” (1944, 37), even though they themselves argue that mass-mediated art is more complicit in maintaining rather than transforming dominant culture. By reaching into every aspect of human existence, they argue, the culture industry restrains human imagination and potential.

In his 1969 essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser refines the earlier positions of Adorno and Horkheimer (and others) in his analysis of ideological state apparatuses. A Marxist, Althusser built on Marxist ideas of structure and superstructure and the various mechanisms used to maintain them. Though Althusser focuses on the church and the education system, he acknowledges the role of culture and entertainment in constituting subjects. Althusser refers to mass media (among other entities) as an ideological state apparatus, a term which neatly exposes both the strategic, non-organic nature of media and the state’s complicity in that project. Like Gramsci before him, Althusser would leave a legacy of theoretical work that inspired many scholars who would come after him. Central among his contributions is the idea

that ideologies are not merely groups of ideas, but also include ritualized practices of behavior. In this way, the framing potential of ideology is not limited to what is seen or observed, but extends to what is performed or lived. His identification of entertainment culture as a site of societal control permeated much of the scholarship in cultural studies in the last three decades. In fact, Althusser is most often cited as the first to refer to "frameworks" in conjunction with cultural studies. It was Stuart Hall, however, who popularized and promulgated the term. In his 1977 essay "Encoding, Decoding," Hall articulates the processes of negotiation that people use to make sense of the messages of culture. Surrounding these processes, he argues, are the ideologies which provide the frames of reference for such negotiation. He uses the language of "rules" to describe the ways in which people communicate. For feminist media scholars, Hall's discussion of frameworks of understanding informed many of the audience studies of female spectatorship. E. Ann Kaplan (2000) quotes Christine Gledhill's observation that meaning happens when disparate frames of reference collide and audiences must negotiate that collision. These processes of negotiation have a central place in feminist cultural studies because they make visible the ways in with individuals are affected by their cultural contexts, a particularly useful tool for scholars seeking to explore the effects of capitalism and patriarchy. The notion of the frame suggests both the confinement and the possibilities for these scholars.

In addition to discussing the ways in which media frames our understanding of culture, Althusser further asserts the importance of media in shaping ideology in the construction of identity, a process he describes as hailing subjects. As the audience of any mass media production, an individual is complicit in her own identification. If she is hailed as a consumer, she is likely to conceive herself in those terms. This concept, referred to as interpellation, provides the basis for many feminist media critics. Such critics examine the representation of

female subjects and the narratives that are circulated about them in order to understand the various roles presented to women and girls. For this study, the potential for film to contributes the interpellation of subjects is a critical concern.

Cultural studies has particular relevance for late-20th century and 21st century feminists. Both third wave feminists and post-feminists integrate culture and media analyses into their theory-making. These two groups gained traction in both the academy and the popular culture in the 1990's, generally at the same time that girl power and girls in crisis were emerging. Though seemingly positioned as the successors to second wave feminists, third wave feminists do not understand their position to be entirely dependent upon or in opposition to the early incarnations of feminism. Indeed, the third wave's focus on identity, particularly the collapsing boundaries between the political and the cultural in analysis of the production and representation of identity, is central to its ideology. Complicating the theoretical landscape further, third wave feminists have embraced irony to the point that they even claim to be "defined by contradiction" (Heywood 1997, 120). Given their emphasis on collapsing boundaries and problematizing traditional categories of definition, third wave feminists offer rich and varied perspectives on cultural studies.

While it might be convenient to position post-feminists as opposite to the third wave feminists, that relationship is not entirely descriptive. Nancy Worthington consolidates the work of several scholars, suggesting that post-feminism can best be understood by its assumption that advocacy on behalf of women is no longer necessary, and can in fact be harmful to women, as it separates women from their "natural" roles (Worthington 2005, 46). Post-feminists have also tended to adopt an essentialized notion of gender in asserting that there is power and opportunity for women who embrace their "natural" state. The post-feminist position is not generally

understood as anti-feminist; indeed, much of the feminist rhetoric of the second wave has been co-opted by post-feminists (Worthington 2005, 51).

An awareness of both third wave feminism and post-feminism inform a gendered analysis of cultural production. In a society in which popular culture is largely commercial, the "target audience" reigns supremely important. Third wave feminism and post-feminism offer two distinct but equally pervasive theoretical lenses with which to discuss women as a target audience. The notion of the hailed subject has particular implications for the analysis of film. As a cultural product, film participates in ideology and hegemony, though this participation can be oppositional. Discussions about what audience is being "hailed" informed much of early film theory. Since its inception in the last century, cinema has offered viewers a chance to view another reality, to travel to places beyond the scope of the average person's experiences. Conversely, film offers the opportunity to see familiar people, places, and problems in a larger-than-life format, simultaneously aggrandizing the viewers' own problems and reminding them to keep those problems in perspective. The allure of cinema encompasses a myriad of paradoxes: it offers escapism and in-your-face confrontation; it makes you feel like both a participant and an observer in the lives of the characters on the screen. Not surprisingly, then, film theory offers paradoxical interpretations as well.

As film theory (and cultural studies more generally) developed in the 60s and 70s, the reigning theoretical approaches relied on psychoanalytic criticism. Discourses of the pleasures of viewing/the pleasure of being viewed as well as the notion of "the gaze" draw heavily from Freudian theory. Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of scopophilia, or pleasure of viewing, into film studies. She suggests that human's inherent narcissism as well as the ability to recognize our own human form is played out in cinema. This aspect of film corresponds to the

"mirror phase" of child development: the moment when a child learns to recognize herself in a mirror. Film then serves as a mirror for our cultural inner child, and the images on the screen are recognized and internalized as part of the culture: we use film to see ourselves. Mulvey also posits that in film, the woman is an object to be viewed while the man is always assumed to be the "bearer of the look" (Mulvey 1989, 46-47).

This arrangement has been consolidated in discourses of "the gaze." Mulvey's particular concern in that essay was the double objectification of women first by the male filmmaker and later by the male audience. In the ensuing years, however, the woman as audience became a provocative theoretical site for many critics. Interestingly, the term "the gaze" held its traction and became a central part in these new studies. Mary Ann Doane (1991) suggests that although the notion of the female gaze had historically been thought of as repressed (a very Freudian notion), there were actually negotiations of power at play that resist such simplification. At the conclusion of her 1991 essay subtitled "Theorizing the Female Spectator," she invokes Foucault, suggesting that repression is but one small part of female spectatorship. This idea would be carried forward in the 90s by considerable growth in audience-centered scholarship.

Audience studies would refocus the theorizing of film away from the gaze somewhat, trading scopophilia and pleasure for reading and negotiation. This shift, argues Sue Thornham in the introduction to *Feminist Film Theory*, requires that female spectators be understood not just as textually positioned, but also as socially positioned. E. Ann Kaplan (2000) adds that while Doane seems to suggest that female spectators are usually collusive with the male gaze, many feminist media scholars resist such limited positions. The gaze itself became cast in some ways as a tool or strategy for meaning-making and, occasionally, resistance (hooks 1992; Betterton 2003).

Once attention was being paid to the audience itself, critics began destabilizing the idea of a monolithic audience as well. Just as there is no one fixed "gaze," there is also no unified audience. Groundbreaking feminist scholar and cultural critic bell hooks asserted that the entire discourse of the gaze neglects anyone outside the white male/white female dichotomy. She suggests that there exists an "oppositional gaze" through which black women in particular were able to "critically assess the cinema's construction of white womanhood as object of phallocentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator." (hooks 1992, 99)

Perhaps the most important aspect of film study in the postmodern world is the mutability of media. Ideas that start in a film can wind up in commercials, music, even political speeches. The cross-pollination of media contributes to what DeFleur and Dennis called accumulation theory, the supposition that "if messages are seen and heard consistently across media forms, corroborated between those forms, and persistently presented, they will have long-term, powerful effects on audiences" (Merskin 2004, 124). In addition, researchers have cited Social Cognitive Theory to emphasize the potential of film to have an impact on viewers' attitudes and beliefs (Stern 2005, 35). Social Cognitive Theory posits that people learn behavioral and social skills through environmental observation, suggesting that media such as film play a role in teaching social norms and expectations.[3] Films themselves become cultural reference points and contribute not only to the intertextuality of contemporary media but become models for the formation of attitudes they seek to represent.

This study seeks to offer a valid exposition of the possible intersections of discourses of girlhood and cinematic representation of adolescent females. This exposition is "not transcendental, but situated, negotiated, and part of an on-going process" (Narayan 2003).

Recognizing that film narratives have contributed to the discursive practices that make the girl subject intelligible, this study seeks to expand the conversation surrounding discourses of girlhood. Working within the cultural studies framework and informed by both third wave feminist and post-feminist ideologies, this study also interrogates the myriad ways in which contemporary feminist media theory both informs and reflects these cultural products.

An interdisciplinary field, girls studies brings diverse methodologies and sociopolitical interests to the examination of various aspects of girls' lives and their cultural production. While psychologists and educators have attempted to track the internal activity of female adolescence, anthropologists and cultural critics have interrogated external artifacts and rituals of this group. Indeed, even the notion of a discreet "group" of girls is problematic. Who is considered a girl? Contrary to conventional wisdom, scholars and critics rarely define the category by age alone. In her introduction to *All About the Girl*, editor Anita Harris calls the term "slippery and problematic" (2004 xx), noting that "girl" could just as easily refer to a seven-year-old or a 40-year-old. Within that collection, many of the authors refer to the ambivalence surrounding the term, as some young women and others use it as a "nod to…joyous youth" (Baumgardner 61) while others reject it outright as infantilizing. The imprecision of "girl" as a defined life space and the multiple responses to the use of the term affirm the role of social construction in creating this (and arguably all) categories of analysis. Equally problematic is the general absence of class and race analysis in the literature. It seems that in trying to locate "girl" as a category of analysis other elements of identity have been ignored by many scholars and researchers.

While the scholarly landscape known as "girls studies" resists definition, several discourses of girlhood emerge consistently. Tension and contradiction reside within many of these discourses, suggesting perhaps that girlhood itself is characterized by paradox. Chief

among these paradoxes is the divide between childhood and adulthood. As a liminal space, adolescence in general is defined by this tension, but the implications for girls in particular are striking.

Not surprisingly, one of the chief sites of tension in the child-adult dichotomy is the body. The female adolescent body is configured as a space of conflict along several axes. The hyper-sexualized representation of pre-adolescent girls in rituals such a beauty pageants is countered with infantilization of adult women in advertisements, for example. This tension also has specific legal ramifications: statutory rape laws often deny girls sexual agency, positioning them as potential victims of predators (Levine 2002), while the media continues to perpetuate the Lolita image (Merskin 2004). As a result, the adolescent female body is a site of anxiety for both girls themselves and the adults who feel responsible for them. One of the most widely-reported features of girlhood is a propensity for bodily harm, both that perpetrated by others in the form of sexual predation and self-inflicted in the form of eating disorders or self-mutilation (Mazzarella 2007, 7). At the same time, the adolescent female form is prized in fashion and advertising as an idealized paragon. The effects of these powerful media messages have been interrogated by feminist scholars in particular (Edit 2003).

If girlhood is regulated by contradictory imperatives for managing the physical self, the codes of personal and social management are equally demanding. The role of interpersonal relationships and the importance of peer groups is another area that has been examined by those interested in girlhood (Allen et al 2005; Bentley 1999; Cairns et al 1988; Eder 1985). Paradoxically, friendship rituals are both more visible than body rituals, but also more insidious. The messages that tell girls how to act and how to relate to one another are as pervasive as those that tell them how to look or how to dress.

Finally, the utility of girl as a market force has been frequently addressed. Products and media aimed at girls contribute to the identification of girls as consumers above all other roles. While its impact can hardly be divorced from the other domains, this commodity-driven atmosphere is beginning to be interrogated. These four domains: the child/adult dichotomy, the contested body, the role of social networks, and the commodification of girlhood, emerge in most of the literature of girls studies. These domains, or themes, concomitantly appear in the narratives of teen film, creating a useful intersection for analysis. The fact that these topics proliferate in both the academic literature and pop culture should not suggest, however, a degree of consensus on any of these topics. On the contrary, the field of girls studies contains as many conversations and attitudes on these topics as there are voices of scholars.

The contested territory between childhood and adulthood has been mapped by scholars of various cultural studies domains. The emergence of childhood as a discreet life space just a century ago has had significant implications for these fields. Valerie Walkerdine contends that the conceptualization of childhood is implicitly masculine and that little girls counter this concept (1998, 257). Little girls display more adult characteristics even as children such as engaging in forms of play that emphasize nurturing, and, according to Walkerdine, culture must create ways to maintain the illusion of childhood innocence. In his examination of child beauty pageants, Henry Giroux agrees that childhood innocence is a marker between the child and the adult, even though most people understand that it is an artificial one. When the image of innocence is breached, the social order is threatened. Events such as beauty pageants offer a sense of control to this process; even though the image of innocence is in many ways undercut, the ritual supports prevailing narratives of childhood (Giroux 1998, 265-268). The beauty pageant also offers a prime example of the “contradictory gazes” with which society views little

girls (257). Walkerdine suggests that society views girls as “little virgins that might be whores, to be protected yet to be constantly alluring.” (257) The image of these girls in popular culture is “at once innocent and highly erotic,” suggesting that it is not just the rare pervert who participates in the sexualization of girls, but society at large (257). Walkerdine challenges the idea that “sexuality is an adult notion which sullies the safe innocence of childhood” and suggests that sexuality is present in children and adults, necessitating various levels of societal intervention (256). Indeed, intervention seems to be the lynchpin in societal attitudes about girls and sexuality. While the image of little girls is eroticized in popular culture, the image of the ideal adult woman is often infantilized. Many girls adopt a “code of silence” surrounding sexual activity since it is inappropriate for girls to talk about their desires and behaviors (Edut 1998, 93). This disconnect between the mind of girls and their bodies stems in many ways from the contradictory messages they receive from early childhood regarding innocence.

Nowhere is the tension between childhood and adulthood more visible than in the form of the adolescent female body. At once a site of seductive power, societal control, and anxiety, girl bodies have been the focus of a considerable percentage of the literature of girls studies. Scholars have considered the media messages directed at girls about their bodies as well as the attitudes of adolescents themselves and the manifestations of those attitudes. The earliest consideration of the adolescent female body centers on regulating and controlling the sexuality portended by those bodies. In most western traditions, the sexually mature female body is simultaneously desired and scorned. For most of American history, “Puritanical notions of impurity, shame, and fear have been used to physiologically control women” (Merskin 1999, 129). These mechanisms of control continue to seep into contemporary culture in cultural productions such as advertising. Girls are instructed to regulate and manage their changing

bodies throughout adolescence or face negative social consequences. In the introduction to their collection of essays *Growing Up Girls*, Sharon Mazzarella and Norma Pecora summarize the work of feminist girls studies scholar Joan Brumberg with the following observation: "[Although] girls no longer are literally restrained by corsets, as were their Victorian-era great-grandmothers, they are, however, figuratively restrained by social and cultural norms dictating an excessive emphasis on the female body" (2002, 243).

There is a tension, therefore, in cultural products that seek to reach girls. On one hand, there has been a well-documented interest in "protecting [girls] against [an] unhealthy interest in body image" (Driscoll 2003, 243), at least in the editorial content of guidance manuals and even magazines for girls. At the same time, there exists an overwhelming amount of media imagery and content instructing girls about how to manipulate their physical appearance whether through make-up, grooming, or fashion. Any messages about healthy body image are therefore eclipsed by the underlying message that girl bodies must be managed, not only in their sexual functioning but also in their outward appearance. This emphasis on looks has a profound effect on girls. Susan Jane Gilman asserts that "Looks…collapse into a metaphor for everything else. They quickly become the defining criteria for [girls'] status and [girls'] worth"(2003, 16). With all of the attention on regulating the internal desires and functions of the body as well as its outward presentation, it is not surprising that the body has become conflated with the self for many girls. In a culture that "inundates girls with messages that their bodies are their voices – their identities" (Pecora 1999, 2), it should also not be surprising that some girls develop destructive relationships with their bodies. Many girls are taught to view their bodies as sites of control and the potential for perfection. The oft-cited prevalence of eating disorders such as anorexia provides an excellent example of the body dilemma for girls. Catherine Driscoll points out that

like hysteria, anorexia involves a “practice [of] femininity otherwise coded as positive” (2002, 250). Where the anorexic has gone wrong, she argues, is in her visible maintenance of her body. All women are expected to regulate their appearance in private rituals, but the anorexic has made those rituals visible, thereby acknowledging them and violating the feminine secrecy of such rituals. In this way, anorexia becomes the intersection of intensely personal manifestations of body image maintenance and social acceptability. Anorexia creates an intersection of the aspirational body messages disseminated in pop culture and the disciplinary practices that women are expected to follow. Likewise, the sexual expectations for adolescent girls reveal a similar tension: cultural messages that tell adolescent girls to look sexy, but not to have sex. The body of the adolescent woman, it seems, is a site of perpetual conflict, manipulation and regulation.

Conflict, manipulation and regulation are also key processes of interpersonal adolescent relationships. For over a quarter century sociologists have been studying the relationships of young women and girls, particularly those sites where they negotiate power and status. Taking an almost anthropological stance, these studies usually followed groups of girls for several months and used various methods to track their relational dynamics. Researchers consistently saw a consolidation of a girl’s personal popularity or status and membership in a group of similarly popular peers. Many of the studies compared groups of girls either within a setting or across settings, focusing on the hierarchies developed and maintained by the girls themselves. (Eder 1985; Merton 1997). Such hierarchies create a status dichotomy in which there is a clear winner or loser.

Within such a rigid social system, girls are expected to have clearly defined goals regarding status. Researchers from the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) found that

many girls identify aggression as a safe way of achieving those goals (Cairns 1988, 822). While the goal of popularity is not necessarily negative or positive, its correlation with aggressive behavior (ranging from teasing and bullying to physical violence) is troubling. This study and others contribute to the belief among girls that manipulation is an avenue to power (Adams 2005, 206-211).

One of the most extensive recent studies in this vein of research came from Don E. Merton, an anthropologist. His ethnography of girls in middle school corroborated many of the patterns indicated in earlier research and suggested even more sweeping implications. His research takes as a starting point the connection between meanness and popularity, so much that he conflates the terms (1997, 177). To the study population, “mean” is preferable to “stuck-up” since the latter carries risk of loss of status. Popularity is a commodity which must be managed: guarded, maintained, and shared appropriately. Girls with potential to be popular are “sought after” by other popular girls to be groomed and brought into the group (179). This system consolidates popularity within one or two groups of girls, minimizing competition from outsiders. These findings reaffirm previous studies. Where Merton’s study augments the conversation is in the analysis of aggressive behavior within popular cliques. Merton suggests that the “internal focus of meanness generally had the effect of protecting the clique’s popularity within the wider social context” (185). The importance of this “sustained and systemic approach to meanness” is minimized by both the girls themselves and the adults who are in contact with them (183). The normalization of meanness reinforces the feminine paradox that women must seek popularity while acting like it does not matter, often at the cost of their personal relationships.

Reviving Ophelia redirected much of the anthropological and sociological emphasis in girl studies to a psychological approach. Using her own experiences as a psychologist and counselor, Pipher employed a discourse of identity to discuss the fragmentation experienced by adolescent girls. Interestingly, Pipher's work largely indicts the environments of adolescence in forcing girls to neglect their true selves rather than suggesting any sort of innate pathology of female adolescence. Many of the articles and books that followed *Reviving Ophelia* represented female adolescents as essentially dependent, insecure or cruel (Wiseman 2002). This representation resonated with many adult women's (and men's) memories, contributing to the formation of new grand narratives of adolescence. Terms such as "relational aggression" (a description of girls' status-oriented manipulation, or colloquially, meanness) began to appear frequently in news media reports as well as parenting guides (Chesney-Lind 2004).

This new terminology contributed to much of the rhetoric aimed at parents and educators who sought to address the new "problems" with girls. The proliferation of news articles and teaching material and guides for parents and other adults sends a strong message: adult intervention is necessary to fix what is inherently "wrong" with girls (Adams 2005, 206-211). The call for adult intervention appears in the research as early as 1988, and continues to permeate contemporary culture (Cairns 1988). This ideology provides the basis for the girls in crisis discourse and has become naturalized in the ensuing decades. The appearance of this concept in teen film suggests that even teens themselves are receiving media messages that adult intervention is necessary.

Pervading the literature of girls studies is a discourse of the creeping sense of the impact of commodification on girls. Messages about teen girl bodies and adolescent peer relationships have been addressed in pop culture through a lens of commodification: the deployment of

schoolgirl imagery in the early marketing of Britney Spears, the myriad of magazines and books offering girls make-up tips and fashion advice, the emphasis in television advertising on social forms of play for girls. Each of these examples reveals the ways in which the discourses of girlhood are distilled for consumers. The emergence of demographic-based marketing contributed to the identification of girls as consumers. The purchasing potential of girls and young women has resulted in a deluge of advertising aimed at them. Debra L. Merskin has commented on the symbiotic relationship between girls and advertising, noting that

> [girls] have become increasingly dependent on advertising for information. Adolescents, in particular, may have fewer personal sources for private information or may prefer not to confide in them. In this way, advertising becomes a forum for discussing personal matters, a kind of social guide on how to remedy problems (1999, 128).

Ironically, of course, that same advertising often depends on the creation of anxiety and manufacturing perceived needs, such as the need for various body image related products. Pecora and Mazzarella lament that "From Barbie to *Cosmopolitan*, girls today grow up in a culture that places extreme emphasis on the female body – a body ideal that is unattainable for the majority of women and girls" (1999, 3). With Barbie as a role model and Cosmopolitan as a playbook, how could girls be expected to avoid such messages? Neither the girl power nor girls in crisis discourse provides an alternative to commercial messages; instead, both discourses become readily complicit in producing those messages in a variety of media.

Teen girl magazines were one of the first sites of cultural production to be critically considered by feminists, and the findings typically reveal a gospel of social conformity and conspicuous consumption. Often these messages are conveyed through a rhetoric which suggests goals and attitudes consistent with second wave feminism, including freedom and confidence.

However, argues Sharon Mazzarella in her analysis of prom magazines, “Feminist goals of individuality, independence and control over one’s life are commodified and translated as the freedom to choose commodities to define one’s independence” (1999, 109). She argues that rituals such as prom offer girls an exercise in “power and control” through consumption (1999, 102). This ideology is certainly not unique to adolescents as adult women are offered the similar options. Nor does the ideology of empowerment through consumption begin in adolescence. It begins, some would argue, with Barbie. In a conversation with her 10-year-old daughter, Feminist scholar Lana Rakow highlights the paradox that although many girls (including her own 10-year-old daughter) believe that Barbie is meant mainly for “brainwashed and stupid” people, pretty much everyone of a certain age has Barbies (1999, 12). Brainwashed or not, there are apparently enough of these people to support the Barbie industrial complex. Even girls who resist or ultimately reject Barbie admit to owning at least one of the dolls, if only because they were curious about her aura. Some critics suggest an even more sinister view of Barbie. Susan Jane Gilman calls her an “icon of Aryanism” who “[succeeds] where Hitler failed…[instilling] in legions of little girls a preference for whiteness, for blond hair, blue eyes and delicate features” (2003, 18). This possibly hyperbolic view nevertheless offers a glimpse of the power of commodification. Not only does the process respond to market forces but it also manufactures needs and has the potential to promote agendas. Barbie is a useful metonym for the effects of consumer-driven pop culture production: she both generates consumer desires and responds to market demands and no matter how much she may be vilified by feminist critics, there is still more ink devoted to her than any other pop culture icon of girlhood.

The symbiosis of capitalism and pop culture has had profound effects for young women. All of the various tensions surrounding the demands of girlhood can be mediated through

consumption. The right clothes can make you look better; the right toys or gadgets can demonstrate your taste. In many ways, consumption has come to define who girls are, inasmuch as focus groups and market data drives pop culture. The impact on the psyche of girls can be considerable. As cultural critic Catherine Driscoll observes a "feminine adolescent identity is the ultimate commodity on sale to girls" (2002, 247). In many ways, the ultimate billboard for that identity is the movie screen. The ubiquity of the feminine adolescent on screen suggests her marketing power. Her presence alone, however, reveals very little. To understand the true nature of her power, we need to understand the stories told by those texts.

Method

As the literature suggests, many academic disciplines are represented within the burgeoning field of girl studies. Education researchers, psychologists, cultural critics and anthropologists have all contributed to the identification of girl power and girls in crisis discourses. The convergence (or lack thereof) between these discourses and the media products aimed at young women has not, however, been satisfactorily explored. Images of adolescent women circulate throughout myriad spaces in pop culture. By focusing on teen film, I am limiting the scope of this research to those pop culture artifacts which teen girls themselves are likely to encounter. As a market demographic, teen girls spend billions of dollars annually on movies, suggesting that the films' cumulative messages about girlhood are indeed poised to have a significant impact on adolescent girls themselves. This study seeks to illuminate an intersection of news media or academic constructions of girlhood (discourses *about* girls) and entertainment constructions of girlhood (discourses *for* girls).

This study will rely most heavily on textual analysis. As cultural products, the meaning of a film is not wholly contained in the text itself, but is also discovered in the analysis of how

those texts were created. Discourse analysis of the films will help explore those processes. In addressing the research question, I have selected six teen films to analyze. Multiple categories exist within the large arena of "teen films": tropes as diverse as delinquents and dancers, techno-geeks and slashers, pervade the genre. While representations of adolescent females can be found in many narrative film genres, this study focuses on films which were produced and marketed, at least in part, for the adolescent female audience. Using the set of techniques collectively called discourse analysis, I will examine how each film constructs a representation of girlhood and how those representations speak to each other. Limiting the total number of films to six ensures that each film will receive significant analytical attention.

In addition to discourse and narrative analysis, the study considers two basic aspects of film technique: framing and focalization. On the most basic, literal level, the frame is the unit of measurement for film analysis. Cinematography, *mise en scene*: both are based on the artistic concept of framing a subject. The borders of the screen image become the borders of the reality of the film narrative. Focalization, or point of view, determines how a film is shot, through whose "eyes" the action is seen. Directors can use a variety of points of view, from mimicking a character's own perception of events to choosing a point of view that suggests omniscience; such directorial choices can be compared to an author's use of first or third person point of view. Framing and focalization effectively reveal the film's attitude about its characters, indicating how the world sees them, and how they see the world. In the context of larger narratives, such decisions can reinforce, complicate or undercut messages about the people represented onscreen.

The role of the researcher is most significant in the selection of film texts to analyze. Dozens of teen films were produced within the temporal parameters of the study. The task, therefore, is to address those films that offer a significant insight on the most important themes

emergent in the literature of girls studies as well as films that reveal the impact of the prevailing discourses. While the use of box office and DVD rental figures can be useful in selecting films which indeed have been viewed by a significant portion of the population, many significant films do not receive the wide distribution or promotion to earn top box office ratings. Some of these films nevertheless have an effect on popular discourses even though they do not generate significant revenue. It is also worth noting that the specific time period of this study, the emergence of the "blockbuster" movie has affected the usefulness of box office ratings as a measure of a films' popularity with a specific demographic. With so many mega-movies earning upwards of $100 million, smaller films appear to have lost relevance with audiences, though their cultural impact and relevance may be perpetuated in new media sites such as blogs. In selecting the films for this study, I looked first at box office and DVD rental statistics. I supplemented this data by searching for specific film titles within academic databases and other news media databases. This information revealed the films which received extensive media attention either at the time of their release or as a result of later events.[4]

A necessary caveat in cultural studies is the impractically of inclusion in terms of all racial, socio-economic, or other marginalizing factors. Admittedly, in trying to trace the representation of female adolescents in film, I have already implicitly acknowledged that such a category exists and have tacitly endorsed the representation in the films selected. While issues of difference have not been purposely excluded from this study, the paucity of their representation in teen film makes it difficult for a study of this kind to draw valid conclusions about specific groups. Among the many explanations for the lack of diversity in Hollywood films is the market imperative to appeal to as broad an audience as possible. Even though this axiom proves problematic, Hollywood seems resistant to exploring alternatives, relying instead on concepts

such as niche marketing. Perhaps the most important implication of the omission in teen film of meaningful representations of difference is the insufficiency of either the girl power or girls in crisis discourse to address issues of race and class as well as the concomitant normalization of whiteness. Despite a push from the academy to bring issues of race and class into the forefront, Hollywood rarely summons the vision nor the will to create narratives that effectively engage such topics.

I have paired the films around three unifying concepts, or themes, all of which arise from the literature of the discourses. The first pair of films, *Clueless* and *Kids*, provides an opportunity to look at the genesis of the girl power and girls in crisis discourses. Both released in 1995, the films represent the span of films in this category. Almost single-handedly, *Clueless* established the new teen film of the 1990s as a viable commercial entity. Grossing over $56 million, the stylized, glossy portrait of Beverly Hills teens seems to be an unlikely place to find the authentic ethos of girl power. In actuality, the film's protagonist possesses many of the characteristics of that discourse; somewhat ironically, her narrative also foreshadows the growing importance of consumerism in defining girl power. In sharp contrast, *Kids* presents a world in which teenagers are practically a lost cause. The first release from director Larry Clark, *Kids* offers a gritty landscape of desperation and destruction. Lauded by critics as a cautionary tale, the film gave an all-too-graphic image of the nascent girls in crisis discourse. Not surprisingly, that film did not enjoy the commercial success of *Clueless*. In the ensuing decade, Hollywood would grapple with how to make both discourses more marketable.

An always marketable issue is sexuality. The next chapter looks specifically at this issue in the films *American Pie* and *Thirteen*. Since the teen girl body is ubiquitous in film, focusing on issues of sexuality distills the representation of those bodies, creating a way to explore the

narratives surrounding the teen girl body. Both of these films locate teenage sexuality at the center of their plots and offer unique points of view regarding teen girls' attitudes toward sex specifically and their bodies more generally. The paths from *Clueless* to *American Pie* and *Kids* to *Thirteen* are similarly direct. Like the earlier film, *American Pie* found an impressive audience in 1999, featuring familiar high school characters and locations. The filmmakers augmented the formula with physical gross-out humor popularized in adult films such as *There's Something About Mary*. It was a winning combination. The film grossed over $102 million and led to many derivatives both within its franchise and beyond. On the other hand, *Thirteen* seemed to replicate both the critical response for *Kids* and its lackluster box office. One of the most significant aspects of *Thirteen* is its screenplay, which was co-authored by an adolescent woman. The assumed realism of the film, however, seems to authenticate the worst of the girls in crisis discourse, while the female characters in *American Pie* retain many of the characteristics of the girl power discourse.

The final chapter examines female friendships and social hierarchies as presented in the 2004 films *Mean Girls* and *Saved!* Although each film contains a conventional heterosexual romance narrative as a sub-plot, the primary narrative conflict is between female characters. While each of these films boasts a strong lineage tying them to the earlier films, they also reveal many changes in both the film genre and the discourses of girlhood. In order to trace this lineage, I examine the ways that each film responds to the subversive 1989 dark comedy *Heathers*. Even though this film predates both discourses, its narrative addresses many of the tropes of girl power and girls in crisis. Both *Mean Girls* and *Saved!* have softened their humor and satire, earning PG-13 ratings and reclaiming some of the audience enjoyed by *Clueless*. The only pairing to compare films of the same genre, these films also elucidate the role of comedy in erasing the

more controversial elements of both discourses. These films suggest a merging of the discourses, implicating commodification in that process.

As I undertake the obligations of discourse analysis and the reading of these films, I make no claim to objectivity. I have, however, tried to minimize any indicators of my personal affinity for the films under consideration. Too many authors in film studies offer readings of film without interrogating the material thoroughly or looking for inconsistencies in interpretation. It is my hope that my reading of the films and my analysis of the discourses being constructed will expand the growing conversation about girls and film rather than shut down or foreclose possibilities for further review. Ambiguities, multiple readings and interpretations do not weaken discourse analysis; they enrich it.

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[1] Sara Rimer, "For Girls, It's Be Yourself, and Be Perfect, Too," *New York Times*, April 1, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/01/education/01girls

[2] For more information about the work of Antonio Gramsci, see Forgacs, David, ed. 2000. *The Antonio Gramsci Reader, Selected Writings 1916-1935*.

[3] Some of the earliest discussion of Social Cognitive Theory was presented by Albert Bandura. See "Human Agency in Social Cognitive Theory." American Psychologist, 44, (1989): 1175-1184.

[4] An excellent example is the 1989 film *Heathers*. Though it attracted a small but devoted audience upon its initial release, the film received intense media scrutiny in the aftermath of the Columbine shootings.

2. CASE STUDY: EXAMINING GIRL POWER AND GIRLS IN CRISIS IN *CLUELESS* (1995) AND *KIDS* (1995)

As the summer of 1995 drew to a conclusion, Hollywood released two films that would have a profound effect on teen audiences and the adults who knew them. The texts seem to have little in common: the first, an independent, gritty documentary-type offering from rogue photographer turned first-time filmmaker Larry Clark; the second a glossy, flirty comedy from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* director Amy Heckerling. With its NC17-rating and relentless cinema verite exploration of a day in the life of New York City teenagers, *Kids* presents characters and situations devoid of hope or, in some cases, humanity. A continent away in sunny Los Angeles, the world of *Clueless* blossoms with colors, upbeat music, and, of course, love. Despite these stark contrasts in setting, tone, and plot, these films share a common characteristic: at the center of each is a 15-year-old girl. These characters reveal vast disparities in the prevailing discursive formulations of "girl."

Cher Horowitz is the heart and soul of *Clueless*; from the opening voiceover to the film's conclusion, we see Cher's world through her delightfully clueless eyes. The film covers roughly six months in the life of Cher as she manages the social lives of her group of friends. That audiences could come to identify with and root for a pampered, indulged blond from Beverly Hills is a testament to both the thoughtful writing and deft acting which are on display in virtually every frame of the film. Cher's inverse, perhaps, would be Jennie of *Kids*. While she has considerably less dialogue or screen time as the male anti-heroes Casper or Telly, *Kids* is very much Jennie's story. She is the only character we are encouraged to feel pity for, and practically all of the narrative tension comes from her quest to find Telly, with whom she shared

her first and only sexual experience. (It's never clear what she intends to do to Telly once she finds him, and for good reason: when she does find him, she can do nothing but watch him deflower yet another virgin.) The film's utter lack of redemptive possibilities is reinforced in its final moments as we witness Telly's friend Casper rape the unconscious Jennie. Filmed for an excruciatingly long two minutes, this image is the last we see of Jennie.

The appearance of these films at roughly the same moment contributed to what Timothy Shary calls the "latest expansion of youth movie production" (2002, 9). The youth movie is a shifting genre, made even more difficult to define by overlaps with various other categories. For most scholars, the presence of teenage characters in lead roles is the most important factor. While *Kids* was obviously a narrative about teenagers, its audience (both fans and detractors) was largely comprised of adults. *Clueless*, on the other hand, seemed to stumble upon a heretofore untapped movie audience: teen girls themselves. *Clueless* shocked Hollywood by becoming the largest grossing teen-film since *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* nearly a decade earlier, and the first of such films to feature a female lead. In contrast, *Kids* made only a fraction of *Clueless'*s $56 million box office, but shocked critics and other journalists made up for the financial disparity by creating a hype fueled by the film's sensationalism and graphic depictions of teenage sex and drug use. Those depictions even earned the film an NC17 rating, further limiting its market potential, but contributing to its reputation.

In addition to their critical and box office notoriety, these films serve to illustrate the prevailing attitudes and assumptions about teenage girls at the time. From the perspective of girlhood studies, the films represent an instructive juxtaposition. Both texts capture the zeitgeists of two discourses of girlhood in their nascent stages. Though neither text has an overt political agenda, they both participate in mainstream conversations about teen girls; in the decade plus

following their release, the titles of both films remain a sort of cultural shorthand for the dynamics they represent. Widespread cultural awareness of the texts probably had as much to do with media coverage and subsequent video release as with the actual theatrical runs of the films. In these ways, *Clueless* and *Kids* make visible not only the original distinctions between the girl power and girls in crisis discourses but also their mutual latent consumer potential.

Girl power has been called "a structure of belief and a set of consumer practices that center on the individual teenage girl's power to effect change in her universe" (Roberts 217); in some ways girls in crisis could likewise be called a structure of belief and set of consumer practices that center on individual teenage girl's inability to effect change in her universe. Although it would be convenient to position the girl power discourse in terms of reclamation and resistance and the girls in crisis discourse with panic and capitulation, we cannot accept either discourse as monolithic or the two together as binaries. Both have morphed over time and been contested by various groups. That both discourses emerged simultaneously offers an entry to many of the questions of girl studies. At this point in the 21st century, it is difficult to find an article relating to girls that does not allude in some way to either or both of these discourses. In "Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work of Connection: A Critical Review of American Girls' Studies" (2004), Janie Victoria Ward and Beth Cooper Benjamin cite the "cultural schizophrenia" of these two discourses but assert its potential to "faithfully represent girls' lived experience" (22). Such schizophrenia becomes further complicated when the discourses themselves are destabilized. As dynamic discourses, both girl power and girls in crisis bring together disparate attitudes, synthesizing ideas and recombining them. While it would be simplistic to suggest that each discourse has simply "positive" and "negative" attributes, the discourses offer a variety of emphases that can be used for a variety of academic, social or

political means. For the girl power discourse, this split often falls along the line of agency through action versus agency through consumption; for girls in crisis, the divide centers on the tension between exposing vulnerability and creating victims. Both discourses contribute limited, at times even contradictory, representations of girlhood, but they each provides a lens for the framing of the girl studies.

In the opening chapters of their book *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power, and Social Change*, authors Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris identify and explore these discourses, establishing them as discordant yet complementary approaches to girlhood. Their position echoes that of Ward and Benjamin, that while neither of these discourses represents the whole continuum of girlhood experiences, it is the careful negotiation of them that creates a rich space for contemporary girl studies. In addition to their thoughtful overview of the discourses, Aapola, Gonick and Harris suggest that "how these discourses are circulated" is a critical concern for scholars (19). Film representation certainly accounts for a fraction of that circulation, particularly at a time when cinema viewership among teens was on the rise as was media attention to the lives of teenagers. As part of these discourses, two films from 1995 have significant contributions to the construction of girl identities. As polysemic texts, all films lend themselves to multiple readings; the readings offered in this study are not necessarily dominant or preferred readings. Instead, they present a way of making the two discourses of girlhood intelligible through specific characters. In this reading, the female lead of each film articulates the prevailing discourse of girlhood in her film.

Before examining the ways in which Cher and Jennie personify many of the attributes of the girl power and girls in crisis discourses respectively, it is instructive to consider their similarities. Physically, the characters and the actors who portray them represent stereotypical

cultural ideals. Both white, blond, and conventionally attractive, Alicia Silverstone (who plays Cher) and Chloe Sevigny (Jennie) exude an approachability coupled with traditional good looks. This attractiveness complements their characters as both Cher and Jennie are shown as popular, friendly, and supportive of others. While their ultimate character arcs differ, audiences are expected to view each young woman sympathetically. That they are both white also complicates both discourses. Girls in crisis and girl power both purport to speak to all categories of girlhood, seeming to erase racial identity when in fact they more often simply ignore all but white girls. On screen, whiteness is once again normalized not only by the race of the female leads but also by their friends. Both Cher and Jennie have black best friends (Dionne and Ruby) who are more sexually experienced and generally edgier in their clothing, speech, and sexual histories. The black girls serve as foils for the white leads. Even class seems to be collapsed in these films. Cher's upper class lifestyle does very little to make her seem inaccessible. Her class status is gently pilloried, making her material excesses seem endearing. Jennie is construed as middle class, but there is no question or concern over her resources. Essentially, for both heroines money and class status are non-issues; the same appears to be the case in both the girl power and girls in crisis discourses. The assumption of a white, middle class person as the basis of each discourse of girlhood limits the utility of both. Neither discourse provides a thorough analysis of privilege as a relevant backdrop aspect of identity formation. This foreclosure is particularly acute in pop culture where producers are even more likely to justify the exclusion of certain racial and class representations by suggesting a need to appeal to a broad audience. Within these limited parameters however, the characters diverge along lines that suggest their connections to the prevailing discourses.

While the girl power discourse is slightly more prevalent in scholarly literature of girlhood, it is in no way fixed. Many authors choose to focus exclusively on the discourse's more seemingly positive or negative attributes, side-stepping the sometimes contentious use of the term. The potential for girls' agency and empowerment is cited among some scholars (Kearney 2002) while the term is mired in a consumerist, faux-feminist sentiment for others (Griffin 2004). Such positions may prove useful for exploring specific manifestations of girl culture, but offer little cohesion. Somewhat improbably, Cher Horowitz illustrates many of the contradictions of the term.

Aapola, Gonick and Harris offer this assessment of the girl power discourse, succinctly showing both the positive attributes as well as the liabilities of the girl power discourse: "It offers [girls] an image of young femininity which is about possibility, limitless potential and the promise of control over the future. Embedded in the concept is a sense that a life of success and happiness is within reach of girls who learn the skills and/or have the characteristics necessary for continual self-invention" (2005, 39). As a protagonist, Cher represents the "limitless potential" promised by the girl power discourse. She is largely shown as being in-control of her world; she is a decision-maker, a well-adjusted and confident young woman. The audience witnesses Cher's control in the opening sequence as we peer over her shoulder as she peruses her clothing options on a personal computer. We learn immediately that Cher understands and takes very seriously the practices of image management. On a daily basis, therefore, she participates in the reinvention suggested by Aaploa, Gonick and Harris. The narrative arc of the entire film also affirms this project as Cher faces various obstacles and gains insight and maturity in response.

In this process, Cher demonstrates both the interpersonal skills and personal characteristics necessary to achieve whatever goals she sets for herself. Faced at the outset of the

film with disappointing grades, Cher undertakes complicated negotiations with (and manipulation of) her teachers. Her machinations include fixing up two single teachers, a project which has positive results for all involved. (In fact, the conclusion of the film occurs at the wedding of those teachers.) The narrative suggests that academic success is not as important as interpersonal relationships, offering a seemingly traditionally gendered perspective that for girls, social skills trump scholastic talent. This reading is complicated, somewhat, by the response of Cher's father who recognizes in Cher's success some of his own talent as a litigator. When he learns that she has raised her grades through negotiation, he tells her that he "couldn't be prouder if they were based on real grades."

In addition to the father/daughter relationship, Cher benefits from a myriad of caring friends and adults. Cher defies conventional (yet ironic) teen film tropes by being both popular and well-liked. Viewers learn from the first frames of the film that Cher is surrounded by a supportive network of friends and family who encourage her. Despite the death of her mother at a young age, Cher appears to have developed coping mechanisms (such as talking to her mother's portrait and gaining strength from it) and has a healthy relationship with her father. By the conclusion of the film, we learn that Cher's most important relationship is actually with her ex-step-brother, Josh. The transformation of that relationship from one characterized by sibling rivalry and teasing to a reciprocal, romantic coupling parallels Cher's own development.

Such a character was not new, of course. In fact, the inspiration for *Clueless* came from Jane Austen's novel *Emma*. Nevertheless, the result of this cinematic creation was a new subject-position for girls on film. Writer/director Amy Heckerling, best known for her earlier teen pic *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, sought to create a female heroine like the ones she admired from her own girlhood. In doing so, she rejected the prevailing girl imagery of the bitchy popular girl

or the generic girlfriend and replaced such imagery by reclaiming other girly objects such as clothes and friends. This celebration of girlhood and its artifacts plays into the complexity of the girl power discourse.

Like all dynamic discourses, girl power both evolved from and into disparate concepts and constructions. In *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power, and Social Change,* Aapola, Gonick and Harris trace the development of girl power, using two references from music to demonstrate the evolution. They position the tradition of independent female musicians (labeled the Riot Grrrl tradition) as the origin of the discourse, moving to its more commercial incarnations (named after the British pop group the Spice Girls). They note, for example, the critical changes from the DIY, anti-consumerist leanings of the early 90s to the proliferation of mass-produced commodities of mall culture (22-23). Far from unilaterally denouncing the term as having been appropriated by the apparatuses of patriarchy, the authors contend that the term must be handled with care. Their analysis underscores the lack of a monolithic meaning of the term girl power. The release of *Clueless* seems to coincide with a moment of transition within the discourse, signaling its participation in both aspects of the continuum, and perhaps suggesting an illustrative link between them.

Cher dominates practically every frame of *Clueless*. Alternating between shots of Cher and shots of whatever she is looking at, the filmmaker clearly establishes Cher as the centerpiece of the film. Along with extensive voiceover from the character, this subjective focalization invites the reader to get inside Cher's mind, making it easy to empathize with her. The camera seems to rest on her radiant face and hair; the combination of lighting and grooming establish the aesthetic of romanticized perfection. Except in the few scenes in which she is psychologically distressed, Cher's image exudes an effortless, organic beauty and unique personal style. While

her fashion does not capture the DIY ethos of the earliest girl power proponents, fashion is linked throughout the film with individual expression. A scene in which rival Amber appears in a dress worn earlier by Cher shows the importance of personal style to these characters. Upon seeing Amber, Cher derides her by asking “Was that you going through my laundry?” Amber is seen to have clearly transgressed an important expectation within their social group by wearing Cher’s exact outfit. Even though some visual cues undercut this individuation, to the characters, their fashion choices separate them from one another.

The importance of image maintenance is best acknowledged in Cher’s makeover of new student Tai. Presented in a montage and set to an upbeat pop song entitled “I Want to be a Supermodel,” Tai’s makeover gives Cher a chance to experience what Dionne calls a “sense of control in a world full of chaos.” This narrative has led to serious challenges to the film, notably in the reliance of a makeover and the implications of a first world/third world dynamic between Cher and Tai (Hatch 1996; Wald 2002). Inherent within these readings and the text itself, however, lies the assertion that image maintenance is a source of power for adolescent girls. Despite her initial reluctance, by the end of the 60-second sequence, Tai appears jubilant, appearing in a miniskirt and t-shirt in Cher’s three-way mirror. (It should be noted that Cher’s approach to the makeover is holistic: in addition to wardrobe consultation, she establishes a regimen of reading “one non-school book a week” to help improve Tai’s vocabulary.) Although Cher does exert pressure on Tai to conform to the physical standards and behavioral expectations of her peer group, Tai ultimately benefits from the transformation while staying true to her own goals. She joins Cher’s popular clique, eventually seeming to eclipse Cher. She demonstrates her independence first by confronting Cher midway through the film and later by choosing a boyfriend from outside the clique without the approval of Cher or Dionne. Tai’s makeover, it

appears, has given her the confidence to pursue her own agenda. By the conclusion of the film, Cher and Tai have negotiated a strengthened bond of friendship based on mutual respect and increased self-awareness on each girl's part. Their eventual collaboration and mutual support suggest a type of sisterhood and solidarity reminiscent of the earliest grass-roots types of girl power.

Along with Tai, Josh provides the catalyst for Cher's own growth as a character. Her scenes with Josh not only highlight the importance of his approval, but also serve as a barometer of Cher's evolving maturity and self-awareness. In this way, the traditional romance plot is reconfigured; the obstacle facing the would-be couple is internal, Cher's own "cluelessness," a condition characterized by a lack of self-awareness. No matter how confident or empowered she may be, Cher's agency often has unexpected results. For example, in a subplot taken directly from *Emma*, Cher's efforts to set up Tai with popular guy Elton backfire and make him think Cher herself likes him. Although Cher confidently proceeded with her plan, she has seriously misjudged the situation with Elton, resulting in hurt feelings and frustration. It is only after Cher realizes her affection for Josh that she is able to see herself critically, and therefore use her confidence and agency effectively. Although she expresses initial annoyance at his constant presence at her home, Cher consistently finds in Josh a useful, even heroic, companion. When Cher is left stranded in an unfamiliar neighborhood by classmate Elton, Josh picks her up, literally rescuing her. Although Cher has already been mugged at gunpoint, the film doesn't linger on such unpleasantness, opting instead to focus on the opportunity for Cher and Josh to bond. Even though Cher does not perceive Josh as a potential suitor at that point, he provides a foil for the heartless Elton, a superficial cad that Cher had hoped to link to Tai. Cher rejects his aggressive advances, turning to the protective Josh. He later provides a foil to another of Cher's

potential suitors, Christian. Though in some ways as innocuous a rival as Elton, Christian inspires intense dislike and distrust in Josh, probably because he can tell how much Cher is interested in him. When Cher chooses new classmate Christian as a suitable boyfriend and potential sexual partner, she pursues him deliberately, even if relying on traditional gender roles. The entire narrative of Cher's pursuit of Christian provides a lens to view the film's treatment of sexuality.

Cher consciously pursues Christian with the intent of seducing him in order to lose her virginity. She orchestrates the details of such an encounter, only to be stymied and learn later that Christian is gay. The filmmaker provides several clues to signal to the reader that the relationship between Cher and Christian will not be consummated. In the preparation montage, Cher is consistently seen as flustered, erratic, and poorly made-up. While these signals might seem perfectly normal in an adolescent on the verge of a important transition, they serve to remind the audience that Cher is not herself in this context. Ultimately (even before she learns about his sexuality), Cher decides not to pursue a sexual relationship. The film affirms not only this decision by Cher, but also Dionne's decision to have sex with her boyfriend and Tai's self-acknowledged status as sexually-active. In this way the film affirms the girl power position of self-confidence and agency. Cher's decision to remain a virgin is seen, therefore, not as the "right" choice, but rather as the right choice for her. This decision is complemented and affirmed by Josh, whose attraction to Cher is respectful and chaste. By the end of the film, when the characters acknowledge their romantic affection for one another, we understand that Cher's misadventures in love were merely prologue to her real relationship. Likewise, her realization that Josh is an appropriate partner signals her maturity and recognition of a new value system.

Ironically, Cher discovers her true feelings for Josh while engaging in retail therapy. On the heels of a personal failure (flunking her driver's test), Cher seeks solace in a familiar space in which she feels in control, at the mall. Though a pained expression and a useful voiceover, however, we learn that shopping has not brought any satisfaction, and in fact, makes her feel more dissatisfied as she realizes that what she wants most, Josh, can be neither bought nor won with material goods. (This epiphany is punctuated by the filmmaker with swelling orchestration over a long shot of Cher in front of bursting fountains.) From this point on (only the final 15 minutes of so of the film), Cher sets about her own makeover. This transformation also allows the film to address Cher's flaws in a tidy sequence.

In their first shared scene, Josh reprimands Cher for being disinterested in politics saying "In some places, maybe not in Contempo Casual, it's considered cool to know what's going on in the world." This criticism highlights Cher's two major flaws: her ignorance of the world beyond herself and her consumerist tendencies. Indeed, these charges might be leveled at teenagers in general. These traits are handled with humor in the film, however, inviting the teen audience to laugh at themselves as they laugh at Cher. In this way, these detractions are neutralized and even held up for critique. Audiences are supposed to laugh at Cher's possessions, in particular her idea that she is "way normal" when she is in fact very privileged. In response to her feelings for Josh, Cher recognizes that she needs to pursue opportunities to give back to the community. She uses her popularity and task-management skills to organize a clothing drive for refugees, symbolically addressing both character flaws. The filmmaker uses Cher's relationship to her clothes to demonstrate her growth as a character: whereas early in the film she derides a character who has ruined her designer shoes, she later empties her closet as part of the relief effort.

Although the clothing drive conveniently responds to several critiques of Cher's value system, the film cannot skirt some of its implications. Cher's can-do attitude and commitment to help her community underscore some of the more problematic elements of the girl power discourse. While Cher is ultimately more empowered by giving away her clothes rather than buying more, she is nonetheless in a position to do both, making her choice and self-determinism the locus for action. Girl power's focus on the individual as the sole subject or agent of change operates in concert with the pervasive neo-liberalism that characterizes much of U.S. culture: by regarding and promoting girls as "fully self-responsible" (Aapola et al 2005, 37), girl power disavows systemic oppression. Furthermore, Cher's power seems to come from her status as a consumer, a charge leveled against girl power more generally.

The final scene of the film poses another troubling perspective that somewhat curtails many of the ideas of girl power. In true Jane Austen fashion, the film ends at a wedding (of the two teachers Cher has set up earlier). Before the bouquet toss, Josh informs Cher that the guys have placed a wager on which girl will get the bouquet; Cher confidently assures him that "it's in the bag." Indeed, the final images of the film reveal many girls wrestling for the bouquet, Cher emerging triumphant, and Josh smiling appreciatively. This brief scene capitalizes on a "hyperfeminine and heteronormative characterization" that ultimately serve to reinscribe patriarchal values (Newsom 2005, 5). Cher's agency and power are completely contained within a social and cultural landscape that prizes heterosexual coupling as the primary objective for girls. Even though some critics may be tempted to dismiss the final scene as a necessary but ultimately unrealistic homage to the ubiquitous wedding resolutions of Jane Austen novels, the decision by the filmmaker to leave the viewer with these codes problematizes the narrative of empowerment.

Although such critical readings are possible, it is also possible to read Cher's actions as ultimately more positive than negative. Efforts such as the clothing drive and Tai's makeover show that Cher is seeking to share with others the elements of her life that bring her pleasure and a sense of self. Throughout the film, Cher is shown as generally happy although she has bouts of failure and confusion. Most important, Cher is likable, and through her surprising depth, she provides an examination of her own identity. Her resilience, self-actualization and confidence are hallmarks of the girl power discourse. The film, like the discourse, asserts the contributions, values, and talents of young women. Perhaps more important, it creates a visibility for such characters as Cher on screen and powerful audiences off-screen. The overwhelming box office success of *Clueless* no doubt paved the way for other girl power projects.

In contrast, Larry Clark's *Kids* seems much more invested in titillating and shocking, rather than entertaining or empowering, its audience. There appears to be very little effort to create any characters with whom the audience can relate, and the audience itself is not intended to be teenagers. Indeed, the girls in *Kids* seem to be cautionary tales, rather than fully developed characters. Even so (and possibly as a result), the film offers a valuable image of the girls in crisis discourse.

Aapola, Gonick and Harris examine what they call the Reviving Ophelia discourse (what I have called the girls in crisis discourse) concluding that while it is more homogeneous in its representations of girls, it is as nuanced and potentially unstable as girl power (40). Characterized by a sense of pervasive vulnerability and loss of authenticity, the girls in crisis discourse focuses on the psychology of girls which, according to early girls studies scholars, had been an invisible topic for years (41-44). But replacing invisibility with vulnerability leads to further complications. At the center of *Kids*, Jennie serves as a metonym for this vulnerability.

An essentially innocent character (at least compared to her peers), Jennie suffers throughout the film, from her early diagnosis as HIV positive until her rape in the final scene of the film. In addition to this narrative arc of humiliation and victimization, Jennie is represented on film as essentially powerless. Consistently shot from behind, the filmmaker constructs Jennie's hapless journey not as a hero's quest, but as a compulsion. After she learns of her HIV status, we do not see Jennie's entire face in full light for the duration of the film. She is literally framed in shadows, a fractured image, never in control of her own movement.

At first, Jennie seems to have some markers of empowerment. She talks with ease about her attitudes toward sex, admitting that she is less experienced than some of her friends. She even agrees to accompany her friend Ruby to get an AIDS test. It is at this point in the narrative that Jennie's power is removed. As soon as she receives her HIV-positive results, Jennie becomes the innocent victim. While she feels driven to find Telly, her only sexual partner and therefore the understood source of her infection, she lacks the access to power to fulfill her mission. As if to punctuate this powerlessness, Jennie's vulnerability is cruelly demonstrated by her opportunistic rape by Telly's friend Casper, made possible as a result of drugs she is given by another acquaintance. Throughout the film, Jennie is objectified and taken advantage of; in terms of the crisis discourse, she is the girl whose situation evokes sympathy and a call to intervene. Unfortunately for Jennie, there are no competent adults present in the film to heed that call.

Jennie's narrative underscores a critical component of the girls in crisis discourse. In the film, Jennie's character is little more than her body, a vessel and symbol for the corrosive destructive outcome of the reckless behavior of directionless adolescents. The violation of her body symbolizes the violation of herself. The *Young Femininity* authors take particular issue

with any move that collapses the teenage girl body and the teenage girl psyche, a move that Pipher herself makes in *Reviving Ophelia*. Such an equation places additional importance on the body as the site of development and identity (Aapola et al 2005, 46). *Kids* contributes to this fetishized concept of the teenage female body. Jennie provides a form and a face, however incomplete, to epitomize this crisis. (To her credit, actress Chloe Sevigny's portrayal hints at multiple dimensions; unfortunately, the filmmaker resists any exploration of the character.)

Jennie's movement throughout the film reveals her isolation and helplessness. When we first see her in the relative safety of a bedroom surrounded by girl friends, she seems at ease. For most of the film, however, Jennie is outside, in pursuit of Telly, separated from both the girls she was with earlier, and the partiers attendant to Telly and Casper. Jennie manages to be isolated even when she is in close physical proximity to others; her dialogue is clipped and her demeanor vacant. Whereas Telly and Casper are constantly in motion, walking and talking, jumping turnstiles, courting girls, stating fights, Jenny is oddly still, even in her pursuit. One of her longest sequences occurs within a cab. Jennie is steady within the frame, with the movement implied in the blur of scenery outside the window. In every frame, Jennie seems out of place. Her inability to connect with the other characters is made most painfully clear when she finally reaches Telly, as he is deflowering his second virgin of the film, and she cannot say anything. She stands in the doorway, silhouetted in shadow, until Telly yells to close the door. We watch as she stumbles among the passed out youths festooning the sofas and floor, ultimately joining them. We do not see Jennie's face again; even as Casper is raping her, we only see her arms and legs, limp as doll parts, and seemingly unconnected from her identity.

Jennie's perpetual motion without motion, following Telly without clear direction or purpose, underscores the audience's sympathy for her. In a film aimed at adults, Jennie is the one

the audience is meant to want to save. Indeed, the importance of intervention is perhaps the most important feature of the girls in crisis discourse. As shown by Mazzaralla and Pecora, the audience and participants in the crisis discourse appear to be adults. Since one of the contributing factors of the crisis is girls' ultimate loss of control or access to resources, a dependency on adults is created. Aapola, Gonick and Harris go further, looking critically at the common reflections of adult women about their own girlhood experiences in much of the girls in crisis literature: "This focus on adult women as the real beneficiaries of the girl movement is problematic both in terms of its political efficacy for young women, and for its tendency to commercialize the Ophelia crisis to create an adult (and therefore wealthier) market for books, programs, workshops and the like" (47). The result is an Ophelia Industry that many feminist critics denounce as ultimately harmful to girls (Baumgardner and Richards). The *Young Femininity* authors conclude that while the girls in crisis discourse did bring real issues of girlhood struggles to the spotlight, its ultimate implication is to individualize such problems and address them through personal improvement, guided by appropriate adults.

Much like the girls in crisis discourse as a whole, the adult audience is seen as having the ability to prevent stories like Jennie's from happening. Although it is the male characters who commit the audacious acts in the film, it is Jennie who is punished. Doubly victimized through HIV infection and rape, Jennie represents the countless girls who are "casualties of our cultural chaos" (Pipher 1994, 210). These particular sexual outcomes provoke a parental panic. As Pipher asserts

> Parents have always been worried about their daughters' sexual behavior, but now, in a time of date rape, herpes and AIDS, they can be sex-phobic. Traditionally parents have

> wondered what their teens were doing, but now, teens are much more likely to be doing things that can get them killed (1994, 28).

The fact that Jennie's family support is completely absent throughout the film underscore the message that hers is the fate of girls whose parents are not diligent in their obligation to protect their daughters. In creating Jennie as the ultimate innocent victim, the film also presents a particular view of sexuality that does not include female agency. Scholar Timothy Shary (2002) is particularly critical of the film's masculinist and patriarchal representation of teenage sexuality (234). Henry Giroux (1998) concludes that the young women in the film offer little more than bodies for male power and pleasure: "Passivity and helplessness become the privileged modes of behavior as the girls in the film follow the lead of the male characters, silently observe their expressions of brutality, and plead tearfully when they become the objects of such violence" (33). The very passivity and helplessness which appear to have offended some viewers represent some of the trademarks of the girls in crisis discourse. In *Reviving Ophelia*, Pipher repeatedly tells the reader that girls are "too vulnerable," their "planning and processing skills not adequate" to fend for themselves (208). In the context of the book, such characterizations are meant to inspire parents to be supportive, affirming presences for their daughters; Jennie's narrative in *Kids* seems to warn parents about what will happen if they fail to do so.

However offensive it may have been, such depictions were salient and the film attracted major media attention. Even though the NC-17 rating made it less than successful at box office, the culture of legend, rumor, and extrapolation prevailed: even people who hadn't seen it knew about it. In this way, the hype surrounding *Kids* was similar to the propagation of crisis discourse. Whether or not the narrative reflected reality, its salience and the threat it posed to

traditional thinking about teenagers contributed to the growing urgency of the girls in crisis discourse.

What would Jennie and Cher have to say to one another if they were to meet in some filmic surreality? After discussing hair care and grooming (seemingly the only topic they might have in common), what could they possibly discuss? Just as these individual girls reveal a stark contrast, so do the girl power and girls in crisis discourses. Although each discourse opens up new spaces for the formation of girl, they are also both limited. Whereas girl power promotes an empowerment through which girls can optimize their personal potential, this power is limited, individual and temporal. Although the girls in crisis discourse shines a light on many of the largely overlooked realities of female adolescence, its denial of agency for young women and its over-reliance on traditional family units reinforce potentially oppressive systems. Certainly, both discourses offer no meaningful critique of privilege, taking for granted a white, middle class identity that seems to be a prerequisite for girlhood. Both discourses also foreclose formulations of girlhood that involve systemic changes or disruptions. Even as early as 1995, when these discourses were emerging as intact, discrete sets of practices, their potential for subversion was being undermined. In pop culture and film in particular, the market demands would continue to limit the discourses throughout the next decade, making them palatable, even reassuring to the dominant order. The following chapters explore the ways in which the discourses work in conflict and concert to shape particular cultural conversations surrounding female sexuality and sexual agency as female friendships and social structures. Using the girl power and girls in crisis discourses, the chapters investigate how the films participate in the discursive formulation of the "girl," how these pivotal issues are framed and produced for mass audiences.

3. CASE STUDY: EXPLORING REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE SEXUAL AGENCY IN *AMERICAN PIE* (1999) AND *THIRTEEN* (2003)

Progressive educators, parents and activists have long decried the lack of thoughtful, critical attention paid to the sex lives of teenage girls. While many factors have contributed to this silencing, the sexual urges, anxieties, and practices of this population have been largely unexplored territory. Pop culture has been one site where a representation of adolescent female sexuality and sexual agency has occurred, but the response has been mixed to say the least.

Over 18 years ago, self-described feminist educator Michelle Fine identified "the missing discourse of desire" as one of the most important issues facing adolescents (1988). She is quick to point out, however, that simply because female pleasure has been absent from historical and official discourses of sexuality, it most certainly is not absent from the lived experiences of many girls. More recently, educators such as Catherine Ashcroft have criticized sex education curricula for not placing enough emphasis on pleasure, especially the vast array of possibilities for women to experience sexual pleasure. As she puts it, so much cultural energy has been invested in teaching girls to "just say no" to sex, there is no opportunity to discuss the option if they want to say yes (2003, 43).

The dominant discourses of girlhood at the turn of the 21st century offered little new ideas to the conversation. The breadth of both the girl power and girls in crisis discourses provide contradictory messages about female sexuality. While some proponents of girl power might align themselves with pro-sex feminists, others are just as likely to cite the empowerment of being able to say no. Most of the literature from the girls in crisis camp is more uniformly pessimistic about adolescent female sexuality, but tends to group it with a host of other practices

as evidence of pervasive psychological distress. Interestingly, both discourses can be found in the abstinence movement which has been so important (but problematic) in U.S. education and pop culture.

An interesting effect of the rhetoric of the abstinence movement has been to reduce sexual behavior to a binary of vaginal intercourse on one side and everything else on the other. The tendency of teens and educators alike to reduce discussion (and in some cases, thought) about the vast possibilities of "everything else" as subordinate to vaginal intercourse truncates the exploration of pleasure and desire. There is little public or private discourse, for example, about girls and masturbation (Wiseman 2002, 188). As a result of this discursive binary, desire is usually trumped by the threat of pregnancy or disease, or replaced altogether by vague references to morality and self-respect (Irvine 2002).

While teen cinema largely reflects the absence of conversation of adolescent female desire, it can also reveal a range of attitudes and stances regarding the sexuality of girls. Two films released in 1999 and 2003 reveal the range of the genre. At the time of its release, *American Pie* ranked second only to *Porky's* as the highest grossing high school film in history.[1] Following the release of *There's Something About Mary*, a comedy noted for its ground-breaking development of physical gross-out humor, *American Pie* brought this new slapstick to the teen film genre. Almost five years later, Catherine Hardwicke's *Thirteen*, though grossing nearly $100 million less than *American Pie*, garnered the positive attention of film critics nationwide, earning an Oscar nod for Holly Hunter and proving to be a career making turn for star Evan Rachel Wood. At the time of their respective releases, *Pie* was most often cited for its over-the-top gross-out humor, and *Thirteen* was lauded widely as "brilliant," "pitch-perfect" and both "tender and merciless."[2]

A traditional studio release, *American Pie* follows what scholar Tim Shary calls the sex-quest, a time-honored plot as four male protagonists at a Michigan high school intend to lose their virginity before graduation (Shary 2002, 234-238). This device relies on the many discourses of virginity as counter-indicated with masculinity which have pervaded teen and adult films for years (Whatley 1991). *Thirteen*, released by major independent distributor, Fox Searchlight, chooses an even older teen narrative: the juvenile delinquent melodrama. Set in the white-washed Midwest, *American Pie* appears as an obvious descendant of the John Hughes films; its comedic resolution also adds to this lineage. *Thirteen* stakes its territory in the more racially diverse sophisticated San Fernando Valley and establishes a realism that reminds the audience of the real-world domestic dramas faced by teens.

Perhaps the most important similarity between the films is the decision of both directors to establish verisimilitude through dialogue and set: the teens in the films speak with authentic profanity and specificity, and the films have the R ratings to prove it. Such a categorization always carries interesting implications for a teen film. Since the purpose of the R-rating is to restrict audiences to viewers over age 17, a teen film is limited immediately by such a designation. In the case of *American Pie*, the protagonists of the film are high school seniors, ostensibly 17 or 18 themselves, so the R-rating still affords an audience of their peers. For *Thirteen*, the protagonists are much younger, opening up many questions about audience. Most reviewers felt that parents were the most appropriate audience for the film, many noting that it might be useful for parents to take their teens with them to see the film (a practice condoned by the R-rating).

While these divergent films present characters and situations worthy of such a rating, they might seem an odd pairing for an examination of adolescent female sexuality. Indeed,

neither film is actually about female sexuality at all, which is essentially the point. For all of its importance as a topic in academia or the media, adolescent female sexuality rarely becomes the narrative focus of contemporary film. When it does, it is usually part of a larger romance narrative in which the issues of sexuality are sublimated. More often, female sexuality, and by extension, the teen girl body, is the context in which the rest of the narrative plays out. This is certainly the case in both of the films under consideration even though they represent widely divergent genres. The sexualized adolescent female body provides a locus for other people's narratives: the male heroes' sex quests in *American Pie* and the power struggle between maternal love and the allure of popularity and friendship in *Thirteen*. Although both narratives rely on the sexual behavior of a girl (or girls), neither text invests much narrative time developing those characters. By looking at texts such as *American Pie* and *Thirteen* with an eye toward this context, subtle ideas and messages about teen girl sexuality emerge. The comedic narrative of *American Pie* reinscribes the pro-sex, empowerment messages of the girl power discourse; the dramatic tension in *Thirteen* uses the sexual initiation of an adolescent female (literally, a girl in crisis) to reveal her own susceptibility to dangerous forces in her life and her eventual reliance on her mother to save her from those forces.

American Pie presents an uncomplicated view of female sexuality: at the end of the day, the girls all like sex. Just as the film brought the gross-out aesthetic of adult comedy to high school, it also ascribes the notion of "do-me feminism" to its teenage girl characters.[3] The film does not explore any of the body issues that could be related to sex; all of the females conform to a narrow aesthetic model and seem to be well-adjusted and neurosis free. Focusing mostly on the point-of-view of the male protagonists, *American Pie* does not investigate the anxiety of the female characters, if they even have any; there are no tears, no dressing-room appraisals of their

bodies and certainly nothing as drastic as an eating disorder. (Ironically, the female characters who present as most informed and comfortable with their sexuality do not participate in any sexual relationships during the film.) This simplified view eagerly gleans only the pro-sex empowerment potential of the girl power discourse that could help the male protagonists on their quests. At the same time, the nature of the sex quest reinscribes the traditionally feminine role as "gate-keeper" of sexuality. This subject position is updated somewhat, in that the girls want to have sex; the traditional position is celebrated, perhaps even reified, in that the girls have control over their own (and therefore the male protagonists') sexual behavior. In this way as well, the text participates in the girl power discourse, affirming conventional femininity and the responsibility of individual girls for their sexual actions. For the girls, their knowledge of and eagerness to engage in sexual activity, in concert with their discretion and judgment about how and when to do so, is taken as proof of their sophistication and well-being.

On the other end of the representation spectrum, *Thirteen* presents an equally uncomplicated view of female sexuality: it is pathological and symptomatic of a host of unhealthy, problematic behaviors. While female protagonists Tracy and Evie engage in sexual behavior in a variety of contexts, the film tends to ignore the motivations and even outcomes of their behavior. Rather, sex is seen in a continuum with other activities such as cutting, body art, or drug use. The female body remains the site for these activities, but the relationship or possible divide between the girls and their bodies is never explored. In this way, the film presents the fractured selves described in *Reviving Ophelia*. In the film, sex (like the rest of these body practices) seems to be about almost everything except sex. To her mother, Tracy's sexual behavior is a source of fear and a cause for concern; for the girls themselves, it symbolizes their status and rebellion. Sex has an inverse effect on these relationships: it drives a wedge between

mother and daughter while it promotes intensified bonding between Tracy and her more experienced friend. *Thirteen* reminds us that, for teenage girls, talking about sex with your female friends is as important as having sex with anonymous boys. This storyline illustrates several of the points made by Pipher in *Reviving Ophelia*. Tracy exemplifies the girl who "at [her] most vulnerable time [rejects] the help of the one person who wants most to understand [her] needs" (105). As the other part of this dyad, Mel struggles with the essential maternal task according to Pipher: "to encourage [her] daughter to grow into [an adult] and yet keep {her} from being hurt" (103). The primacy of this relationship is reified throughout the girls in crisis discourse; the insinuation of an outsider in *Thirteen* is as much a threat as Tracy's spiraling behavior. There is no space presented for sex to be anything but a symptom of deep unrest and instability for girls. Thus, while *Thirteen* and *American Pie* have very different representations of female sexuality, both texts limit that representation to familiar narratives and roles drawn from narrow aspects of the girl power and girls in crisis discourse. Both films are confined to these tropes, foreclosing their discursive potential to expand the ways we think about girls and sex.

Although *American Pie*'s central plot seems to do little but rehash time-worn tropes of male sexuality, the film does open up – or at least update – sexual perspectives for both the male and female characters. The dynamic for the protagonists isn't simply from virginal to experienced: the characters actually change how they feel about sex because they learn something. Two scenes in a diner book-end the film. While the four male protagonists discuss sex over food, a move that could be seen as furthering a sex-as-consumption motif (Bell-Metereau 2001), this reading is undercut by the fact that these scenes reveal a sensitive, and more importantly, a dynamic attitude to sex. Media scholar Tim Shary posits that:

> as the boys move toward their climactic first times, they each earn a modicum of self-esteem by rising above their initially base impulses and learning to treat the self-assured girls with respect, so that all of their eventual sex scenes are rendered tender and/or humorous, and furthermore, they are all ultimately celebratory, a phenomenon that had been minimized in American youth films for over a decade. Perhaps the common acceptance of safe sex (which is clearly practiced in the film) and the refreshing sense of confident female sexual pleasure that the film promotes signal further changes in the film industry's attitudes toward teen sex (Shary 2002: 238).

American Pie presents characters that complicate essentialist notions of sexuality, i.e. the narrative that men want to have sex and women want to have intimate relationships. The film stresses the importance of female orgasm and multiple characters participate in on-screen discussions of (and one on-screen depiction of) female masturbation. The pleasure of the female characters is the pivotal issue, inverting previous discourses by allowing female sex drives to be shown as just as powerful as those of the males characters. The film also allows a refutation of male sex drive when Jim declares "I'm so tired of all this bullshit pressure to have sex. You know, I haven't even had sex and I already can't stand it. Yes, I hate sex."

In many ways, the adolescent female characters offer the most sex-positive portrayals, a stance that can rightly be seen as somewhat subversive in teen film, but echoes many of the empowerment tropes of the girl power discourse. As Ashcroft (2003) asserts, the "young women of *American Pie* make conscious, calculated, informed decisions about their sexuality, potentially challenging traditional and official discourses that position them as naïve, inexperienced innocents who may unwittingly be lured into giving away their virginity" (63). For their part, the male characters demonstrate sexual maturity "in terms of their full acceptance

of the sensual and sexual equality of their female partners" (Kaveney 138). While this growth represents dynamism on the part of the male characters, the female characters show less change. For the girls, maturity is demonstrated by being able to enjoy sex (which is understood to be synonymous with achieving orgasm). The ones who already possess this skill at the beginning of the film maintain it, and the ones who do not acquire it. That girls enjoy sex as a general rule is not questioned. The text presents girls who are fully self-responsible for their sexuality: not only do they determine when to have sex and with whom, but they also take steps to ensure that the sex they have is pleasurable. Such representation clearly participates in the girl power discourse. The girls all typify a type of empowerment that is "both subversive and reaffirming to the patriarchy" (Newsom 2005, 4), perhaps suggesting why the film enjoyed popularity with audiences and critics. The narrative presents hyperfeminine female characters, all of whom conform to very traditional standards of beauty, who assert their knowledge about and their desire for sex. Because they "stand up for themselves…while maintaining a distinctly feminine style" (Newsom 2005, 3), these characters affirm girl power as long as it works alongside boy power rather than posing a threat to it.

Amid these sex-positive depictions, however, the film also suggests that girls still occupy the decision-making (or "gate-keeping") role in sexual relationships. The most traditional sex-as-element-of-romance narrative concerns protagonist Kevin and his girlfriend Vicky. Arguably, Vicky changes the most of all the girls in the film, though her change is from virgin to not-a-virgin, a subject position so completely defined by negation that it lacks its own name. While Vicky seems to represent the classic virgin-dilemma, she is a dynamic character. She is not simply withholding sex from her boyfriend, Kevin, until he proves that he loves her; she is trying to create a perfect experience, most likely one that resembles the pop culture images of what sex

should be. Vicky's attitude moves from wanting intimacy to a more mature, though somewhat cynical, "nothing is perfect" mentality. A significant amount of screen time is spent addressing Vicky's sexual pleasure, or the lack thereof (Ashcroft 2003). In one scene, Kevin is seen performing oral sex on Vicky and she explicitly encourages him before climaxing. Played for comedy, the scene offers perhaps the most overtly feminist perspective of sex in the film: shot from a variety of perspectives, the scene begins with a close-up on Vicky's ecstatic face before cutting to a frame from Vicky's perspective showing the top of Kevin's head between her legs, their dialogue playing over the girl power anthem "Doll Parts" by Hole. Such a vivid representation of adolescent female pleasure had yet to be reached in mainstream teen cinema. The rest of their narrative follows a more traditional path. Tracing several key scenes, Ashcroft points out that both Vicky and Kevin are seeking the perfect moment: for her to have sex and for him to say "I love you." These scenes reinforce the idea of as men and women operating as partners rather than adversaries in a sexual narrative. Their relationship also establishes new role models for teens: "[she] is the girl who can decide to have sex with someone she cares about but knows she is not committed to, and he is the boy who wants to make sure that their love was real for the moment – unusual subject positions for male and female partners" (Ashcroft 2003,60).

The other couple whose narrative follows a romance plot is Oz and Heather. Their narrative shows Oz's pursuit of Heather, a conventional plot line undercut somewhat by the fact that his pursuit requires that he cast off traditionally male characteristics (in this case, his status as star of the lacrosse team) in favor of more feminized traits (symbolized by his participation in jazz choir). Although we are never told if she is a virgin like Vicky, Heather also withholds sex until she is confident about her relationship with Oz. At the very least, Heather is coded as chaste, and possibly even prudish, through her tidy, feminine clothes, minimal make-up and

choir-girl stereotype. Even so, Heather's enthusiasm for sex in the context of a relationship is never questioned. Once the issues of the romance are worked out, sex is a given. Even though these two narratives link sex and romance, the girls' willing participation in sexual activity demonstrates the sex-positive belief that healthy, happy girls enjoy sex, even as the narratives affirm the traditional gender roles of pursuer and pursued.

Two other narratives in the film subvert those gender roles, both involving the haplessly endearing protagonist Jim. The most comically sex-positive characters are exchange student Nadia and band geek Michelle. These characters both want sex without the trappings of a relationship. When they deploy their sexuality, they aren't doing it as a power play, seeking intimacy or a particular bond with their male partners: they are doing it because they want to have sex. Nadia's representation is enigmatic. On one hand, she typifies a certain male fantasy of the exotic female: she shows up in Jim's bedroom most implausibly, and while changing clothes, peruses his collection of porn magazines and begins masturbating. The fantasy-aspect of this narrative is underscored by Jim's eagerness to film their encounter and broadcast the video feed to his friends; he clearly doesn't see Nadia as a real person, certainly not as a viable partner for himself. However, although Nadia could be viewed as a victim of exploitation, her apparent complicity in the event suggests that she seems able not only to enjoy, and even take pleasure in her object status, but also to turn the tables and take pleasure in viewing a male abject as she instructs Jim to strip for her. Jim is also "punished" for his behavior because he ultimately cannot maintain an erection long enough to actually have sex with Nadia, a situation made all the more humiliating because his plight is captured on video for all of his peers to witness. In the end, however, Nadia fares even worse: as a result of her behavior, she is forced to return to her home country, reminding even the most sexually-confident girls that their actions have

consequences. Given her foreignness, Nadia's narrative must also be considered as part of the discursive tradition of casting the non-white woman as a seductress. Though she is ethnically white, Nadia is certainly an "Other" in the film. This reading detracts from her empowerment somewhat, as her sexual agency can be construed as a marker of difference. Even though Jim's fantasy of sex with Nadia hardly lives up to his (or the audience's) expectations, the narrative does little to disrupt this tired trope.

Jim's next partner, Michelle, also provides a life lesson about expectations. As a band geek, Michelle seems to Jim to hold no promise as a sexual conquest, but she ultimately reveals the libidinous tendencies of band members, demonstrating her own sexual comfort as she seduces Jim on prom night. More than the other teenage girl sex partners, Michelle seems to capture the most empowered approach to sexual behavior, representing a new sexual agency for girls that does not rely of seduction or coquettishness, but rather appropriates the traditionally male role of sexual aggressor. It should be noted that Michelle and Jim are seen as comic characters, and their subversive sex roles are played for comedy. The text undercuts the potential of such representation by holding it up as a source of amusement. Still, the presence of a sexually empowered girl who is not coded as a "slut" and the guy who is willing to let her take the lead contribute to the representation of young women and men as partners and collaborators in shaping their sexual identities.

There are also female characters in the film who, while they do not participate in any sexual behavior, offer insight regarding adolescent female sexuality. Though they are not sexual agents within the text, their characterizations indicate sexual awareness and independence. They represent another application of female power. Jessica, Vicky's best friend, serves as a counselor for both male and female characters; Kaveney (2006) calls her "one of the film's foci of good

sense and sexual expertise" (141). In various conversations, she informs Vicky about the merits of masturbation, helps Kevin recognize the signs of female orgasm, and helps Finch create a reputation. In one scene which takes place in a hallway in the high school, Jessica is framed in front of a display proclaiming "coach of the year." Indeed. Jessica is almost too cool for her sexually struggling peers. She doesn't take a date to prom; in fact, she wears headphones to the event to further symbolize that she is not influenced by her surroundings, but transcends them.

A less significant character who mirrors Jessica's role as coach is Oz's "college girl" date. In her one scene, she is literally in the driver's seat. When Oz attempts a pathetic come-on line ("Suck me, beautiful"), the girl, who – in a delightful twist – is majoring in "postmodern feminist thought," rebukes him and offers thoughtful advice about how to foster relationships with girls. Ashcroft offers a reading of the scene that reaffirms the mutuality of young men and women:

> She is clearly the cool one, in control, and it is a relatively compassionate interaction in which, rather than take offense, she helps to educate him, and he eagerly listens. As the more confident and experienced person in this interaction, the representation of the college woman creates space for a transformative subject position for women and young women. In addition, this interaction contributes to a discourse where women and men work together to resolve differences and misunderstandings (Ashcroft 2003, 52).

This collaborative to sexuality suggests a balance that affirms girls' empowerment.

One of the most problematic aspects of the representation of these young women, along with Nadia, is their exclusion from any positive sexual relationship in the context of the film. It is ironic that the women who seem most self-possessed and sexually confident do not actually have sex. Perhaps the filmmakers mean to suggest the unworthiness of any of the male

characters as partners for these confident women. Even so, their presence on screen as coaches or gurus, but not true partners, creates a new object status for young women and undercuts the idea of sexual partnership. At worst, these characters suggest that there is a limit to the appropriateness of female sexual enthusiasm. While a sex-positive attitude is a sign of health and attractiveness, a girl who knows too much can still be considered off-limits (or worse, emasculating) to her peers. Furthermore, the sexual agency of girls is rendered less threatening by presenting it as an element of comedy, just as many of the potentially threatening aspects of the girl power discourse have been watered down by various cultural forces. None of the female characters in the film seek to overthrow the dominant order of high school; they have simply created new subject positions within it. While these subject positions may well be more satisfying than previously available options, the female characters essentially reassure rather than provoke. In this way, these characters underscore the true role of female characters in the film: they are not there for their own purposes, as actors in their own narratives of sexual fulfillment, but rather to help the male characters achieve their sexual goals. Empowerment, it seems, is more about promoting girls' sexual availability rather than agency. Most important, *American Pie* reminds us that no matter how empowered or sex-positive the representation of an adolescent female may be, her story is subordinate to those of the boys around her.

Like *Kids*, *Thirteen* opens with a disturbing scene with two teens in bed. Rather than depicting a sex act, however, *Thirteen* reveals two teen girls doing whippits, inhaling chemicals to get high. They get numb and proceed to hit one another, laughing at their inability to feel anything. Both *Kids* and *Thirteen* direct the audience to envision and imagine the teenage female body. Although there is no sexual predation as there is in the earlier film, the scene signals to its audience that these kids are in serious trouble. Also, whereas *Kids* elects to show a day in the life

of the adolescents, the rest of *Thirteen* reveals how these characters got there, and more importantly, how to fix it.

This tumultuous coming of age journey is mapped onto the body of a teenage girl. Film reviewer Stephanie Zacharek describes the plot of the film (and its tone) as a story of the "trauma of growing into womanhood" (2007). Scholar Kathleen Rowe Karlyn goes further, stating that the teen girl body is portrayed as the "battleground for the most compelling dramas of [the teen's] life" and the target of "the related discourses of consumer culture and (hetero)sexuality" (2007: 455). Both of these assessments signal the seriousness of the film and the potency of female sexuality. The thirteen-year-old at the center of *Thirteen* is Tracy Freeland. The film chronicles her descent into self-destruction as a result of her friendship with "bad girl" Evie and her subsequent redemption as a result of her mother's (somewhat belated) intervention. This dramatic arc and the relationships entailed constitute the crux of the film. Despite the film's focus on Tracy (she appears in virtually every frame of the film), the narrative leaves little doubt that Tracy is not in control, that she is a victim of her circumstances and society. In this way, Tracy embodies the representation of teenage girls found in *Reviving Ophelia*; she is the archetypal girl in crisis.

In order to demonstrate Tracy's fall, the film makes sure to show how normal, and how healthy, she is at the beginning. Tracy is coded as a good kid in a few key scenes. First, she elects to read one of her original poems to her mother, Mel. This disclosure of a personal piece of writing full of dark images reveals the closeness of the mother/daughter relationship. The audience also recognizes Tracy's good girl status because her nerdy friends do not conform to traditional standards of beauty: they are dark-skinned and shaped like little girls, and, like Tracy, their clothing does little to accentuate their femininity. Unlike Tracy, however, these characters

do not even seem to have the potential to participate in the same kind of transformation that Tracy will undergo: because they are so far removed from the white, thin ideal, Tracy's narrative (which is, of course, the girls in crisis narrative) is not a threat or even an option for them. These friends are also the visual opposites of Evie Zamora, the eighth grade vixen in low-slung jeans, a siren whose iconic status is confirmed by Tracy's brother when he confirms her "hottest girl" title in an early expository conversation. (Evie's ethnic status is problematic as well. Her surname suggests that she is Hispanic, but her outward appearance does not accentuate that identity. The actress portraying Evie is of Jewish and Italian ancestry. Evie's ethnic coding allows her to be white enough to be perceived as traditionally attractive, but also vaguely ethnic enough to be perceived as a threat.) In Tracy's quest to become popular, she sets her sights on becoming Evie's friend, and she succeeds, leading to the drug-induced violence of the opening scene, and many more scenes of adolescent deviance.

Throughout the film, the narrative revolves around Tracy, and the director uses a variety of techniques to keep the viewer linked to her. When we are not looking at her, we are seeing the world through her eyes. As Tracy's world becomes destabilized, the film reflects that disruption, using unsteady camera work and jarring framing. As Tracy loses the ability to see clearly, the film becomes similarly out-of-focus. The irony, of course, is that the narrative is not so much about what Tracy does as what others do to her. This distinction underscores the importance of Tracy's body as a site of personal and cultural conflict. Tracy literally turns her body over to Evie, letting her have significant influence over her clothes, her piercings, and her actions. Although Evie is the most obvious agent of Tracy's downward spiral, the film does not construct her as a one-dimensional bad-seed. Like Tracy, Evie has been set up for this fate: both girls are being raised by single women in households that have been affected by drug and alcohol abuse.

The film also draws an explicit connection between the girls and the cultural forces at work in their lives. Frame after frame implicates the beauty and fashion industry for promoting sexualized images. These images illustrate a pervasive theme from the girls in crisis discourse, presenting a culture that "encourages girls to consume products…to sedate their natural and understandable pain" (Pipher 1994, 202). With such diminished adult support at home, how can these girls be expected to withstand such pervasive messages about the maintenance and presentation of the female body? The overt nature of this message earned negative reviews from some critics. According to Zacharek (2003), the anti-media agenda overpowered the narrative:

> All I've really learned [by the end of the film] is that teenagers are victims of the world around them -- its materialism, its obsession with sex, its messed-up adults -- and that the chances of getting through it reasonably unscathed are slim. Whoops, I did it again, and it's all society's fault. Now there's empowerment for you.

That Zacharek uses the rhetoric of empowerment highlights the film's ultimate participation in the girls in crisis discourse. Although Tracy and Evie feel temporarily powerful as a result of their actions, they are understood to be on a self-destructive path. Without the support and intervention of adults, these girls will get into more serious situations. And the film, like the girls in crisis discourse, lays the responsibility for intervention first and foremost on parents:

> The parents' job is to protect. The daughters' job is to explore. […]Generally parents are more protective of their daughters than is corporate America. Parents aren't trying to make money off their daughters by selling them designer jeans or cigarettes, they just want them to be well-adjusted. They don't see their daughters as sex objects or consumers but as real people with talents and interests (Pipher 1994, 23).

Lest the narrative be devoid of hope, the final chapter of the film offers salvation in the form of maternal love. Once Mel recognizes the depth of Tracy's self-destructive behavior, she intervenes forcibly, literally surrounding Tracy in a maternal embrace that simultaneously supports her and restrains her. In an emotionally charged scene, Mel interposes her own body between her daughter's and the unseen forces that have sought to destroy it. The scene occurs in the kitchen of their small home, significant not only because it has been the location for several conflicts throughout the film but also as a powerful domestic image, reinforcing the feminine role of both mother and daughter.

While the essential dramatic tension of the film lies between the dueling influences of Evie and Mel over Tracy, the backdrop of the culture takes the film beyond traditional melodrama and asserts a specific agenda. The barrage of onscreen images of billboards and shopping malls reveals both Tracy's aspirations and context. The film reveals not only how Tracy fits into her culture, but how she sees it, complete with the overwhelming exhilaration of adolescence. This focalization frames Tracy as vulnerable, reinforcing the lack of control she is able to exert over her life. With Evie's guidance, Tracy seeks semblances of control: wearing revealing clothing to attract the attention of boys, taking drugs, manipulating adults. This deviant behavior supposedly empowers Tracy, making her feel popular and desired. The empowerment is ephemeral however, and Tracy ultimately resorts to self-destructive activity such as cutting herself to deal with the stress of her life. Mary Pipher offers several metaphorical meanings of self-mutilation, what she refers to as "a concrete interpretation of our culture's injunction to young women to carve themselves into culturally acceptable pieces" (1994, 158). Ranging from submission to protest, from plea for help to assertion of power, all of these meanings can be seen

in Tracy's self-mutilation. The narrative creates on film the toxic culture described in *Reviving Ophelia*.

The connection to Pipher's work was made explicit in a press screening of the film. In preparation for the film, Zazharek reports, audiences received readings from several texts that could be identified with the girls in crisis discourse, including *Reviving Ophelia*. The readings set the tone for the film, which Zacharek locates as part of a consciousness-raising effort, its aims more educational than entertaining (2003). Whereas a film like *Kids* might be seen as merely shocking or exploitative, *Thirteen* seemed more cautionary. An additional mark of credibility came from the fact that one of the film's screenwriters was herself a teenage girl. Nikki Reed, who portrayed Evie in the film, wrote the film with director Catherine Hardwicke based in part on her own experiences. This involvement leant authenticity – and increased anxiety – to the story (Jesteadt 2007).

This authenticity, of course, led to an R-rating for the film. As Annika Hymlo laments, the reality of girls' lived experiences is largely deemed inappropriate to be shared with other girls; as a result, teens themselves often see only a "softened version of girls' reality" (Hylmo 2006: 182). In the same way that *Reviving Ophelia* and the bulk of the girls in crisis literature offer insight for parents and educators, *Thirteen* provides a narrative for well-meaning, concerned parents. Like *Kids* before it, *Thirteen* is a film about teenagers for adults. Indeed, *Thirteen* is actually less about teenagers than the earlier film. Tracy is not as much as dynamic character as a character in turmoil. The changes she undergoes are less internal than the result of the various forces acting on her. In many ways, Mel is the dynamic character. She learns the importance of her own role as a mother, and she is able to assert herself as the primary actor in her daughter's life. Like the parenting guides of the girls in crisis discourse, this representation

reassures audiences that adults have the power to restore order in an adolescent's life where chaos once reigned. Karlyn summarizes the film's message as an affirmation that "early adolescents such as Tracy and Evie need not only attention from adults but a firm and loving hand during periods of transition to the freedom of adulthood" (2006: 461). A far cry from narratives that lay the blame for adolescent behavior at the feet of the parents, the narrative of *Thirteen* suggests that parents can be the hero of the narrative. If even Mel, who is flawed, as a somewhat distracted recovering alcoholic, can provide this support, any parent can find a similar path. To emphasize Mel's success in resolving her daughter's crisis, the final image of the film shows Tracy, alone, independent of both Evie and Mel, whirling around dizzyingly on a playground, far away from the judgmental and provocative eyes of the billboards and magazines. Now, even as she spins "out of control," Tracy is as safe; even though she is outside, her body is appropriately contained. As a result of Mel's love and support, the drama is resolved and Tracy is safe, both emotionally and physically.

In both *Thirteen* and *American Pie*, the safety of the teenage female body is paramount. For Tracy, that safety comes as a result of adult intervention keeping her from self-destruction. For the young women of *American Pie*, on the other hand, their safety is a result of their own sexual confidence. In both cases, bodily safety is conflated with overall health and happiness for adolescent girls, though sex is seen as alternately symbolic of health or symbolic of destruction. Even in the midst of robust discourses, there is little representation of female sexual desire or agency.

That neither the girl power nor girls in crisis discourse affords an opportunity for mainstream cultural productions to address this topic suggests the failure of both discourses to penetrate the cultural understanding of adolescent sexuality. It seems ironic that in a culture so

saturated with the sexualized imagery of teenagers, there is a narrow range of acceptable representations of adolescent sexuality. The sexual bodies of girls on film need to conform not only in aesthetic demands in terms of shape and color, but also to generic demands of various narratives. At worst, their bodies are decorative, but even when the adolescent female is a key figure in the narrative, her body and sexual agency typically provide a context for someone else's story rather than a plot of her own. Also ironic is a ratings system that refuses to acknowledge the disconnect between what teens are allowed to witness onscreen and actual teenage behavior off-screen. Films such as *Thirteen* and *American Pie* remind audiences and girl studies scholars alike that simply getting adolescent girl bodies on the screen does not create or expand the existing discourses surrounding adolescent female sexuality. Caught between the message for girls to be empowered on the one hand and protected on the other, films rarely depict narratives that show girls exploring, negotiating, and using their own bodies for their own purposes. The deep-rooted resistance to such representation is evidenced by the relative silence of both the girl power and girls in crisis discourses regarding girls' sexuality. Both discourses ultimately fail to open up new discursive formulations for "girl." While society is quite comfortable looking at the adolescent female body, there are some things, apparently, we just can't talk about.

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[1] Released in 2007, *Superbad*, another male sex-quest, currently holds the box office record in this category.

[2] According to reviews compiled by film review aggregator, www.rottentomatoes.com

[3] Village Voice writer Joy Press provides an excellent discussion of this term in her 1997 article "Notes on Girl Power: the Selling of Softcore Feminism." http://www.villagevoice.com/content/printVersion/196405

4. CASE STUDY: EXPLORING REPRESENTATIONS OF POWER AND POPULARITY IN *MEAN GIRLS* (2004) AND *SAVED!* (2004)

In the beginning of a cathartic soul-baring and relationship-building workshop, a well-meaning high school principal asks the assembled 11th grade girls to discuss their "lady problems." The first volunteer announces that just because she uses super tampons, it doesn't mean she's a slut, asserting "It's not my fault I have a wide-set vagina." At hearing this, the principal relinquishes control of the workshop to a female teacher after muttering "Yeah, I can't do this." This exchange, most likely meant to prompt awkward laughter from the audience, almost did not make it into the final cut of *Mean Girls*. The film's director apparently went several rounds with the MPAA, invoking his own status as the father of a teenage girl when appealing to keep the vagina joke. In the DVD commentary, he uses feminist authority to recall the debate as he quips, "Don't make me call Eve Ensler." Far from depicting a frank and honest discussion of menstrual and sexual realities, the film uses the female body as a punchline.

Hollywood has always been a problematic site for feminists. From physical depictions of the female body to the long-standing exclusion and under-representation of women in the creation and production of film, Hollywood inspires, yet most often resists, a myriad of feminist projects from academics and activists. That said, films as cultural products do reflect some of the feminist ideas that have permeated U.S. society over the past several decades. Released in 1988, *Heathers* reflects much of the ambivalence toward feminism that would inform the discourses of '90s. While the female characters are sexually active, for example, they lack power and control in their relationships and are still objectified by the male characters. The very hierarchical social structure that protagonist Veronica struggles against can be read as anti-feminist, even though

women are ostensibly in charge of it. That Veronica must use a gun (a classic phallic symbol) to assert her power invited multiple feminist readings, for example. *Saved!*, though somewhat less ambivalent, still declines to identify feminist sites within the text. The film's overall message of acceptance and community resonates strongly with many progressive agendas. That its protagonist is a single teenage mother and daughter of a single mother affirms that role and its socially-conscious possibilities. The film can be read as sex-positive, even though many of the more explicit references to sexuality were excised from the final product in order to achieve the PG-13 rating. *Mean Girls* comes closest to addressing feminist concerns head-on, but with similarly troubling effects. The workshop scene suggests a post-feminist, essentialized depiction of girls: even when the topic at hand is the complex network of female cliques and friendships, it all comes back to the vagina. The scene also suggests that even though men may be aware of the struggles faced by teenage girls, they are fundamentally unable to intervene because it is an essentially female reality.

These various stances regarding feminist projects reflect the cultural tension that exists in contemporary U.S. society. While many realities of women's lives have been acknowledged and normalized in pop culture, any overt discussion of the systems that constrain those women is verboten. Regardless of their overt or tacit relationships to feminist projects, each of the films participates in the discourses of girlhood. In addition to their filmic legacies, theses films also extend these discourses from academic domains and into the popular zeitgeist. For over a quarter century, sociologists have been studying the interpersonal relationships of young women and girls, particularly those sites where they negotiate power and status. Taking an almost anthropological stance, these studies usually follow groups of girls for several months and use various methods to track their relational dynamics. Researchers consistently see a consolidation

of a girl's personal popularity or status and membership in a group of similarly popular peers. Many of the studies compare groups of girls within a setting or across settings, focusing on the hierarchies developed and maintained by the girls themselves (Merton 1997, Eder 1985). Such hierarchies create a status dichotomy in which there is a clear winner or loser.

Within such a rigid social system, girls have clearly defined goals regarding status. Researchers from the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) found that many girls identify aggression as a safe way of achieving those goals (Cairns et al 1988). While the goal of popularity is not necessarily negative or positive, its correlation with aggressive behavior (ranging from teasing and bullying to physical violence) is troubling. This study and others contribute to the belief that among girls, manipulation is an avenue to power (Adams 2005).

Whether influenced by such academic reports or simply born out of memory, narratives of popularity appear frequently in teen film. Both the girl power and girls in crisis discourses integrate messages about the appropriate uses of popularity. This chapter explores the media construction of popularity as a site of female power and agency in teen film, focusing on two 2004 teen comedies, *Mean Girls* and *Saved!* The main characters in each of these films represent girls who must negotiate their own popularity and that of others. While these texts speak to and from their shared context, they also participate in a cinematic representation of popularity that can be traced to the dark comedy *Heathers*, released 15 years prior.

The comic aspects of each film camouflage (to varying degrees) their messages about adolescent female power and agency. Darkest in tone, the darkly satiric film *Heathers* offers the most provocative vision of an alternative to the popularity paradigm: an empowered popular girl systematically kills the reigning members of her own clique and her own outsider boyfriend in order to create a new social order. The film presages both the girls in crisis and girl power

discourses, depicting both a social landscape far more sinister than many adults want to see as well as a heroine who is capable of dismantling that landscape independently. In many ways, the narrative of the film was as subversive as its depiction of violence. Both *Mean Girls* and *Saved!* offer lighter comedy and toned down messages. For these texts, the emphasis is on working within the system rather than overhauling it. For both, the heroine's journey demonstrates inherent messages about the appropriate use of female power, the dependence on responsible adults, and the reification of gender norms. These ideas position these films in the larger girls in crisis and girl power discourses, ultimately diluting the subversive potential of both discourses and offering levity and reassurance to both teen and adult audiences. The narratives acknowledge and take for granted the inherent dangers of teen girl relationships but suggest that with guidance and support, teen girls can navigate those relationships successfully – without having to kill anyone or relinquish their prom tickets.

While movies involving teenage protagonists have been a mainstay of American cinema for over 50 years, the pace and patterns of teen cinema follow distinct trends. The popular girl has been a fixture in teen films for over two decades. Though recent incarnations such as Torrance in *Bring it On* or Elle in *Legally Blonde* have celebrated this character, her heritage is typically negative. In several of the John Hughes films of the mid 1980's, the popular girl is the antagonist, a foil for the good girl protagonist. In *16 Candles*, Caroline is rude to her peers, gets drunk at her boyfriend's party and is essentially date-raped by the nerd character, an act that carries no negative repercussions for him.

Such negative depictions of the popular girl may well have been wish-fulfillment on the part of filmmakers in the 1980's, revealing more about their idiosyncrasies than anything else. At the same time that sociological and psychological research about girls and their social structures

began to appear, film representations started to show more nuance. Released in 1989, Micheal Lehman's *Heathers* marked a decisive move away from the romantic teen comedies presented by John Hughes. The film explores high school social systems and pressure, demonstrating the potential for hyper-violent responses to each. Although *Heathers* may have been the first film to merge dark comedy and teen cinema and had become a cult hit, original box office returns for the R-rated film were unimpressive. Furthermore, the film ignited strong responses from industry leaders, such as threats to blacklist its stars. The film returned to ignominy a decade later in the wake of the Columbine shootings. As a result of this backlash, the post-Columbine landscape has seen the dark teen comedy return in a softer, less violent strain. Since 1999, the darkest teen films have focused on issues of sexuality and personal hypocrisy, largely avoiding the questions of bullying and social conformity.

Heathers tells the story of a popular girl, Veronica (played deftly by Winona Ryder) who manages to overthrow the social hierarchy of her school and create a new, presumably egalitarian order. Along the way she resists not only the overwhelming pressure to conform to the beliefs and practices of her female clique, but also the allure of sexy but deeply troubled anarchist J.D. (played by Christian Slater). Though the film predates the emergence of the girl power and girls in crisis discourses, Veronica Sawyer contains many prototypical markers of both. Veronica's world is full of contradictory expectations but devoid of affirmation or healthy relationships. Such a vision of the adolescent landscape resonates with the portrayal of the treacherous realm described in the girls in crisis discourse. The pointed and sometimes painful representation of the high school landscape depicted the toxic culture identified by girls in crisis progenitor Mary Pipher. That Veronica can survive in this environment demonstrates her innate power. Her ability to wade through such a murky morass and throw off the social conventions

and expectations thrust upon her suggests the power and self-reliance celebrated in the girl power discourse. From this common cinematic and discursive ancestor, the protagonists of *Mean Girls* and *Saved!* emerge.

In *Mean Girls*, that protagonist is Cady, a projection and amalgamation of adolescent girl identities found in a post-*Ophelia* parenting guide, *Queen Bees and Wannabees* (2002). In the book, psychologist Rosalind Wiseman provides an ethnographic study of high school females, a topography she calls "girl world." In adapting the non-narrative book for the screen, comedian Tina Fey employs a variety of conventions from the teen comedy genre, from Machiavellian lunchroom antics to the much-anticipated prom. Her task in illuminating the themes of Wiseman's book revolved around the construction of an adolescent female protagonist who simultaneously participates in the dominant power structure of her school and works for its destruction. This character, Cady, ultimately succeeds in diffusing "girl world" (with considerable help from adult characters) and constructing a peaceful landscape with her peers, thereby offering an example of how girls can survive this tumultuous time, ostensibly alleviating one aspect of the moral panic around the girls in crisis discourse.

Striking out for more controversial territory, *Saved!* (2004) targets religious fundamentalism with satiric humor. Against this backdrop, *Saved!* tells the story of a young woman, Mary, who finds her role as a member of a popular, insular group at a religious prep school incompatible with her internal struggles with her faith. After she becomes pregnant, Mary removes herself from this group, asserting her independence and ultimately aligning herself with the more supportive outcasts. Through this trajectory, Mary's identity assumes many of the positive attributes of the girl power discourse: she negotiates a path for herself and helps both groups forge connections through acceptance and understanding. Like Cady and Veronica, Mary

has a seat at the cool kids' table, but she gives it up in favor of a more fulfilling position. All three heroines affirm the notion that hierarchical popularity systems should be abandoned in favor of more authentic, equitable systems. Such systems are seen as one site of the crisis that girls encounter, and their inherent ability to conquer them suggests empowerment.

Although both films (carrying family market friendly PG-13 ratings) stanch the bloodshed that *Heathers* used as plot development, they share with the earlier film a preoccupation with the pathology of female adolescence, seen particularly in teen girl friendships. *Mean Girls'* Cady, like *Heathers* protagonist Veronica, must negotiate her privileged status and various conflicts that seem incongruous to that status. Ultimately, Veronica asserts her independence through violence and a rejection of the out-of-touch adults in her life. On the other hand, Cady resolves her conflicts through consciousness-raising and increased appreciation of and respect for her parents and teachers. Cady represents a parent-friendly manifestation of the hero-identity Veronica Sawyer pioneered. While she is intended to be a positive role model for teen girls, she also models the belief that empowerment for girls is predicated on the support and guidance of caring adults.

In *Saved!*, Mary comes closer to carrying on Veronica's legacy, at least in spirit. Whereas she also rejects her privileged status, she seeks not independence, but wider acceptance and interdependence. Mary's support comes first from her peers, rather than the adults in her life. (Ultimately these adults come through, but it is actually the teenaged characters who prompt their positive response.) Like Veronica, Mary is introspective and thoughtful; the movie is her individual journey. For Veronica, this journey took her very far from the conventions of teen cinema. Mary's journey, however, affirms many of those conventions even while it subverts some expectations. If Veronica opened up complex narrative spaces for cinematic teen heroines,

Mary and Cady show how such spaces should be contained. In these ways, both films take the radical possibilities represented by Veronica and make them safe and reassuring. Likewise, both the girl power and girls in crisis discourses are simplified and neutralized. The "power" promised by the girl power discourse is understood to be personal, characterized by "an individual negotiating her role in the system" rather than over-hauling it altogether (Newsom 2005, 20). And while the social threats of bullying, peer pressure and conformity suggested by the girls in crisis discourse are represented onscreen, girls are easily able to navigate those threats (with the help of caring adults) without any permanent damage. Whereas Veronica Sawyer rebukes practically all the social norms of high school through violence and sacrifice, Mary and Cady simply show girls how to laugh off their troubles and get along with one another.

While the lives of teenagers have been a mainstay in both the US news media and Hollywood since the 1950s, rarely have these two sites converged. Since *Mean Girls* was adapted from one of the parenting guides to come out of the girls in crisis moment, it is uniquely positioned. The source material, *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, offered light-hearted guidance to parents who want to help their adolescent daughters. Though it participates in the "girls in crisis" discourse, the book provides reassurance to parents. Author Rosalind Wiseman uses as the basis of her advice categories of girl roles. She developed these roles through her work as a psychologist. *Mean Girls* incorporates these roles and anecdotes from Wiseman's work. Wiseman's original text might seem like an unlikely candidate for a screenplay. Writer and comedian Tina Fey undertook the difficult task of distilling characters and envisioning a narrative out of a parenting guide. Throughout the text, Wiseman integrates stories from her own experiences working with adolescents as well as first-person comments collected for the book. These anecdotal references provided many of the situations and characteristics for the characters.

For example, Anne, age 15, provides this description of a Queen Bee: “She thinks she’s better than everyone else. She’s in control.... She’ll make stuff up about people and everyone will believe her” (Wiseman 2002, 26). Such a description fits *Mean Girls’* Regina George (whose name also signals her royal status). Other plot points are drawn from Wiseman’s extensive analysis of teen party rituals (276-304) and the many ways in which girls betray one another.

As a teen film, it features many of the characters and characteristics audiences have grown to expect in this genre. As an adaptation of a popular parenting guide, the film does adopt a softly didactic tone. It participates in the heritage of the dark comedy because it asks its audience to make fun of a topic that has been treated seriously elsewhere. Perhaps most interesting, the film’s creators never questioned the comedic content of the text. The film was never meant to be anything other than comic, though Fey and some of her collaborators acknowledge the potential seriousness of the topic. Indeed, Wiseman herself appreciated not only Fey’s understanding of the topic but her tone as well. (Not surprisingly, the majority of the film’s adult characters come from the ranks of Saturday Night Live.) They also felt confident that the film would have a broad appeal in the teenage market; that confidence was certainly bolstered by the casting of Lindsay Lohan. Savvy producer Lorne Michaels mentions in the DVD commentary that the escalating talk about “mean girls” as a cultural phenomenon would translate to increased market awareness and, by extension, ticket sales. Michaels and his crew also capitalized on the comforting tone of the source material. Despite brief, indirect reference to “Girls Gone Wild” and MTV, *Mean Girls* depicts generally wholesome adolescents, the type of role models most parents would want for their children. This apt blend of comedy and affirmation found success at the box office; *Mean Girls* grossed nearly $90 million, making it one of the top-grossing teen comedies of all time.

Grossing less than $9 million on the other hand, *Saved!* garnered somewhat less attention from mainstream audiences. What media attention it received largely focused on its treatment of Christian fundamentalism. While filmmakers claim that the film promotes tolerance and faith, many of its detractors felt that the film made fun of Christians and faith-based institutions. Both of these positions ignore the importance of female friendships and support networks to the action of the film. With the emphasis on the religious messages of the film, the representation of adolescent relationships is not fore-grounded. Nevertheless, the film portrays a young woman who must deal with issues of faith, sexuality, and acceptance. Even the minor characters demonstrate complexity and depth.

Like *Mean Girls*, the film mitigates the seriousness of its topics through humor. Though both films can accurately be described as satiric, their tone is light, a far cry from the dark comedy that characterized *Heathers*. In the 15 years since its release, *Heathers* has stood alone as one of the darkest teen films ever made; its over-the-top presentation of the high school world and biting social commentary have not been repeated. Instead, its more modern successors stop far short of the caricatured, hyperbolized portrayal of angst-turned-violent. Just as the girl power and girls in crisis discourses fail to offer a space for the creation of a new female subject position in opposition to dominant conceptions of femininity and female agency, the films refuse to present characters who are not already intelligible as safe, likeable girls. They are familiar people in uncomfortable, though not untenable, situations. While both *Mean Girls* and *Saved!* adopt a questioning stance toward their topics, the filmmakers try to focus on levity. The DVD commentary on both films make multiple references to comic relief. In *Mean Girls*, this often came from the adult actors interjecting humor to prevent maudlin scenes such as the therapy workshop in the gym and the final spring fling scene. The creative forces behind *Saved!*

preferred to "bring it back to comedy"[1] through the teens themselves of the exaggerated depiction of fundamentalism.

As comedies, each film presents a protagonist whose story leaves them ultimately better off than when they begin. The heroines of each film must confront the ugliness of teen popularity (manipulation, back-stabbing, gossip) before exerting her individual power. The obstacles for each young woman include other teen girls, usually the dominant "popular girl" of film and pop culture mythology; all are blonde, wealthy, and selfish, therefore positioning them in opposition to the brunette (or red-headed), slightly-less-wealthy, and emotionally-mature heroines. In depicting these journeys, the filmmakers use coded representations and somewhat divergent theories of popularity and social dynamics.

In *Heathers*, protagonist Veronica Sawyer is introduced early in the film as a disaffected member of the popular Heathers clique (the only one who is not named Heather, incidentally.) The opening sequence of *Heathers* utilizes many of the codes of teen film, but it also resists them: the director pushes many of these tropes to ridiculous extremes while he also repositions some of the characters within those codes. The sequence establishes the film's hyperbolic, cartoonish tone and helps create a new subject position for its protagonist. Veronica Sawyer is an outsider/insider; she has been the uncool kid seeking acceptance and access to the popular clique. Once inside that clique, however, she finds herself separate from the other members. Throughout the sequence, director Michael Lehmann creates a playful, humorous depiction of the characters and their lives. The four members of the Heathers clique have assigned colors (red, yellow, green and blue) and their costumes always follow the guidelines. They stand out from the rest of the school in their vividness and from each other in their strict adherence to who may wear what. Veronica, of course, offsets her assigned blue with a mostly black ensemble. A

visual connection is made to JD who appears in a black trenchcoat. In contrast, the less popular characters wear paler colors and patterns. Both Betty Finn (Veronica's former best friend) and Martha Dunnstock (a victim of Veronica's prank) appear in pink, for example. In addition to the colors, Lehmann uses unrealistic camera angles to highlight the absurdity of the events. These elements combine to reveal a satiric tone and a comic spirit to the film. Ultimately, the opening sequence establishes the absurdity of the high school status quo and Veronica's increasing discomfort in it. The rest of the film follows Veronica's rejection (and ultimate dismantling) of the social hierarchy which she has apparently conquered.

Neither of the more recent films makes such a bold impression or begins as abruptly. While *Heathers* throws the audience into the immediate dramatic conflict of narrative, both *Saved!* and *Mean Girls* rely on detailed exposition (and extensive use of voiceover) in order to establish the heroine's trajectory. In *Saved!* this exposition shows Mary as a passionate fundamentalist Christian participating unquestioningly in pro-life demonstrations and painting her school's huge Jesus billboard. Mary is a member of her school's top clique, the Christian Jewels. Like their film progenitors, the Jewels dominate their school culture, but unlike the Heathers, they are known not for cruelty, but for vocal talent. Their exclusivity is symbolized by the matching pins the three members wear. Mary's journey is prompted by her boyfriend's confession that he is gay and his subsequent deportation to a Christian reprogramming facility, Mercy House. Mary's faith is shaken because, having slept with Dean, she believed he has been "cured" of his homosexuality. This doubt becomes full panic when she realizes that she is pregnant, a fact that must be concealed from her judgmental friends. (In a wry moment, the audience sees Mary leave the same Planned Parenthood office that she was protesting earlier.) For Mary, the disaffection with the teenage social strata is enmeshed with the orthodoxy of their

fundamentalist community. The conflation of popularity and social hierarchies with Christian fundamentalism offers insight onto the film's agenda. As Mary rejects and later reforms the Christian Jewels, she is really navigating a path to more progressive Christian values. In doing so, Mary preserves her "true self," an entity described in Reviving Ophelia as representing "wholeness and authenticity" (Pipher 1994, 37). By being true to herself, Mary achieves the ultimate goal of adolescence; she is rewarded with an expanded and mutually supportive network of friends and family.

Mean Girls expands the narrative of popularity by including both Cady's rise in status and her metamorphosis. When the movie begins, Cady is preparing to go to school for the first time at the age of sixteen. The daughter of zoologists, she has lived abroad for most of her life. This device gives the film a "blank slate" character, one who can infiltrate and comment on existing social systems without the burden of a past. With no abandoned best friend or hidden pregnancy, Cady functions as the perfect neutral test subject for the ideas of the film. The rest of the teen characters are introduced at school, and are neatly categorized. The first people Cady befriends, Janice and Damien, are obvious outsiders, coded by their appearance and ambiguous sexuality. Although Cady recognizes them as authentic people and appreciates their friendship, she is quickly seduced by the popular girls known as The Plastics. Like the Heathers, these girls are known for their privileged existence and terrorizing of other students. The look and feel of *Mean Girls* is something of a hybrid between the garish, brassiness of Heathers and the more muted verisimilitude of *Saved!* Director Mark Waters creates a safe, glossy feel and avoids the disconcerting camera angles that give *Heathers* its sense of turbulence. Whereas each of the Heathers has an assigned primary color, the Plastics look eerily similar. Each appearing in various short skirts and other pink items, the Plastics seem to gain strength through solidarity

and hyper-femininity. Clothing becomes symbolic for Cady's journey: from her original jeans and bland shirt she achieves pink, Plastic perfection before ultimately returning to jeans. The visual tone of the movie echoes the tone of its source: although *Queen Bees and Wannabes* addresses a serious topic, its presentation is comforting, creating a sense of familiarity through first person anecdotes and direct address by the author.

Through the course of each heroine's journey, she must confront not only the social system that constrains her but also the alpha female, or Queen Bee in Wiseman's terminology, at its center. In *Heathers*, Veronica accomplishes this through murder only to have a new Queen Bee emerge from the underlings. Neither Cady nor Mary (nor their respective creators) is willing to go to such extremes. Each of the 21st century heroines use subterfuge to unseat their enemies. Once Cady removes Regina from power, the rest of the clique expects her to assume Regina's role. Eventually, the girls establish new cliques with diffused power for all. In *Saved!* Mary wants no part of the Christian Jewels even after she has shown the truth about Hillary Fay. In fact, keeping with the motif of acceptance, Mary and the rest of the outsiders embrace Hillary Fay in a broader community with no membership pins required.

The roots of these diverse journeys lie in fundamentally different understandings of identity. One of the themes of *Heathers* is the inevitability of high school hierarchies. There is always someone to fill the requisite role of queen bitch in the cosmography of high school. Even the naming of the characters emphasizes the mutability of identity. Even in death, another "Heather" will rise up to oppress her peers. Therefore, Veronica's nemesis is always changing. The characters in *Mean Girls*, however, fill specific, fixed roles. Using categories from *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, the filmmakers promote the notion that some girls are naturally aggressive and mean, and will sift to the top of social hierarchies. Their social network is kept in place by

more submissive girls. Since Cady is an outsider with no fixed identity, she can assume different positions in the social landscape ultimately becoming the catalyst for dismantling it altogether and thereby "solving" the problem. *Saved!* borrows from both ideologies. When Mary leaves the Jewels, for example, she is replaced by sycophant Tia. Although Hillary Fay is the Queen Bee, she is not motivated by innate meanness, but rather by self-righteousness. In many ways, the actual nemesis is not Hillary Fay at all, but the orthodoxy, or intolerance of change, that she represents. In this way, the filmmakers resist making Hillary Fay the enemy, placing blame on the culture at large. Hillary Fay is as much a victim as Mary; both of them are subject to the societal forces described within the girls in crisis discourse.

Queen Bees Regina and Hillary Fay come from a long line of blond nemeses in teen films. This legacy predates the girl power and girls in crisis discourse but reveals a site in which both discourses graft new identities onto existing teen film conventions. Genre conventions create filmic codes that filmmakers use repeatedly to connect a new film to previously viewed material. Many film borrow conventions from multiple genres to create new spaces for meaning-making. As cultural products, film texts make overt or hidden commentary on the culture that produced them. These codes signal a narrative theme of reinforcement, resistance, or reassurance.

Many of the tropes of the genre stem from the Johns Hughes films of the 80's. In those films, adults usually occupied clueless or hapless roles, such as parents unable or unwilling to communicate effectively with their children. School officials come off equally poorly, though there are occasional glimpses of competence. *Heathers* pushes this representation to the extreme. Veronica and her parents have the same vapid conversation repeatedly and the teachers at the school have no insight into the inner lives of the student body. The film confidently makes fun of

adults and tacitly lays much of the blame for the teenagers' various plights at their feet. In the ensuing 15 years between the release of *Heathers* and the others, conventional wisdom seemed to treat parents more kindly. Not surprisingly, *Mean Girls*, the film based on a parenting guide, depicts positive examples of both parents and teachers. While there are negative examples of each as well, they are so comically drawn as to be easily recognized as "bad," and therefore not threatening to adult viewers. The adults in *Saved!* are more fully characterized. They are certainly flawed, but ultimately, they act appropriately according to the ethos of the film. Interestingly, in that film, it is the children who prompt the parents to get their acts together.

In addition to parents, each film depicts school officials in large assemblies, another convention of the genre. Again, the love-in and pep rally scenes in *Heathers* are the most scathing. Essentially, these scenes merely emphasize the ineffectiveness of adults to help the teens around them. In direct contrast, the workshop scene from *Mean Girls* shows a female teacher in the role of expert, facilitating a healing session for the female characters. This scene was taken from author Rosalind Wiseman's group exercises; it reaffirms the necessity for adult intervention that characterizes the girls-in-crisis discourse. Again, *Saved!* offers a middle course. The school kick-off pep rally/prayer meeting gives the Jewels a chance to spotlight their talent and shows one of the adult characters as a benign, but somewhat out-of-touch role model.

As visible as the adults are in teen film, the genre demands an awareness of spaces and rituals which are deliberately adult-free. In the ecology of high schools, classrooms are adult-zones whereas the cafeteria and bathrooms represent freedom from adult supervision. Likewise, a teenager's bedroom represents the space in the home that is set off from the adult-regulated spaces. Filmmakers rely on spaces to code interaction, offering immediate clues to audiences about the context of a conversation or interaction. In general, bedrooms in the home and

bathrooms in the school connote intimacy and privacy. These small spaces offer safety and seclusion but also isolation, whether self-imposed or not. On the other hand, school spaces such as cafeterias, gymnasiums or theaters represent public exposure, even pageantry. In a similar way, the more public spaces of a home such as a living room or garden provide a liminal space that is more private and exclusive than the school but still social. These sites often provide the backdrop for potentially dangerous social interaction, such as a private argument at a public party. All of these spaces are represented in the *Heathers*, *Mean Girls* and *Saved!* in very similar, conventional ways.

Each film includes at least one sequence that takes place mostly in the cafeteria, a locus of social mechanizations and behavior. The cafeteria is circumscribed within the school building, but is largely outside of the control of the school administration. While adults are responsible for maintaining the safety of the students, much of the subterranean workings of the student body takes place in this space outside the authority of the adults. As in *Heathers*, the cafeteria in *Mean Girls* is explicitly coded according to the social hierarchy: a character's identity can literally be mapped to where they eat lunch. In each film, this space also invites confrontation since there is the potential for interaction between groups. The cafeteria space in *Saved!* is outside and this openness reflects the flexibility of the environment. Nevertheless, this space is the site of pivotal confrontations. As coded spaces, bathrooms offer a foil for cafeterias. As one of the few private spaces available on a high school campus, it is not surprising that each of the three heroines finds herself alone in a stall at some point in each film. The bathrooms are also the sites of secrecy: alliances are borne here, as are plots. It is the ubiquitous school bathroom where Veronica comforts a bulimic Heather, Cady tells the Plastics' secrets to Janis, and Mary reveals her pregnancy to Cassandra. The bonds of the bathroom reinforce these relationships.

School spaces also reveal the power of transformation as the utilitarian gym or cafeteria becomes the fantastic other-world of the school dance. The extensive decorations as well as the surreality of being at school, usually a daytime space, at night immediately indicate that the dance is something different, set apart from the typical high school experience. Known by many names, the dance creates a space that melds the public sphere with the private, individual desires with social expectations. This ritual includes a myriad of sexuality and popularity codes for teen cinema. As the convergence of romantic intrigues (who goes with whom) and intra-gender competition (who will be prom king and queen), the dance offers filmmakers a succinct space for resolving their narratives. Not surprisingly, the dance is usually at the end of the teen movie: it is what the characters in the film and the plot itself have been striving for. Perhaps the most important ritual of the teen film, the dance provides the ultimate opportunity for the private drama of the film to be resolved in a public space. The dance usually signals the resolution of the film, simultaneously the beginning of the end of the film narrative and the end of the film characters' "beginning," i.e. adolescence. The use of this convention, often with some irony, establishes each film's alternate critique of and participation in several cultural conditions of the high school experience.

Playing with the dance convention, *Heathers* refuses to actually depict the prom on film, though it is a constant referent throughout the film even in its final line. The film's final scene is perhaps its most subversive. Though he originally wanted to blow up the school during prom by strapping dynamite to himself, JD has had to adjust his plan somewhat, settling on a pep rally as a second choice. JD's plan to destroy the school is foiled by his would-be prom date Veronica, who has faked her own suicide to throw him off. Using a gun, she forces JD to abandon his plot

to detonate a bomb under the gym during a pep rally. He ultimately sets off the bomb once Veronica has forced him out of the school, so he blows away only himself.

Veronica's final actions both underscore and defy expectations. By taking the red scrunchie from Heather Duke, Veronica asserts her own status as the new leader. She even tells Heather, "There's a new sheriff in town," borrowing from another film genre entirely, the Western. By co-opting this decidedly unfeminine stance, Veronica further distances herself from the expected teen girl subject. Leaving Heather gaping in the hallway, Veronica asks Martha Dunnstock to come to her house and watch movies instead of going to the prom. In this way, the school dance is marked as one of the many trappings of the traditional high school experience that Veronica abandons. The filmmakers have bombarded the audience with multiple genre-blending and confounding cues. Veronica ends the film without a boyfriend, the most serious departure for a teen film. The many references to, but refusal to depict, prom show the filmmaker's savvy teasing of the audience. These departures foreshadow the early ethos of the Riot Grrrl strand of the girl power discourse which encouraged girls to make their own rituals and traditions rather than participate in tired routines which reinforce hierarchy, stereotyping, and consumerism. At the end of the film, the audience knows Veronica has won because she has survived; what remains unclear, however, is how the social landscape will accommodate this kind of character.

Neither of the other films comes close to the subversive ending that *Heathers* presents. Both *Mean Girls* and *Saved!* use the conventional spring dance as the locus for the conclusion. Both Cady and Mary end up at their respective dances in distinctly unconventional circumstances after they each had decided not to go. The need to place each of the heroines at

the dance reaffirms the ritual as the most appropriate site for girls to claim their power. Both films also use the dance scene as a platform for some of the most explicit moralizing in the film.

For Cady, the final scene is the Spring Fling, an event even the director and screenwriter refer to in the DVD commentary as the prom. In this scene, several of the female characters have all been elected to the spring fling court. Cady had not expected to be at the Spring Fling at all, but decides to go after she clinches the state championship for the Mathletes. She appears amid the festivities in khaki pants and her math team letter jacket. Beyond the costuming sight gag, the sequence conforms not only to teen film genre conventions but also to the reassuring image of the nice popular girl. Cady, following genre conventions, has won the election for Spring Fling Queen. She decides to share the prize: she literally breaks her plastic crown and gives pieces not only to her fellow court members but also to other girls in the room.

After she leaves the stage, she is reunited with her "man candy" crush, Aaron, and reconciles with her true friends, Janis and Damien. Cady's generosity is rewarded with both a desirable romantic union as well as friendships. Even though Cady symbolically shares her power with less popular girls in her class by throwing pieces of her crown to them from the stage, she is not actually expected to fraternize with them once she leaves the stage. (A surreal epilogue scene does show a few of the "uncool" minor characters lounging in front of the school with Cady and her friends.) Cady's gracious and unlikely behavior, possibly taken from a self-help book or etiquette guide, provides a model for popular girls and the wannabes who would emulate them. Wiseman affirms this outcome as the ultimate goal for girls, saying that girls who develop critical thinking and empathy "will develop social competency – the necessary coping skills to navigate the social hierarchy. From social competency come high self-esteem[…], the end goal of all the work you and I are doing to raise healthy girls with a strong ethical foundation

who can make sound decisions" (2002, 174). Cady's transformation is complete, and her status as a role model affirmed.

Saved! follows a similar route to the big dance. Mary and her fellow outsiders have been kicked out of school, but decide to crash the prom anyway, Mary in a pregnancy-revealing red dress. Unbeknownst to them, the students from Mercy House have the same idea. The prom scene therefore becomes a site of subversion as these students converge on the stereotypical school dance. The sequence includes a quick succession of many pivotal lines and plot points beginning with Hillary Fay's exposure as a vandal and ending with Mary's labor and departure for the hospital.

From the beginning, the audience recognizes the codes which indicate that Hillary Fay's moment has come. She arrives at the prom with the rest of the (dateless) Christian Jewels and she has a large pimple on her chin. After successfully framing Mary for the vandalism to the school, Hillary Fay's guilt is ultimately confirmed by Mary's replacement Jewel, Tia, a classic "wannabe." The third Jewel, Veronica, rejects Hillary Fay by throwing her pin at her, echoing the scene in which Hillary Fay removes Mary's pin. Caught onstage, in front of everyone, Hillary Fay's fall from grace is symbolically complete. Whereas she began the film singing onstage at an assembly, she ends up being humiliated in a similar venue. In her shame and frustration, Hillary Fay runs out of the dance and ends up crashing her van into the large Jesus billboard, a literal conflict of faith. Showing true forgiveness, it is Cassandra and Roland who come to her aid.

At the same time, Pastor Skip must deal with the students from Mercy House including the father of Mary's baby who, still gay despite his treatment, has brought his boyfriend to the prom. The moral conflict of the film is neatly framed in Mary's rhetorical question, "Why would

God make us all so different if he wanted us to be the same?" This line offers a simultaneous critique of the orthodox Christianity practiced by the school and the orthodoxy of high school social structures that leave little room for outsiders.

Although the sequence brings all of the film's conflicts to a head, it also offers tidy resolution and opportunities for character development. Like *Mean Girls*, the film ends with a brief epilogue at the hospital with all of the characters posing around Mary and her daughter, symbolically directing our attention to the future of this ad hoc family. Both films offer reassurance that in spite of whatever obstacles girls face, they can resolve them effectively. In their respective voiceovers, Cady proudly reports that the hostile environment once known as "girl world" is finally "at peace," and Mary basks in the love of her community asking rhetorically and ironically, "After all, what would Jesus do?" These endings suggest a return to stability and safety, blurring the girl power discourse's promise of empowerment and the girls in crisis reification of the family. Ultimately, the films fail to create new discursive possibilities, returning instead to predictable narratives.

If *Heathers* signaled the existence of cultural ingredients that could produce a disruptive female character like Veronica Sawyer, *Mean Girls* and *Saved!* signal the ability of society to contain that disruption. Embodying at the same time elements of both the girl power and girls in crisis discourses, Veronica proclaimed both the toxicity of female adolescence and its inherent strength. Neither of the more recent movies depicts a heroine as independent and competent as Veronica Sawyer. Cady renounces power-plays and backstabbing to achieve status, eventually conforming to the appropriate behavior expected by her parents and teachers and ends up happier as a result. The message for girls is clear, coming directly from the girls-in-crisis discourse. Even as the film tries to denounce female aggression, it effectively normalizes it and shows the "right"

way to handle it. *Saved!* refocuses attention away from female aggression explicitly, conflating a relentless religious fundamentalism with traditional high school hierarchy. The film does manage to salvage many of the tenets of the girl power discourse. Mary and her friends take charge of their own situation, forging bonds within the community and sustaining each other. This synthesis of the dominant discourses favors the most salable aspects of each, foreclosing their more subversive potential. Cady and Mary conform to the genre expectations of the teen romantic comedy in order to be intelligible heroines: they end up with friends, supportive parents, and they get the guy. Is there room in contemporary teen film – or in today's discourses of girlhood – for a Veronica, or for any girl who doesn't have this holy trinity of support? The ease with which the girl power and girls in crisis discourses have been neutralized and enmeshed suggests the ultimate failure of each discourse to contribute to truly new discursive formulations of girl.

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[1] Brian Dannelly, writer/director, *Saved!* DVD commentary, 2004.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Just before the holiday season in 2007, U.S. film audiences met Juno, the endearing 17-year-old whose tale of teen pregnancy, told in an exotic, hyperliterate patois, drew almost universal praise from critics and audiences. Despite its hip image and even its screenwriter's even hipper backstory as the renegade writer who once worked as an exotic dancer, Juno's narrative is quite retro: the daughter of a functional, working class family deals with the crisis of an unplanned pregnancy by selecting adoptive parents, and for her trouble, finds a committed, loving boyfriend. Juno is the kind of teen that adults want to see, the kind who affirms the coolness of the audience but does not challenge the establishment. In addition to its hefty box office pull, the film's screenplay earned an Academy award. By all accounts, Juno had become the film establishment's most favored girl.

There was not much competition for the title. The ebb and flow of media tastes has led to a declining number of teen films since 2005, while teen-centered television series are on the rise. Against a cultural landscape of small screen "Gossip Girls," Juno's unaffected appeal feels natural, even sweet. The character also represents a new type of film girl, one who blends and normalizes many aspects of the girl power and girls in crisis discourses. At every point in her story, Juno is self-determining: she seduces her friend, she elects to carry her pregnancy to term, she handpicks the adoptive parents. While she makes these decisions thoughtfully and largely independently, she does so with the full support of her parents and best friends. Juno shows how the crises of girlhood can be managed through self-actualization and parental love. That *Juno* the film and Juno herself barely question this reality indicates that the dominant discourses of the turn of the century have become hegemonic to the point of being passé. The girl power and girls in crisis discourses have both become normalized, understood to be part of the "conventional

wisdom" of girlhood. Girls are assumed to be self-determining actors who are accountable for their actions. At the same time adolescence is assumed to be an inherently risky life space. Meanness and cruelty among girls has become codified under the rubric of "girls will be girls." The discursive formation of girl over the past 15 years has synthesized girl power and girls in crisis, virtually eliminating any of the activist impulses of either discourse and emphasizing an agency for girls that is predicated on support from a traditional family system. What power remains is limited, fully inscribed within the cultural forces of patriarchy and consumption.

Compounding the neutralization of girl power and girls in crisis, none of the discourses of girlhood have yet moved beyond an assumption of whiteness and class privilege. In fact, the representations of both girl power and girls in crisis have become even more extreme and even more exclusive. Pop culture most likely accelerated this change. Journalist Rosemary Neill asserts that "Pop culture's ambassadors for young women (Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, Amy Winehouse) are held up as agents of their own destruction while, according to [Australian scholars] Dux and Simic, the feminist watchwords choice and empowerment have been 'used to sell everything from pubic-hair removal creams to thousand-dollar shoes'" ("Girl Power," *The Australian*, 30 August 2008). The relentless demands of commercial media dictate what kinds of girls can be on screen, and what kinds of stories they can tell. The cultural collapse of character and actor, attributed in some ways to an insatiable appetite for paparazzi-fed details, further distorts film narratives. This disconnect signals that the discourses are no longer organic, vital constructions, but rather buzz words, shorthand for a set of stereotypes and assumptions. The limited representation of girls in pop culture sites such as film emphasizes the most salable aspects of the girl power and girls in crisis discourses, further containing the discursive possibilities for girls.

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