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For at least 30 years American culture has failed to provide empowering myths and symbols to its adolescents as they come of age and try to make sense of their selves, sexuality and the culture that surrounds them. This lack of myths and symbols is especially harmful to girls and women who are subject to the limiting and damaging myths and symbols that mainstream American culture continues to manufacture and reinforce. While mainstream entertainment continues to produce and market commercial products and ideology that do not empower girls and women and often undermine their autonomy, intelligence, and power, there are fissures in its powerful facade. In independent films, and in some mainstream films, are powerful and empowering characters, images, and ideology that offer girls an alternative to manufactured narratives that rely upon limiting myths and symbols to define and confine girls’ adolescence and mold them into powerful consumers. Because few independent films are part of the entertainment readily available to teenage girls and women, I have assembled a collection of films that subvert American myths and symbols and create powerful and empowering narratives and characters that girls and women can use to make sense of their selves and sexuality as well as adolescence, mainstream entertainment, and American culture itself. By understanding all of these contexts, girls and women can work to change the culture that limits, defines, and confines both women’s lives and entertainment.
Remaking Myths and Subverting the Mainstream:
Teen Girls Come of Age on and off the Screen

by

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Sarah Duncan Hentges, Author
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Preface

My generation follows a generation that sought to change the world, a generation whose fight Gene Stanford details in the preface to Generation Rap: An Anthology about Youth and the Establishment.

But there is something different about the revolt of the youth of the 1960's and 70's. In the past parents could console themselves that after a few years of rebellion, their children would ultimately turn out to be very much like themselves. This is no longer true. Times are changing, as Bob Dylan has stated, and parents are faced with sons and daughters who are beyond their command. This is a new breed. . . . The older generation, as might be expected, is not willing to step aside gently and make way for the Age of Aquarius. Having accomplished much in its lifetime, it resents youth's disregard of material progress . . . At best it views the young rebels as misguided . . . A few adults, realizing that the world they helped create is by no means perfect, welcome the rebellion of the young as a means of bringing about needed change. But most of the older generation have refused to believe that the youth of today have anything new to offer the world. . . .

The youth that Gene Stanford was writing about in 1971 have now become the older generation and while they may not be defending the same traditional values that the older generation was defending in 1971, they still refuse to believe that “the youth of today have anything new to offer the world.” Instead, the older generation has made material progress an institution and they market youth just as much as they market to youth. But as “young adults” we are both a market niche and an untapped resource. The drastic change that Stanford identified as a contributing factor to his generation gap is also present for my generation, but along with drastic social change has come drastic technological change—a huge shift during my lifetime (24 years) alone. Times are indeed changing; they have been for a long time.
The generation gap today is not so easy to define, and it's not so much a generation gap as a gap between those who have power (money) and those who don't. Those who have power determine what we watch, eat, listen to, where we live, where we go to school, and where we shop—all of the things that make us who we are as individuals and as a culture. They create hegemony, the establishment, big brother, mainstream culture, consumer culture, the status quo—all the same entity, disguised under different names and functioning as a faceless entity that escapes blame and responsibility for the culture it creates and perpetuates.

The entertainment that is marketed, packaged and sold to us, is a reflection of this empty, consumer-oriented culture and the images and ideas contained within the entertainment of mass culture (as well as in the media in general) inhibits progressive cultural change. This is the entertainment we have been raised on and it continues in reruns as well as “new” versions of the old. This mainstream entertainment asks us to consume a dominant ideology uncritically and it makes it easy for us to do so since mainstream movies, television, and music often make autonomous consumption impossible since they dominate the consumer market as well as the mass media. But within the culture that determines much of our reality are images, ideas, plots, characters, jokes, and other elements that undermine the power of mainstream consumer culture. Are these subversions simply another ideology to consume or do they give us a choice in our consumption? Is any consumption autonomous?

I began writing and researching Generation X and subversive TV, but this topic became too big to handle, especially for a thesis. This thesis is only a part of the struggle between the culture we consume and the culture that consumes us and I focus narrowly on one type of media and one cultural issue though I think the issues I raise can be translated into other aspects of culture and entertainment. I've narrowed my focus to how adolescent girls' coming of age is influenced and limited
by the expectations and limitations of American culture and how this, in turn, creates women without an autonomous sense of self or sexuality and perpetuates women’s cultural subordination. But more importantly, I’ll show how the culture that defines and confines girls and women can also empower them if they can access and incorporate subversive narratives, images, myths and symbols into their self during coming of age (and later transitions).
Introduction

In an interview almost 30 years ago, published in Generation Rap: An Anthology About Youth and the Establishment, world-famous psychoanalyst, Rollo May, identified a lack of myths and symbols in American culture. Without myths, he argues, youth lack that which gives them “identity, a sense of being, a style of life.” According to May, youth in 1971 were “struggling to come of age in a society in which there have been no basic, viable, fully-accepted myths and symbols available to be incorporated into the self.” This lack of myths causes youth “to look within, to undertake the lonely, confusing task of finding new myths on which to base identity.”¹ In her book A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence, Patricia Hersch discusses some of the same problems for adolescents in the 1990s as Rollo May recognized in 1971. Hersch writes: “There are few community-sanctioned moments or formalized thresholds that mark steps on the road toward adulthood.” Since “old pathways are inadequate to assuring success in the adult world,” youth are still left searching for myths and symbols that will help them make sense of themselves as individuals and as members of society. Rather than help teens along the path toward adulthood, American culture offers confusion and contradiction, especially to girls.²

While the path toward adulthood is rough for all teens, in her book Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women Elizabeth Wurtzel explains how this path (which she classifies as a trajectory) is more confusing for girls.
Of course, teenage years are a tough time for guys too, but it is not because they are pushed and pulled every which way: it is in fact because the trajectory for boys is so much more direct. You want to be a man, you want to be stronger, you want to be richer, you want to lay as many babes as possible. The propulsion for the male of the species is utterly forward—more women, more muscles, more money, more power, more scores. There is pressure involved in all this demand for acquisition and accumulation, but at least the rules are straightforward and obvious—if you’re going farther, faster, harder, and higher, then unless you end up in a car wreck, you are doing the right thing. \(^3\)

The lack of trajectory for girls explains why navigation of adolescence can often be contradictory and confusing, especially when it comes to sex. Because boys’ trajectory requires them to acquire and accumulate, girls are not only “pushed and pulled every which way,” but they are acquired and accumulated as a part of boys’ rites of passage.

A lack of community-sanctioned rites of passage means that the rites that do exist are not constructive, but can often be destructive, especially as girls are sucked into boys’ rites of passage. In her book, *Slut! Growing up Female with a Bad Reputation*, Leora Tanenbaum explains how what she terms “slut-bashing” is dismissed “as typical adolescent cruelty and a rite of passage.” \(^4\) Name-calling may seem like simple adolescent cruelty, and it is. But as a rite of passage, name-calling ensures abuse and subordination of female victims, especially as this “rite” is manifested in more dangerous rites of passage. Bernard Lefkowitz, author of *Our Guys*, explains such a manifestation as a condition of culture. “For a lot of boys, acting abusively toward women is regarded as a rite of passage. It’s woven into our culture.” \(^5\) It is woven into the same culture which defines girls and which girls use to define themselves. One of the most infamous examples, one that merges sex with abuse, is the Spur Posse from Lakewood, California. \(^6\) These boys kept score, tallying points for each of their sexual conquests. Although they were arrested in March of
1993, the charges were dropped in all but one case. The girls were denounced as "sluts," while the boys were defended by their parents, as well as their community, for being "red-blooded American boys."

By dismissing or qualifying the sexual and mental abuse girls are subjected to, abusive rites may as well be community-sanctioned. They are a part of what adolescent psychologist Mary Pipher calls a "girl-poisoning" culture.

Culture makes many girls feel as though they are "crawling out from under a complex web of affection and alienation, woven largely by their own insecurities, fantasies, and confusions," as Sara Shandler explains in *Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write about Their Search for Self.* They fight battles in their heads that leave them powerless to oppose, or even identify, the larger scale. Instead, girls focus their insecurity and confusion inward. Lyn Mikel Brown also recognizes the web that Shandler describes, not as something woven by a girl, but as an institutional framework that creates a girl's emotional reaction. Brown writes: "Early adolescence...disposes girls to see the cultural framework, and girls' and women's subordinate place in it, for the first time...that their reaction to this awakening would be shock, sadness, anger, and a sense of betrayal is not surprising." But this shock, sadness, and anger come up against the very culture that created them, and a girl is left trying to make sense of this structural roadblock. Pipher reaffirms this power of the macro; she writes: "Adolescent girls today face a problem with no name. They know that something is very wrong, but they tend to look for the source within themselves or their families rather than in broader cultural problems." Girls tend to think that there is something wrong with them instead of thinking that there is something wrong with their sounding board because culture, by virtue of its massiveness, easily escapes blame or turns the blame against its victims.
Culture is even more confusing in terms of sexuality, a piece of self that is necessary for a complete development. Pipher explains what the authors of *Sexuality in America: Understanding Our Cultural Values and Behavior* term the "schizophrenic character to sexuality in the United States":

America doesn’t have clearly defined and universally accepted rules about sexuality. We live in a pluralistic culture with contradictory sexual paradigms. We hear diverse messages from our families, our churches, our schools and the media, and each of us must integrate these messages and arrive at some value system that makes sense to us.

And girls are left to interpret these contradictory messages with little constructive help from the institutions that create such sexual chaos. According to Mary Pipher, “girls receive two kinds of sex education in their schools: one in the classroom and the other in the halls.” The education in the classroom often centers around “just say no” programs and abstinence only programs though some schools do distribute condoms. These programs, according to the girls that Pamela Haag quotes in her book *Voices of a Generation*, do not take into account “the social and physical consequences associated with refusing sex.” The phrase “just say no” does little to “acknowledge male pressure, violence, and coercion by which a girl’s ‘no’ is not respected or is linked to social repercussions.” These out-of-touch programs offer little help with the sex education that takes place in the hallways or outside of school. Even when schools do offer information about STDs and birth control, according to Pipher, “most do not help students with what they need most—a sense of meaning regarding their sexuality, ways to make sense of all the messages, and guidelines on decent behavior in sexual relationships.” Because schools lack what is essential to developing a sense of sexuality, and because many parents also lack the knowledge or desire to talk to their kids about sex, girls are left to make sense of themselves and their sexuality amidst battling ideologies and undesirable, even violent sexual realities.
The search for sexuality and the search for self are both processes which lack empowering myths and symbols. Instead, a girl’s sexuality (and thus her self) is subject to limiting myths. Sex is a necessary step to becoming a woman, to negotiating a whole new level of adolescent life, as well as life in general, but virginity, as a cultural institution, is a myth that limits girls and women. Mary Pipher writes that “losing virginity is considered a rite of passage into maturity,” and this passage is one that is impossible without a boy (or man) to make this transition. According to the myth of virginity, despite a girl’s experience with sex, she is a virgin until she has experienced heterosexual penetration. Because of this myth, girls aren’t told what Mary Pipher tries to instill in her clients: that “it’s healthy for girls to enjoy their own developing sexual responsiveness and to want to explore their sexuality. It’s possible to be sexual and still be a virgin.” But according to dominant definitions of sex and the demands of male partners, it is not possible to be sexual and still be a virgin. Instead girls are forced to “avoid intimacy because they have no control over what happens once they begin to explore.” The consequences of sexual exploration can be as dangerous as physical and sexual abuse, rape or coercion, pregnancy or disease, but these are often the farthest things from a girl’s mind when she thinks about exploring her sexuality. Instead, “adolescent girls approach their first sexual experiences with a complicated set of feelings. Sex seems confusing, dangerous, exciting, embarrassing, and full of promise.” And sex is all of these things, not only because of the way girls feel about it, but also because of the way girls are made to feel about it by the culture around them.

Because of another damaging myth entrenched in American culture, girls face not only the physical consequences of sex, but also the social and emotional consequences. The stud/slut dichotomy, which ensures that girls who have sex are “sluts” and boys who do are “studs,” means that girls’ sexual choices are also
ruled by the informal, insulting labels that often stay with a girl throughout her life. According to Leora Tanenbaum, author of *Slut! Growing up Female with a Bad Reputation*, ‘‘Slut’ is a pervasive insult applied to a broad spectrum of American adolescent girls, from the girl who brags about her one-night stands to the girl who has never even kissed a boy to the girl who has been raped.’’ A girl doesn’t have to engage in any kind of sexual behavior to be labeled a slut; her status as such is not determined by her own thoughts or actions, but by the culture that surrounds her. Judy Mann also recognizes that “like my daughter and her friends, all teenage girls are aware that they have been left with the options of being sluts or prudes, while boys who have sex attain power.” Because the stud/slut dichotomy means power for boys and a lack of power for girls, virginity and the double standard are two institutionalized myths that limit girls’ search for self and sexuality.

Because sex is ruled by limiting and damaging myths, and because, as Mary Pipher claims, sometimes girls don’t know that they “have the right to make conscious decisions about sex,” as a rite of passage, sex lacks the power that its anticipation promises. An anonymous diary contribution to *Ophelia Speaks* exemplifies the conflicted emotions and thoughts involved with sex and takes contest with its value as a rite of passage:

And another milestone passes without a hint of sorrow or a mark of passage. No ceremony. No dwelling. Only a brief, unsuccessful attempt at trying to forget it happened. Of course, I am no longer a virgin, ta-da? And how funny those words sound, look, written in blue ink on paper—as if they were something, as if they mean something, as if I should feel their weight within these pages.

The ambivalent feelings of this journal entry, along with her “attempt to forget” and the strangeness of her own writing, reveal the ambiguity of sexuality, but also the lack that sex creates as a rite of passage. Not only does she not feel guilty, but she
doesn’t feel fulfilled either. She thinks she should feel something, but isn’t sure what that something should be. Because sex is so confusing and initially disappointing, and because this girl lacks the myths to help her make sense of these contradictory and confusing feelings, later sexual encounters are equally upsetting. The continuation of this journal entry explains what happens to the act of sex once the rite of virginity is passed:

And the same pattern repeating itself: me, silent and passive, feeling passionate but driving the passion completely inside, expressing nothing, letting myself be groped, fondled until I am no longer wet, no longer turned on (hurting). He stops, not because I say anything, but because he knows. And I know. Therein lies my double-bind, my inefficient consciousness, trying desperately to learn, to assimilate, to construct, to understand, to reconcile. I can’t allow myself to think I am anything. It is only a disappointment. My rotting insides are visible on the surface again. I fall apart. Entropy increases.

In this journal entry, it is clear that the physical and mental pain that comes with losing virginity does not disappear after the first act of intercourse. Whether the pain is physical or mental, it is there, and it marks sex as the pattern repeats itself. The powerlessness that this girl feels is not from anything she has done or anything that has been done to her; it is because of a lack of what she feels and what she feels she should expect. She searches “to learn, to assimilate, to construct, to understand, to reconcile” because she knows that any one of these paths could help remedy her present state of mind. She’s confused and like girls have the tendency to do, she drives these feelings inward and lets them confuse her even more as they eat away at her self. She assumes that the way she feels on the inside, reflects on the outside because this is the only way to deal with these feelings. Her reaction is an individual, emotional reaction, but when girls become sexual, they also become subject to the cultural framework. Some girls are aware that there is something lacking in the male
paradigm of sexual conquest. In *Voices of a Generation: Teenage Girls Report About Their Lives Today*, the author, Pamela Haag, writes, “some girls write of wanting to explore sexual feelings in an environment that is...less paradoxical in its views of adolescent sexuality, and far less focused on the act of intercourse itself.”

But in Haag’s study very few girls could see past the limits of cultural definitions to voice such an opinion because such a desire counters culture’s control of female sexuality.

The lack of myths does not only affect girls, but women as well. Adolescent psychologists, Mary Pipher and Judy Mann both describe women who enter therapy struggling with the same issues that plagued them as adolescents and the same problems that their teenage daughters face. Judy Mann writes, “these women enter therapy in their late twenties and thirties, having failed to grasp the idea that it is up to them to choose how they are going to construct their lives.” They cannot construct because of what Mann describes as “a sense of lost self, a silencing of their voice, a loss of self-confidence and of identity.” These women were not empowered during their adolescence; they were robbed, not only of self, voice, confidence, and identity, but also of the means by which to acquire them. Because they lack both the means and the end, girls and women continue to lack the necessary myths and symbols that help make sense of adolescence as well as self and sexuality. If women cannot grasp this idea, they are not only powerless in the construction of their own lives, but they are also powerless to change the structures within society that have left them unable to choose or construct.

Many of the contemporary myths and symbols that are available to girls and women are manufactured by the girl-poisoning mainstream (or dominant) culture. Such myths and symbols are marketed to girls in the form of products as well as
ideology. In “The Secret Life of Teenage Girls,” a recent article in Rolling Stone, Jancee Dunn describes this “secret life” but what she uncovers is hardly a secret since it is easily supported through a variety of material (and materialistic) evidence. The article includes interviews from several different girls, and Dunn recognizes the same “noncommittal, nonconfrontational” voices that adolescent psychologists and sociologists have recognized as a condition of adolescence. But Dunn claims that girls, “for the first time in American history, wield tangible power in dictating popular culture, and they are confident consumers, secure in their opinions,” as she describes each of these girls according to what she buys, owns, and eats, all of which reveal what kind of consumer she is. The incongruence between confident consumers and confident girls shows what kind of power is important to mainstream culture. It is not what a girl says that makes her powerful; it is what she buys. And it is the latter that Dunn attributes to “secure opinions.” In other words, girls do not have confidence in themselves as much as they have confidence in the products they consume, at least in the eyes of mainstream culture.

Girls’ opinions are at least as valuable as their purchases are, and the SmartGirl website, whose motto is “Smart Girls decide for themselves,” offers yet another avenue for consumer girl power. The SmartGirl Web site may not accept any advertising, and it may be written primarily by girls, but it is run by “SmartGirl Internette Inc., a New York-based company that earns revenue through custom market research and data analysis on the teenage girl audience.” Because SmartGirl Internette Inc. does custom market research and data analysis, they are not offering girls the chance to decide for themselves; they are using the free information that girls provide to market them and further market to them. The “girl power” that Dunn describes (partially based on the fact that “what [teen girls] dig will make its way, in diluted form, to the forty-year-olds”) and the SmartGirl Website claims to provide
(despite its exploitation), is not necessarily empowering, despite the power it gives
girls as consumers. Pop culture may provide a temporary identity, sense of being,
and style of life, but it does not provide "myths and symbols...to be incorporated
into the self," primarily because pop culture offers only entertainment that is
sanctioned by the status quo, entertainment (and products) that ensure girls will
become those same 40-year-olds.

The line between mainstream and subversive is fine, especially in relation to
teen culture. Resistance to the mainstream can be marketed as a rebellious trend just
as easily as a product logo can become a fashion. This relationship makes
autonomous consumption difficult, if not impossible, especially since pop culture has
the power to smother or at least conceal other parts of culture that are not sympathetic
to its ideology like independent film and music. The movements associated with
subversive independents can be just as easily dismissed or incorporated by the
mainstream. For instance, consumer "girl power" is the mainstream's answer for
riot grrrl power. Mary Celeste Kearney describes the riot grrrls in her article
"'Don't Need You:' Rethinking Identity Politics and Separatism from a Grrrl
Perspective":

"Considering the subordination of adolescent girls in
our society, it seems only natural that riot grrrls are
separating from males and older women as well as
mainstream culture (and some segments of alternative
cultures) to establish and assert their own sociopolitical
identity via a culture that remains distinctly girl-oriented
and unadulterated.

But in the mainstream "girl power" is something totally different, something
completely detached from the riot grrrl subculture. "Girl power" is not a
sociopolitical identity, it is a trend. It may be girl-oriented, but it is not unadulterated.
"Girl power" unites in a way that grrrl power does not and it is, according to
Kearney, the latter that has been responsible for the "all-too-recent focus on girlhood
as a positive structure of investment, position of empowerment, and location of political agency after a century of mainstream constructions of that social position as one of subordinate passivity, mitigated perhaps only by the more ‘active’ behaviors of fandom and shopping?" But the “positive structure,” the “position of empowerment,” and the “political agency” of girls is not separate from the mainstream in the same way that this structure, position and agency is for the riot grrrls. “Girl power” is mixed up not only in fandom and shopping, but also in the perpetuation of the “subordinate passivity” that is hidden by the shallowness of the active.

What consumer “girl power” fails to take into account is girls’ lack of power in other areas of their lives. They may dictate pop culture, but they cannot dictate the circumstances that surround their coming of age (which is part of what the riot grrrl subculture offers). The same culture that gives girls consumer power, also limits their paths to social and sexual empowerment—it lets them buy products as well as ideologies but does not give them the opportunity to truly decide for themselves, not what products they want or do not want to consume, but the choice not to be consumed themselves. The age of “girlpower” makes girls powerful, but only in a way that legitimates dominant, consumer culture. Culture has left girls searching for these solutions not in myths, but in products. A girl can, as Dunn suggests, “safely reinvent [her]self with new shoes and lipstick,” but she has only changed her surface, not her interior. She has bought into a myth, but this myth has no substance from which to grow. Shoes and lipstick may help girls “safely reinvent,” but they do not help girls make sense of themselves or the culture that confines them. When new shoes and lipstick aren’t enough, what are girls to do? And when girls become the 40-year-olds with diluted “girl power” and still lack a sense of self, voice, confidence and identity, where are they to find these things?
The identity sold to girls is not only in products, but in fictions as well. In the introduction to her book *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and TV*, Deidre Pribram writes: "there is a strong impulse at this age [adolescence] to identify with these collective representations [in film and on TV] and to use them as guiding fictions," these fictions, "in part, shape and compose their mental picture of the world," a part of teen experience. Too often these collective representations have a negative effect as guiding fictions, when unreal images meet impossible expectations, when girls are undermined or left out or when the myths of dominant culture undermine girls’ autonomy and search for sexuality and self. But, as I will show, they can also have a positive, empowering impact, especially when they subvert the myths and narratives that make it impossible for girls and women to develop an autonomous, empowering sense of self and sexuality.

Film is one possible alternative to the superficial “girl power” adolescent girls find in material products and materialistic productions, but it too is subject to the damaging myths, symbols, and images of “girl-poisoning” culture. In her book *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*, Annette Kuhn writes: "cinema—as both representation and institution—participates in the construction of social discourses." Because of its power to participate and construct, film helps determine some of the myths that we use to make sense of ourselves and society. But as an institution, films create a discourse similar to the products and ideology girls consume, a social discourse that further limits and confines women as it supports dominant culture’s myths, symbols, and re-presentations of women. Because Hollywood movies are those most available to widespread audiences, they cannot simply be dismissed. But because they are mass-marketed for a more diverse audience than indie films, they also deserve critical attention, especially since these
widely available films have the potential to form myths that may or may not be beneficial to girls and women. These films are like lipstick and shoes. They offer temporary “escapes” from reality and safe reinvention of surface character (through identification with a character on screen), but do little to help develop (and empower) inner character. But if “Hollywood movies have treated women badly and continue to do so,” as Kathi Maio claims in her book *Feminist in the Dark*, how do we avoid the perpetuation of social discourses that are damaging to women? And where are girls to look for powerful women and empowering narratives? 

Despite the discourse created by Hollywood films and dominant culture, Kuhn recognizes that “there is always space for contradiction or at least a ‘lack of fit’ between the various levels at which discourses are produced and circulated in society.” Once a discourse is circulated, it’s meaning can be negotiated. Kuhn suggests negotiation by “reading against the grain” which offers “the pleasure of resistance, of saying ‘no’: not to ‘unsophisticated’ enjoyment, by ourselves and others, of culturally dominant images, but to the structures of power which ask us to consume them uncritically and in highly circumscribed ways.” This suggests, as does Kathi Maio, that critical viewing, and not a complete denial of Hollywood films, is the best solution. Kuhn and Maio both suggest not a sacrifice of the pleasure of media entertainment, but an act of defiance. We can still watch and enjoy movies that do not have women’s best interests in mind, as long as we don’t buy into their limiting discourse.

But as Jon Lewis concludes from Ann Kaplan’s work on MTV (and from Mills and Ewen’s “lamentation”), “if we wade through the morass, we can find subversive forms and progressive strategies.” These progressive strategies and subversive forms aren’t simply waiting to be discovered in the morass; it takes an active pursuit in order to separate them from the masses of limiting and defining
social discourses and available cultural reference points. In order to find new myths that aren’t compromised by the limits of consumer-oriented culture (limits similar to those imposed upon girls by dominant culture), we need to search for narratives that do not objectify, silence, or compromise girls’ coming of age process. It is with the help of these narratives found mostly in the indie films outside or at the edge of the morass that girls can negotiate the lack of fit that they find in their daily lives and women can renegotiate the past that continues to limit them in the present.

The power to change “girl-poisoning” culture comes from girls’ and women’s opposition to this culture, especially against narratives and images that homogenize or characterize women in a way that benefits the perpetuation of limiting cultural paradigms. Susan Douglas, and other women who write about media, suggest an active role as media consumers, a resistance to media that does not treat women well; and Mann, Pipher, and Douglas all suggest that parents help their daughters to be confident and uncompromised media consumers. This power to oppose media and culture (because the two are inseparable) comes from personal, social and sexual empowerment, a process that is a coming of age in itself. Girls and women can be socially and sexually empowered by using media images and narratives to understand cultural processes as well as personal ones. In other words, while media images and narratives often cripple girls and women emotionally, and while culture-at-large does the same, women and girls can also be empowered through re-presentations of these limiting and crippling factors, representations that subvert personal and structural barriers to self and sexuality.

Girls and women already use films to make sense of themselves, but they often struggle alone, trying to make sense of one piece at a time, and are often missing the most important pieces. In this case, some of the important pieces are the
independent films and other films that don't always make their way into the dominant social discourse and the MTV niche.\textsuperscript{35} If "girls appropriate their own ideals of girlhood from available cultural reference points," as Pamela Haag claims, it is important that the available cultural reference points are not only those most accessible. But if girls also "play with, in, and around the boundaries of 'appropriate' expression to disrupt the social construction of gender and to invent spaces and possibilities for themselves," as Lyn Mikel Brown finds that many girls already do, then girls can find spaces and possibilities in life and in dominant narratives with the help of alternative and subversive cultural reference points—found not only in the morass, but also in narratives that do not adhere to the confines of the Hollywood film.\textsuperscript{36}

My purpose here is to assemble a collection of films, alternative and subversive cultural reference points, that deal with issues of sex and sexuality, adolescence, coming of age, the expectations of dominant culture, and the consequences of sex—a collection of pieces that girls and women can use to make sense of themselves in place of the damaging and limiting narratives and myths that American culture provides.\textsuperscript{37} I have chosen a body of films (largely from the late 1990s) in which girls are not simply subordinate, satellite, or stereotyped characters. In these films girls are the protagonists in a variety of coming of age scenarios and in these scenarios girls confront the power structures of American culture—they refuse to be compromised, silenced, or sexualized in the terms of the dominant. Many of these re-presentations of adolescence directly subvert the factors that impede girls' social and sexual development. But these films have not been seen by very many women because they are films that are pushed into the margins by the mass-produced films that Hollywood studios manufacture. They exist outside of the pop culture dominated by MTV and teen magazines and rely upon word-of-mouth and chance
rentals. These films have limited distribution and availability and this is one reason why I bring them together here. But all of these films are available to girls and women in video stores or through on-line dealers. Most importantly, all of these films offer the chance to not only make sense of the micro level of self and sexuality, but also of the macro—the culture that constructs us all.

These films give girls the room to “play with, in, and around the boundaries of ‘appropriate’ expression” and many films “disrupt the construction of gender” and “invent spaces and possibilities.” This space is where the girls are and where the girls can find “subversive forms and progressive strategies.” Through these films girls can be helped to see the “intricate and multiple ways in which our emotions, desires and relationships are shaped by the society we live in,” the very elements that compose sexuality, according to Julia Cleaves Mosse. But women can also use these films to do what they cannot do in life—go back and renegotiate adolescence in a way that helps them recover their voice, their sense of self, and the ability to see that they have the power to construct their own lives. Since, according to Tania Modleski, “psychologically speaking, all stages are more or less present at all times: the young woman anticipates future life; the older woman is a product of her past, or indeed reenacts the past in present relationships,” these films can be accessed by a woman of any age, whenever she chooses to do so. Separated by space and time, these films may or may not mean anything substantial to the viewer (and what they do mean is impossible to know for sure), but together, in the limitless realm of culture, they weave a fabric that has the potential patterns of new myths and symbols and the ability to redefine adolescence for girls and women; these redefinitions offer empowering myths and symbols to girls and women as they compose themselves socially and sexually, immediately or in retrospect. Such a process does not need to
be limited to individual pursuits. Informally or formally, in small groups or in classrooms, these films can provide a forum for girls (and women’s) empowerment.

While the most empowering films I will discuss are independent films, in part one I include some mass-marketed films that do not compromise girls’ characters and do not completely adhere to the rules of dominant culture (but may be undermined by other elements of the film or its social context). Because these films operate within a commercially successful framework they are, perhaps, more successful at mocking or exposing harmful myths while the independent films subvert these myths and write new ones. Two of these mass-marketed films, *American Beauty* and *American Pie*, are both very recent, and very successful films (for different reasons), and both take issue with the assumptions of dominant culture as well as other mass-produced films subvert American myths. *American Beauty* (winner of the 1999 Academy Award for Best Picture) is not a girls’ coming of age film, nor is its focus on teen girls, but these deficiencies (in terms of this study) are beneficial to making new myths. This film directly counters some of the same damaging myths, not in a coming of age scenario, but through Lester Burnham’s mid-life crisis. When Lester realizes he’s been “sedated,” he has to search for a way to feel awake and alive. A myth opens his eyes, but it is his search for self outside the confines of culture that is his awakening. *American Pie* is interesting in that it closely resembles many of the “virgin movies” of the 1980s (like *Porkies*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, and *The Last American Virgin*, among many, many others) that limited girls’ roles to the objects of boys’ sexual fantasies and initiations. But *American Pie* allows its female characters to be characters rather than props. The girls in this film are just as interested in sex as the boys are and the girls do not allow themselves to be limited to objects of the boys’ desire.
One of the benefits of consumer girl-power is a culture that is churning out teen film after teen film, more and more of which include girls as protagonists or one of the protagonists. Most of these films support convention through romantic plots, elements, and outcomes. However, as Tania Modleski argues in her book Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women, "even the contemporary mass-produced narratives for women contain elements of protest and resistance under highly ‘orthodox’ plots." But when these orthodox mass-produced narratives undermine women's empowerment and promote their general subordination and their subordination as male fantasies, their elements of protest and resistance may be buried under the myths of "girl-poisoning" culture. While American Beauty and American Pie subvert American myths, most mass-produced teen narratives offer a mix of subversion and convention and create yet another morass to sort through. In the rest of part one I will look at the ways in which romance acts as both convention and subversion. The two mass-marketed films I will discuss, Clueless and 10 Things I Hate About you, have a mixture of subversive and conventional elements, while the two indie films, The Incredibly True Adventures of 2 Girls in Love and Welcome to the Dollhouse use romance in a way that subverts the conventions of romance as a social ideal and as an institutional construct. Clueless (1995) is a sarcastic comedy written and directed by Amy Heckerling who also wrote and directed the comedy (and in many ways classic teen film) Fast Times at Ridgemont High (1983). While Fast Times is a more serious comedic look at the teenage mall culture of the 1980s, Clueless mocks the superficial mall ("girl-power") culture of the 1990s. While the plot of Clueless is driven by an orthodox, romantic plot, (and is based on Jane Austen's Emma) its sarcasm also undermines its conventions. 10 Things I Hate About You (1998) is based on Shakespeare's Taming of the Shrew, so that its romantic plot is not only driven by convention, but by a literary legacy as well. The
elements that make this classic play a modern teen movie, are both conventional and subversive in a way that makes it difficult to read as a subversive narrative, but impossible to ignore because of its treatment of feminism, romance, and sex. Both *Clueless* and *10 Things* push sex off-screen and post-narrative, like most romantic films do. But because these movies are teenage coming of age films, sex is an important and inescapable part of the narrative.

In most of the films that comprise this study, sex and sexuality cannot be pushed off-screen or post narrative—it is a part of the narrative that, like in life, cannot be separated from the other elements of the film. In each of these different films, girls find ways to negotiate sexuality that may or may not allow them autonomy, but do allow them to develop their self and their sexuality. The two indie films I discuss in this section subvert conventional notions of sex and romance. In *The Incredibly True Adventures of 2 Girls in Love* (1995), Randy Dean and Evie find the strength to overcome adolescence and the social forces that dictate their lives, through the strength of their relationship with each other. Randy, who works at a gas station and sees her life going nowhere, and Evie, who is surrounded by shallow friends and her mother’s nagging expectations, seem like an unlikely couple, but the two develop a friendship (and a romance and a sexual relationship) that helps them negotiate the terrain of adolescence on their own terms.

*Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), a film about Dawn, a seventh-grader who cannot find love or acceptance at home or at school, is quite different from any of the other films in this study. Dawn is awkward and unpopular and she develops a crush on her brother’s friend because, although Steve is basically indifferent to Dawn, he is the only person who does not insult, threaten, or embarrass her. When Dawn’s crush is shattered, she is forced to keep dealing not with her romantic conceptions of sex
and love, but with the hard reality that she will face until she can escape from adolescence.

Part two deals with films that negotiate the landscape of adolescence in terms of sex and sexuality, and each film does so in a different way. *Ripe* (1995) deals with the uneven development of fraternal twins, Rosie and Violet. When their parents are killed in a car crash, the girls are freed from their undesirable parents and decide to go to Kansas (for no reason in particular). Instead, they are stalled at a military base where their adolescent discoveries cause a rift between them that can never be healed. Violet discovers sexuality while Rosie discovers guns and Rosie’s confusion about both sex and the power of guns (mixed with her obsessive jealousy) is inevitable.

*Slums of Beverly Hills* (1998), is a film about Vivian, a 14-year-old girl who, over the course of a summer, is forced to come to terms with her body, her family, and her life. This autobiographical film has one of the most empowering female characters—a girl who won’t let her family or outside circumstances rule her adolescent development. I include *Smooth Talk* (1984) in this chapter because its protagonist, Connie, is, in many ways, a less developed version of Vivian, and because of this she navigates much different circumstances. While Vivian chooses the terms on which she explores her sexuality, Connie races forward, and she is unprepared for what she finds in the world of sex. She ends up surrendering her sexuality to a vicious smooth talker because he traps her into making such a choice. *Whatever* (1998), a film set in 1981, is a commentary upon the atmosphere of the eighties. In this film Anna, a high school senior, is forced to face the gap between her dreams of becoming an artist and her fears of becoming nothing. Anna hates school, but is encouraged by an art teacher who believes in her talent. But even his positive encouragement is not enough to convince her that she will end up with a fate different
from her mother's. Anna's friend, Brenda, is not very helpful either since there is only one outcome for her character, and she desperately tries to find love and acceptance anywhere she can—with boys, with men, with drugs and alcohol. The narrative of *Whatever* most closely resembles a coming of age. With subtlety and an attitude that mirrors the film's title, Anna negotiates sex, her family, school, danger, and her future, and, in the end, she doesn't just do "whatever," she does what she needs to do in order to overcome the present and move on with her life, not in the direction of her dreams, but in the direction of a suitable alternative.

The latter half of part two looks at four films that deal with both the personal and structural consequences of sex. In *Just Another Girl on the L.R.T.* (1993), Chantel takes pride in her academic achievements and has a very certain path laid out for herself, but because of her ignorance about sex, she gets pregnant and is forced to deal with both her pregnancy and her change of plans. Like all of the pregnant girls in this chapter, Chantel's ignorance only makes her situation more trying. Dealing with this ignorance is a crucial part of her coming of age. In *Manny and Lo* (1996), after the death of their mother, two sisters go on the run from a system that could care less if they live or die. Lo takes Manny on a search for a suitable family after kidnapping her from her foster parents, but Lo is up against a force that she cannot control and she does not understand—she is pregnant. Manny forces Lo to acknowledge her pregnancy and the two girls kidnap a baby expert (Elaine) to help them. Elaine is also without a family and she comes to understand the circumstances that Manny and Lo are in. She stops trying to escape and sticks around not only to help Lo through childbirth, but also to help both Manny and Lo (and the newest addition to their family) through the rest of life. In *The Opposite of Sex* (1998), Dedee manipulates her story and the people around her in order to alleviate her compromised situation. While I usually laugh at the ridiculous plot summaries and
comments on the back of videos\textsuperscript{45}, the one on the back of \textit{The Opposite of Sex} explains this complicated plot (and also reveals the mainstream opinion of Dedee that she tries to subvert with her narrative):

Dedee Truitt is the opposite of sweet sixteen. Politically incorrect, outrageous, and bracingly honest, she descends on the Indiana town of her half-brother Bill like the force of nature she is. Within weeks Dedee seduces his beautiful, but befuddled live-in boyfriend Matt, announces Matt’s the father of her unborn child, and escapes with him—and $10,000 of Bill’s money—to the not-so-bright lights of Los Angeles. Meanwhile, Matt’s \textit{other} boyfriend blames Bill for his disappearance, and gets even by pushing for an investigation by the local sheriff—who incidentally carries a torch for Bill’s best friend Lucia, a wickedly acid spinster who disapproves of everything Dedee does—and hey, who can blame her?

It’s a chase, buoyant comedy of manners, a celebration of the unpredictable. But ultimately it’s the story of six confused, touching, and hilarious people who eventually stumble into what they’ve wanted all along: loving, committed relationships—what Dedee calls ‘the opposite of sex.’

In addition to the complicated plot, \textit{The Opposite of Sex} is a movie that tackles complicated issues surrounding sex and sexuality, teen pregnancy, gays, and the ignorance of a savagely naive but savvy teen. But what makes this film unique is that Dedee, through the power of her narration, structures her story, gives us commentary on herself and everyone else in the film, and refuses to submit to the confines of her audience or her genre’s expectations.

The last film in this section, \textit{Girls Town} (1994), tackles issues that few teen films seriously touch—suicide, sexual and domestic abuse, rape, date rape. The three girls in this film fight to make sense of themselves while simultaneously making sense of society. After their friend Nikki commits suicide, the girls are confused and left to figure things out on their own. Neither their parents nor their school do anything to help them make sense of their friend’s death, so they band together to fight against the forces that ask them to go through adolescence in silence and
complacency. Rather than search for community-sanctioned ways to express themselves, the girls choose acts that will be most effective to alleviate their anger and frustration with a society that won’t listen, won’t help, and doesn’t seem to care.

Together, these films establish the myths and the markers that culture is lacking and subvert the limiting myths that impede girls’ social and sexual coming of age. By remaking myths and renegotiating patterns that keep women in their socially designated place, girls can be empowered during their coming of age and can subvert the expectations of mainstream society and culture. The characters in these films can help girls figure out their own inner character. Instead of relying upon lipstick and shoes to allow them to operate incognito, girls can build a sense of self and sexuality that assures they will not, as Mary Pipher puts it, “crash and burn in a social and developmental Bermuda Triangle”\textsuperscript{46} and also ensures that a girl plays the lead in her own life.
Part 1
American Myths: Mainstream Subversion and Romantic Negotiation

In Susan Douglas' book *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media*, she writes about how women of her generation have been affected by the media they grew up with. While her book is a comprehensive critique covering music, movies, and (mostly) television she writes of films: "in standard Hollywood movies, men act—they solve crimes, engage in sword fights, right social injustice, and swing from vines—while women are on screen to be looked at." These parameters continue to rule Hollywood films and are especially confining for teenage girls. The active males and the inactive females determine how girls *seem* when they are looked at—on screen the teenage girl is sexualized and made into an image that is pleasing to mass culture. This masculine gaze makes all girls into sex objects and makes all sex objects into girls—puffing and primping to look good for the eyes that gaze throughout the day. It is the same thing that mass culture has done to Vladimir Nabakov's character, Lolita. Elizabeth Wurtzel explains: "it seems that in the void created by Nabakov's beautiful, complicated text (lack of reading—not misreading—is the culprit here), a cultural version of the game Telephone—with Freudian phantasies and wish fulfillments guiding it along—has turned a girl who is the object of perverse desire into the object of a rapacious sexual appetite." In many ways, this is what culture does to every girl. American culture sexualizes all teenage girls in one way or another—in life and on screen. In the book, Lolita is subjected only to Humbert's gaze and Humbert's fantasies. In film she is subjected to the sexual appetite not of Humbert the pervert, but of the perverted manipulation of the Lolita moniker by dominant culture. Gone is the girl who "chews on gum with bovine vigor," the girl Jeremy Irons describes as "absolutely ghastly—cheap, not
pretty, bad teeth, bad skin, smelly.” This is not the Lolita who plays in the movies. Wurtzel continues, “despite the notion of teenage temptress that has been attached to the moniker Lolita, in Vladimir Nabakov’s novel she is rather vile, obnoxious, not in the least bit seductive.” (But even Lolita as a teenage temptress is a misreading since she is a pre-teen, not yet thirteen, when the novel begins.) The incongruence between Lolita, the character, and Lolita, the myth, demonstrates the incongruencies that film representations can cause in real life. The Lolita paradox demands a confused and contradicted sexuality (not unlike American culture) that makes it impossible for a girl to determine her sexuality on her own terms.

Lolita is not the only celluloid victim of mainstream culture. Teenage girls are bought and sold by the image they produce on screen. They are often silenced and/or sexualized and thus objectified. The sexualization is not always typical of the Lolita paradox; girls who are active in their sexuality—the “sluts”—usually “get what they deserve.” In Jawbreaker, the villain, Courtney, is into “kink” and bullies around her lover before she has sex with a dead man in order to defile the reputation of the friend she just accidentally murdered. At the end of this teen flick, the student body jeers her off the stage after this homecoming queen falls. The line between fantasy and filth is sometimes harder to draw. For instance, the movie Wild Things relies upon male fantasies like cat fights and menage-a-troi, but one of the victims turns out to be the victor when the entire plot unfolds. What seemed to be manipulative sex turns out to be the terms of her master plan. Independent films allow girls more autonomy and complexity in their coming of age than Hollywood films (and these films will be discussed in part two). But while many Hollywood films continue to be ruled by American myths, symbols, and images, some mainstream films (perhaps sometimes inadvertently) subvert, or at least expose, these myths. While American Beauty and
*American Pie*, for example, are mass-marketed films, they expose myths and make it impossible for their audience to consume the girls or the film uncritically.

In the book, *Crossroads: The Quest for Contemporary Rites of Passage*, Louise Carus Mahdi also recognizes the lack of myths and the life-long consequences of such a lack. She writes in the preface:

> In many cultures, the puberty rites of passage are the most important of all transitions, providing the background, and often the patterns, for all later passages. These basic patterns are established at puberty and are often repeated again and again at later transitions.

If these basic patterns are not established at puberty, it is the lack of these patterns, and not the patterns themselves, that are played out again at later transitions. In *American Beauty* this lack of patterns becomes apparent in the mid-life crises of Lester and Carolyn Burnham, and they fall apart at the same time their daughter is establishing her own sense of self and trying to be autonomous.

In *American Beauty*, both Lester Burnham and his wife Carolyn, face the pitiful state of their seemingly perfect, but desperately lacking, suburban lives. Despite the fact that Lester will be dead less than a year after the narrative begins, he is in control as he narrates from beyond death. He tells us that his death does not matter because, in a way, he's dead already. The Burnham family struggles not to fall apart, if only for the sake of appearances as new elements are introduced into their lives. New neighbors move in next door—Ricky, who becomes Lester's key to enlightenment and Jane's boyfriend, his brow-beaten mother, and his maniacal, over-controlling father (whose sexual confusion causes him to kill Lester). Lester and Carolyn both deal with their crises in their own ways. Lester lifts weights, pursues his fantasies (which include telling off his boss and having sex with Jane's friend, Angela), and escapes from reality by smoking the government-engineered pot that Ricky sells him. Carolyn can only partially escape the trajectory that her life has
followed. She pursues her self-discovery through an affair with the successful real estate king she worships. Rather than free herself from the demands and expectations she structures her life upon, she finds only a temporary reprieve. Her crisis, unlike Lester's, continues to be ruled by American myths—an appearance of success at all costs.

Jane is going through adolescence at the same time her parents are going through their respective mid-life crises and neither parent pays much attention to her unless they are fighting about her in terms of her place in their lives. When Carolyn drags Lester to see Jane perform in a high school basketball game's half-time show, Lester is bored until he sees Angela, and immediately his gaze is compromised. Suddenly the camera sees nothing but Angela as she gazes back at it seductively. The half-time show is narrowed to Lester's focus and Angela dances as if she is dancing only for his gaze. She begins to unzip her shirt and instead of being greeted by her body, a stream of rose petals bursts from her chest. Lester snaps out of the gaze, and it has permanently altered his view. When Lester and Carolyn meet Jane after her performance, Lester continues to stare at Angela and stumbles over his words.

Lester's sexualizing gaze enacts the Lolita paradox and Angela seems to be the perfect candidate. But she is simply another victim of this gaze and her character brings all of the angst of the Lolita paradox to the surface. She is made into an idealized sexual object in Lester's gaze. Lester stammers to find words that will impress Angela (and fails miserably—"Do you like muscles?"), but through his fantasy gaze, he continues to seek out the fantasy-Angela and she lives up to his expectations. Under the influence of the gaze he seduces her, kisses her, and pulls a single petal from her mouth. He also finds her in the bathtub surrounded by rose petals. But the fantasy Angela cannot live up to the "real" Angela, and even this Angela is a construction of a myth. Lester's gaze makes the fantasy-Angela seem
like "Lolita," but the "real" Angela is actually closer to Nabakov's Lolita. (The characters even share the same last name.) They are both vile and disgusting, but seductive none-the-less. Because Angela does not want to be ordinary, she puts up a front. She tells Jane all of the graphic details of her sexual escapades, but neither Jane, nor any other girls at school are really that impressed. When Angela brags about sleeping with a fashion photographer, one girls at school sees right through Angela and tells her off in an attempt to shatter Angela's preoccupation with her looks and her dreams of a successful future in modeling. When Angela hounds Jane for her own dirty details, Jane refuses to cooperate and tells Angela that "it's not like that" and that she wishes Angela wouldn't tell her everything she does. What Jane thinks it's like is left ambiguous.

Ricky is also able to see through Angela, not because of a gaze that is sympathetic to dominant culture, but because his gaze is not determined by the expectations of American culture. Ricky is free to see not what has been constructed, but what is really there. Through Ricky's eyes (and through his camera), Angela is ugly and he tells her so. In one scene, his camera searches beyond Angela's attempts to seduce its gaze and focuses upon what he sees as true beauty—Jane's smiling reflection in a small mirror. Ricky's camera simplifies and cuts out the intermediary that the masculine gaze automatically provides. Ricky has the ability to see things that the gaze overlooks and his camera represents this view.

In his opening narration, Lester says that he would like to tell Jane that her insecurity, anger, and confusion will end, but he can't. By the end, he has changed his opinion and, like Ricky, he sees true beauty not in any of the manufactured beauties of American culture, but through the camera that can find beauty in the most ordinary object, or something that is not an object at all. Lester has lost the gaze and can see true beauty—beauty in life, beauty in an inanimate object, beauty in his
daughter and wife—because Ricky's view has become his own. What Lester had with the gaze was an idealized, sexualized version of girls. His gaze, as both a personal fantasy and as symbolic of the masculine gaze of culture, turned Angela from a girl into an object, from a virgin into a Lolita. But when he stops gazing, she is exposed for what she really is and seems nothing more than an ordinary girl. Just as Lester's gaze is an illusion, the "real" Angela is also an illusion. Both of these illusions are shattered when Angela tells Lester she's a virgin. He can no longer go through with his fantasy and the viewer can no longer go on believing in the fantasy of the "real" Angela either. After her confession, she becomes, not a Lolita, but an average teenage girl and Lester makes her a sandwich.

Yet another myth is shattered when Jane refuses to see Ricky in the way that Angela does. Angela accosts Jane for her interest in Ricky because Angela cannot see past his reputation. To those like Angela, "mental problems" are frightening. Lester doesn't have any reason to pay attention to surfaces or be frightened, and he accepts Ricky easily with the invitation to "party" or, as Ricky must explain, to get high. While Ricky's character can be interpreted from a variety of viewpoints, only Jane really gets to see the real Ricky. Again the camera comes into play as she looks at him naked through his camera and asks him about being in the hospital. Neither Jane nor the camera expose Ricky though; he is exposed by the pain of what he has been put through by his father's deeply conflicted and violently dangerous techniques of dealing with what he cannot, or does not want to, understand. In the end, it is this same lack of understanding, both of himself and the world around him, that causes Ricky's father to kill Lester Burnham. Just as Lester has finally come of age, Ricky's father's ignorance kills him. Ricky's father never came to terms with himself or his sexuality so he is left, conflicted and angry, to rob others of their own
rites. *American Beauty* is a film about the ugly side of American beauty, the side that cannot be squelched. When dominant culture does try to push the dark side down, it only rears its ugly head in a way that blows away progress and Ricky’s father represents this ugliness.

*American Beauty* deals largely with the play between surface impressions and reality. The film begins through Ricky’s camera in what appears to be a foreshadowing of what is to come, but this opening scene is yet another subversion of dominant culture’s myths. The camera is focused on Jane, in her underwear, telling Ricky (and his camera) what a jackass her father is, and asking Ricky to kill him. But this footage is a trick. The same footage is shown in the context of the narrative and it is clear that Jane does not want Ricky to kill her father. The difference between the beginning camera footage and the same footage in the course of the narrative juxtaposes the two different contexts that the same piece of film can have depending upon its placement and its interpretation, but it is also the difference between the expectations of dominant culture and the free will of its narratives. This film could have easily been about a teenage daughter who, with the help of her crazy boyfriend, kills her father. It certainly seems like this is the direction the movie is headed. But this would be a plot that surrenders to conventions and stereotypes and compromises Jane’s character. It would also be a plot that would allow dominant culture’s myths to triumph.

While this film seems to be determined by the thoughts and actions of the men, it is Jane who is the central figure and it is Jane who will continue to oppose culture on the same grounds as her father. Jane’s coming of age is interrupted by Lester’s awakening, but if not for this interruption, Jane may have followed the fate of
so many other girls (and boys) who do not question the people they are becoming. When the film begins, Jane is annoyed by both of her parents. In his narration Lester describes Jane as a typical teen, and he only really begins to become interested in her life when he wakes up to the pitiful state of his own. But Lester has not established a pattern of caring and he cannot just walk into her life because he wants to. Jane continues to try to avoid her parents’ strangeness until she is confronted with a strangeness that is more intriguing—Ricky. He seems to be a pervert, always taping her, but when she asks him to stop, he does. Jane cannot figure Ricky out, but soon she stops trying to decipher him, and decides to get to know him. The two complement each other and fall in love. At the end of the film, when Lester is talking to Angela, he asks her if Jane is happy. Angela tells him, with a bit of jealous eye rolling, that Jane thinks she is in love. This news makes Lester happy, not simply because Jane is in love, but because Lester knows that the person she is in love with will not let himself (or Jane) be sedated. Because Ricky helped him to see true beauty, Lester knows that Ricky can also see true beauty in Jane. While Lester’s opposition to dominant culture is the impetus of the movie it is Jane and Ricky who will continue this opposition.53

Sometimes alternative coming of age narratives for girls are found in the unlikeliest of places. Despite its resemblance to the “virgin movies” of the eighties, American Pie is worlds past its predecessors where girls were only allowed to be the pie, and not allowed to eat a piece for themselves.54 In American Pie, the girls are not only allowed to talk about, think about, and initiate sex, but they are given an advantage on the playing field of the virgin landscape of four (somewhat clueless) high school boys. In this narrative that is clearly focused on the sexual pact of Kevin, Jim, Finch, and Oz (Chris) to lose their virginity before high school is over (last
chance: prom night), the girls are hardly powerless. The boys desperately pursue dates and are humiliated again and again; but they all score in the end despite their prior humiliation. But the girls aren’t humiliated and they “score” as well.55

Jim, the most sexually inexperienced of them all (he doesn’t even know what third base feels like), has an appropriate end to his high school days; he is, to his pleasant surprise, used by Michelle, the girl with a thousand band camp stories. Though Jim is convinced all night that prom night is not going to be the night, he doesn’t realize that the ball isn’t in his court. Michelle’s been waiting for sex the whole movie, and she is exactly what the bumbling Jim needs—a woman to take control and tell him what to do. In this way, Michelle is a male fantasy—a nerd who is also an aggressive sex pot. But Michelle also subverts this myth as she takes her sexuality into her own hands. The popular kids shun her from their parties, but when she has the opportunity, she wants a piece of the pie just as much as the boys do. While Jim has been searching for the pie and can only hope that Michelle might be the one he will score with, he fails to realize that he can just as easily be pie to Michelle. When Michelle is the user, the outcome of the scenario is “cool.” The roles have been reversed, and Jim is on his back. He is powerless, but this is exactly what he needs—to slip into manhood rather than force his way through.

While American Pie focuses around Jim’s inadequacies as he searches for the figurative “apple pie” and embarrasses himself with the literal pie, it also falls into some of the same male fantasies as movies from the past, like Finch’s James Bond-like seduction of Stiffler’s mom;56 or the eastern European girl, Nadia, who strips down in Jim’s bedroom, walks around nearly naked, looks through his stuff, finds his porn, and proceeds to “go downstairs” as one of the many viewers of the internet link puts it. But in a movie like Revenge of the Nerds, such a viewing would be the source of profit, pleasure, or performance, but instead, in American Pie, it
becomes premature ejaculation—twice—while nearly the entire student body watches. On this screen, the fantasy of the European sexpot produces the outcome destined for any overly-horny, adolescent male who finds a nearly naked, masturbating girl in his bed—not the sexual adventures of fantasy and film, but premature ejaculation, the reality that *American Pie* mocks. Jim’s sexual failure becomes the punchline to his joke of an adolescent life. He keeps “banging [that] tennis ball against a brick wall” instead of hitting it to a partner. But, in the end, the wall that Jim keeps hitting isn’t as solid as it seemed to be.57

Although *American Pie* is the teenage boy’s equivalent to a romance—they all “score” and fulfill this rite of passage—the girls in the film are the ones who are strong, empowered, and who come of age with or without the help of the boys. Vikki is introduced as she urges Kevin to open the envelope that holds her future. When he assures her that she got in, her response to the good news is telling Kevin that she loves him. Although she doesn’t fully realize it, Vikki’s whole relationship with Kevin is caught up in her plans for her future, as evidenced in her choice of when to say those important words. The rite of passage is buried in the sexual relationship because she can’t go to college a virgin. She might end up “doing it with some totally random guy who totally turns out to be a jerk... and [she’ll] wish [she] would have done it with Kevin.” This is a fate Vikki imagines after Jessica confirms that “it” hurts. She says, “the first time you do it, you know, it hurts. But then you do it again, and again, and it starts to feel good, really good.” So obviously, if Vikki ever hopes to enjoy sex in the future, she better do something in the present when she has a chance to take care of the preliminaries. Even these reasons aren’t enough without Jessica’s supportive words: “you’re ready. You’re a woman. Look at you. You’re ready for sex.” But, when it comes to the act, Vikki isn’t totally ready until she hears “the words.”
Vikki is lucky enough to have a confidante as she struggles with her questions about sex. Jessica is experienced, but she has not been obliterated by her experience; she has been made stronger. She has fallen prey to the talk and the act, but she is now free to keep her “options open.” At prom, while everyone else is subject to the pitiful dronings of the band, Jessica walks around with headphones on—impervious to the cheesy cover band the rest of the crowd is forced to endure. Jessica’s autonomy allows her to be advisor and confidante to all of the clueless boys and girls. She instructs Kevin on what he needs to do in order to get Vikki back— “the big L or the big O,” the former being the way she “was duped”; the latter being what experience has taught her and what she can pass on to Vikki. While Vikki is still unsure about sex, Jessica figures out why; Vikki has never, in the words of Jessica, “double-clicked [her] mouse.” Jessica clues Kevin in, and with some help from big brother (and, coincidentally, a long line of tradition), Kevin figures out what to do. Vikki is initiated into this realm of sex while her parents are downstairs. This sex, which isn’t “sex” at all is what it takes for Vikki to learn that (again in Jessica’s words) “it’s not a space shuttle launch, it’s sex.” In many ways, Vikki has lost her virginity, but not in any way that society deems a rite of passage. She may have had an orgasm, but love and virginity are still unresolved and those issues, according to mainstream culture, are what sex (for girls) is all about.

While Vikki tries hard for the love that should accompany the sex, Heather is not actively looking for what she finds. Of all the “pact” girls in the movie Heather is the most intelligent, autonomous, and self-aware. Vikki is aware of her future, but Heather is aware of her self. She knows the effect of her “choir girl” reputation, but she’s not necessarily looking to Chris to help her shed such an image. She asks Chris to prom because she thinks he’ll be “someone interesting to go with.” But when she finds him making fun of her with his lacrosse friends, she dumps him and
Chris has to learn the truth behind the words of the “college girl” who laughs in his face early in the movie—he can’t fake it with Heather.\textsuperscript{60} The movie does not make it clear whether Heather is a virgin or not, but it is not an issue. It doesn’t need to be because she is always in control of what she wants to do. She may be smitten by Chris, but she is not swept off her feet.

The sex scenes that complete \textit{American Pie} may seem to be in the boys' favor, like they are in so many similar movies, but in this virginity narrative, the girls are just as involved in sex as the boys are. For Vikki, losing her virginity, especially, as Kevin calls it, “normal style,” may seem like powerless sex as the camera sees the pain on Vikki’s face and she asks Kevin to go slow. But Vikki knew what was in store for her, and despite the fact that she gets the words she was looking for, the act is no more romantic than it is in any of the other films in this study. Before, she pined for perfection, but afterwards we find that she has learned, perhaps from the sex itself, that nothing is perfect. And after the long-awaited and agonized-over event actually happens, she knows for sure that Kevin is a piece of her past and not a part of her future. She breaks it off, but he hardly disagrees. His moment, however, was much more perfect than hers. Vikki has sex with a boy, and perhaps this act makes him a man, but it is the process of the relationship that does so, and the break-up is part of the passage. Instead of being the first step into womanhood for Vikki, sex is the cementing act. It enables her to leave trivialities behind and enter the next stage of her life looking toward the future rather than to the past.

The romantic part of the plot belongs to Heather and Chris. At first choir was a scheme, but choir quickly becomes the playing ground where this man is made. Lacrosse couldn’t do it, but singing does. Chris grows up more than any of the other boys as the angle he was going for in the pact—sensitive—becomes the person that he is in life. He realizes that Heather is the only place where he isn’t going toward
one of many goals. He pours out his soul to her on prom night, and this is what sets
Chris apart from his friends. Heather has turned Chris inside himself and only these
two are granted sex with romance and foreplay. Chris has matured so much, that he
doesn’t even need to brag about his conquest (because it was no conquest at all).
Instead, he says they just “had a really nice night together,” and confesses that he
thinks they’re falling in love. Though Kevin, Jim, and Finch have now all crossed
that line between virgin and non-virgin, they can hardly comprehend what Chris is
talking about (and not talking about). They may have broken the barrier, but they still
have some growing up to do.

*   *   *

Mainstream films need to please the masses and, bottomline, make money.
They have pieces of subversion mixed with convention while indie films are
subversive by nature. *American Beauty* is most subversive in its refusal to submit to
the standard ideology of mainstream film, and in doing so it subverts the Lolita
paradox. *American Pie* is most subversive in its disguise as a movie about boys when
the girls in the film are not simply objects, but subjects as well. Other mainstream
films also subvert the limiting social and sexual myths of American culture, but in the
realm of teen films, subversion is sometimes more difficult to locate and uncover,
especially when romance masks sex. Sex has its place in conventional, as well as
subversive romances, because sex is an inherent part of teen life (and life in general)
whether its place is on or off the screen. For instance, John Hughes’ films in the
eighties simplified teen sex in the romantic portrayals and class struggles of his teen
characters. *In Sixteen Candles* and *Pretty in Pink*, Molly Ringwald’s characters are
not out for sex, they are out for a really cute (and, coincidentally, really rich)
boyfriend, a relationship. Once she has that romantic relationship, sex becomes
slightly more acceptable (though if that sex takes place, it does so post-narrative64).
She has overcome her powerlessness not by doing something for herself, but by winning the boy (the goal of most romantic films). Romance remedies general and specific powerlessness, and this scenario is played out over and over again in the romantic plots of many teen movies and "chick" movies.\textsuperscript{62}

The 1983 movie \textit{Fast Times at Ridgemont High} deviates from the formula of most other romantic films; sex is not pushed off screen or post-narrative. This romantic film subverts romantic preconceptions. Stacy has sex twice during the narrative and both times are on screen. In the first scene Stacy loses her virginity and this adolescent marker is far from the romance of off-screen sex. Stacy can't hide her disappointment, but while she is dissatisfied with the sex, she is relieved to get “it” over with. As Jon Lewis notes, “the scene is not romantic, but it is not ruinous either. Rather, it is anti-climactic, ironic, embarrassing.” The second time, Stacy actively seduces Damone and the sex is even more pitiful. There is no foreplay and the act lasts no longer than a few seconds which embarrasses Damone enough to send him running and leaves Stacy “bored, confused, and totally naked.”\textsuperscript{63} But Stacy’s nudity (a shot that filmmaker Amy Heckerling had to fight for) is not sexualized. Instead, it leaves her even more exposed, not in the same way that the Lolita paradox exposes, but in a way that subverts the Lolita paradox. She is vulnerable in her nudity especially in contrast with the infamous scene with Linda in the red bikini, a male fantasy that goes awry. The sad irony is that when \textit{Fast Times} is edited for television (where most teens are likely to see it) this revealing scene, as well as those other scenes that subvert mainstream conceptions of sex and sexuality, disappear and all of this subversive meaning is lost because nudity and frank sexual discussions have no place in mainstream television and a specific place in PG-13 and R-rated movies.
At the end of the film Stacy says, "I finally figured it out. I don't want sex, anyone can have sex. I want a relationship. I want romance." And despite her friend, Linda's skepticism ("we can't even get cable TV here, Stacy, and you want romance?") at the end of the narrative Stacy and her boyfriend, Rat (neither rich nor good-looking), are "having a passionate love affair. . . .but still haven't gone all the way." This film, despite being a romance, takes the romance out of sex because sex is not a part of the romantic plot. Sex is used both as comedy and as realism, and as such, sex more closely resembles the reality of teenage life. Sex is not often romantic (or perfect, like Vikki in American Pie wants it to be), it is more often painful, disappointing, or frightening, and, thus, not a good choice for romantic subject matter. In Fast Times Heckerling keeps the romance and retains sex as a rite of passage and a part of coming of age, but does not romanticize the rites that allow a girl to "settle" for romance. Stacy chooses romance because she has had sex and it was not romantic at all.

10 Things I Hate About You is a romantic film with its mix of subversive and conventional elements. Kat is a "bitchy" feminist who reads Sylvia Plath and applies to Sarah Lawrence college. She wears black and refuses to submit to the pressures of popularity and she is also a strong, empowered character. But to her sister, Bianca, and the rest of the student body, Kat is a loser, a mutant, and a bitch. She is even called a "heinous bitch" in class by Joey, a popular model who her younger sister, Bianca, likes and who we later find out was Kat's boyfriend when she was a freshman. Bianca doesn't realize that Joey is responsible for the change in her sister. Kat didn't get sick of being popular, Joey made her sick of it.

Bianca is concerned only with convincing their father to let them date and Kat is the obstacle that stands in the way, according to their father's rule (no dating until
you graduate). What Bianca doesn’t know is what a jerk Joey is and that Joey is interested in her because she is a guaranteed virgin. But this hardly matters since Bianca finds this out for herself on their first date and quickly dumps Joey for Cameron, a new boy at school who fell in love with Bianca upon first sight. But Kat and her father are still obstacles to Bianca’s qualified autonomy and Cameron and his friend take it upon themselves (with the help of Joey’s money) to find someone who will date the undateable Kat and offer to help him “tame the wild beast,” as Patrick says lightly.

The girls’ father, an obstetrician, is adamantly against dating because he knows what happens to girls who date. (They have sex, get pregnant, and wind up on his examining table.) Because of his professional experience, he doesn’t trust his daughters to make their own choices or mistakes, but he also doesn’t realize that his daughters are smarter than he thinks. Kat and Bianca’s father is comically portrayed as the out-of-touch parent saying things like, “what’s normal? Those damn Dawson’s River kids sleeping in each other’s beds and what not. I’m down. I’ve got the 411. And you are not going out and getting jiggy with some boy. I don’t care how dope his ride is.” In this short burst of passion he confuses all of the lingo of popular teen culture. His assumptions are absurd and this absurdity is reflected by his words. But the true absurdity comes from the contrast between his daughters and his expectation. His character may be portrayed in ridiculous proportions, but his daughters’ reactions to him make it clear that they are not going to live up to his fears. When he lectures the two on the latest teenage girl to visit his delivery room and asks Bianca what she thinks this 15-year-old delivering twins said, Bianca replies: “I’m a crack whore who should have made my skeezy boyfriend wear a condom.” He has no reply to these words that simultaneously show common sense about contraception, but also an upper-middle class (and mainstream) view about pregnant teens that
independent films subvert. He doesn't need to make Bianca wear the belly (a weighted contraption meant to simulate the experience of being pregnant), but someone could teach her a bit of compassion.

The narrative of *10 Things* is focused on Kat and her "taming" while Bianca's shallow pursuits are part of the subplot. While Kat keeps her attitude and her politics, she also falls in love and surrenders to the plotting of her sister. But she also works through a lot of the baggage that made her want to be an outcast. Parts of this working out come from a conversation with Bianca where Kat admits that she had sex with Joey because "everyone was doing it." She says, "after that I swore I would never do anything just because everyone else was doing it." Bianca listens with amazement, but when Kat tries to lecture her, she lashes back. Kat tells her, "not all experiences are good, Bianca. You can’t always trust the people you want to." Of course Kat is speaking about Joey and her own experiences. But Bianca doesn’t have the same maturing processes as her sister and she replies, "well I guess I’ll never know, will I?" Bianca's words are like a slap in the face to Kat. Kat was so worried about protecting her that she didn’t think about letting Bianca figure all of these things out for herself, and this conversation makes Kat swallow her pride and go to prom so that Bianca, according to the rules, can also go. Kat is surprised and pleased to see that Bianca did not go to prom with Joey, but with Cameron.

Kat goes through many rites of passage in the span of a few weeks time which include getting over her preconceptions about people (and boys in particular), talking to her father about her future (and he tells her that he sent the check to Sarah Lawrence despite the fact that he will miss her), letting down some of her defenses, and letting Patrick into her life. And Patrick actually turns out to be just perfect for Kat; he’s even interested in the indie feminist bands that Kat likes.
Although I read Kat as the empowered character, the one who is not afraid to be herself, to be something different from the crowds around her, it is Bianca who comes across as powerful. Bianca has all the right answers. She talks back to her father, avoids Joey, sweetly manipulates Cameron, puts her sister in her place, and remains the good girl everyone loves. She even punches Joey several times—once for “making my date bleed,” once for her sister, and a final one “for me.” But while Bianca exhibits all of this power, she is not empowered. As Patrick describes her to Kat, “she’s without.” The hero of the movie, in many ways, is also a bland conformist. She doesn’t make any hard choices in the course of the narrative—Cameron is clearly the best choice. He’s perfect (a sweet, little follower) and Joey is slime. She doesn’t even take an active role in the plot to get her sister (and thus herself) a date. Instead, she sits back and whines as the boys do all of the plotting. She is there to be looked at while the boys have the active roles. This is one way that subversion and convention are mixed and which one dominates is a matter of interpretation.

In terms of sexuality, however, convention seems to dominate. At the end of the film Bianca is in a romantic relationship and while her father was frightened about her “getting jiggy with some boy,” she does not show any interest in anything more than kissing (though her father has a comeback for that scenario as well: “kissing isn’t what keeps me up to my elbows in placenta all day long”). Bianca won’t be doing anything just because everyone else is doing it, but she also won’t be doing it because the narrative will not allow this possibility.

The parameters of the romantic narrative are even more confining for Kat. Her status as “bitch” when the film begins is a result of her making an autonomous decision about her sexuality and herself. She doesn’t want to follow the crowd, especially when it comes to sex. Her decision is not community-sanctioned or
supported, but her status as an outcast certainly is. Once Kat is with a boy who is
not like Joey, a boy who cares about her and has her best interests in mind throughout
the film, she is not allowed to continue her development on screen because the
narrative ends before she has to make such choices. The film makes it seem like sex
is not even an issue because romance prevails and the two cannot be on screen
together in such a film. The subtext, however, is that Kat is, by now, ready to pursue
her sexuality in a sexual relationship (but only as an outcome of the romantic
narrative).

In *Clueless*, Cher can afford (literally and figuratively) to have a romantic view
of sex; she is in control of her life and of the narrative that relates this life to us.
When the narrative begins, she is the most popular girl in school; she is a model for
fashion and taste. When Cher is unhappy with her grades, she decides that her
teacher is unhappy and she and her best friend, Dionne (both named after singing
stars), plot to fix up two lonely teachers. Cher uses her talent—makeovers—(which
“give her a sense of control in a world full of chaos”) as well as her cunning and not
only wins good grades for herself, but adoration and applause from the entire student
body. Cher’s best solution for feeling “impotent and out of control, which [she]
really hates,” is to go to the mall, where her father’s credit card puts her life back in
perspective. At home, Cher is Daddy’s little girl and she plays this part as well as she
plays the part of little sister to her “brother” Josh, the son of her ex-step-mother.
She makes sure her father remembers to eat and she makes fun of Josh (mostly for
his lack of style).

Since Cher is so powerful in high school, this isn’t the place where she
searches for men because “searching for a boy in high school is as pointless as
searching for meaning in a Pauley Shore movie.” Her romantic vision, which
Dionne, jokes about, is “saving herself for Luke Perry.” Such a vision cannot be fulfilled by high school boys who are, the girls decide, “like dogs.” And Cher’s experiences with high school boys do nothing to convince her otherwise. When one boy insists on giving her a ride home, he forces himself on her and forces her out of the car in the middle of LA. Cher survives not only what she terms “sexual harassment,” but also abandonment and a robbery that strips her of only her cell phone and her purse, and causes her to “ruin” her designer dress. While this representation undermines the seriousness of both date rape and sexual harassment, it is representative of the conditions that rule teenage girls’ sexuality—even the most popular and the most perfect are targets for boys’ “uncontrollable” passions.

In another failed attempt with high school boys, Cher successfully catches Christian’s attention by “showing a little skin,” sending herself flowers, and other little ploys meant to make him ask her out. When Cher decides that Christian is “the one,” she tries a sure-fire plan. Di helps her pick out an outfit for the big night and arrange her pillows just right. Cher even attempts (and fails) to bake cookies. But with all of Cher’s preparation, it is clear that Christian is not interested in having sex with Cher, not because of any failure on her part, but because he’s gay. (Later, the two become friends because he likes to shop as much as she does.)

Cher’s control begins to dwindle out of control as she finds herself in a situation she can’t argue her way out of—she fails her driver’s test—and her friend, Tai, (who Cher helped to make popular with her make-over talent) takes a stab at her, calling her “a virgin who can’t drive.” Suddenly the other power that Cher thought she had, defining the criteria necessary to lose her virginity, becomes something that makes her powerless. She realizes that what she thought was taste (“You see how picky I am about my shoes and they only go on my feet.”), has really left her clueless.
But in a sweep of romance Cher realizes that she’s in love with her non-brother, Josh, (something she was clueless to before) and of course the feeling is mutual. Until Cher realizes she is in love with Josh, she teases him and argues with him. She comes across as being a silly airhead, but every once in a while, Cher surprises him with something intelligent, sensitive, or funny. In some ways Cher “grows up” when she realizes that she was clueless, but this rite of passage is hand-in-hand with sex since she has found a guy that meets her sexual criteria—someone she “really cares about.” Even in this romantic coming of age, sex, if not the deciding factor, is the prize, and Cher is hardly powerless in claiming this prize (since she does so post-narrative). But the movie also ends with a wedding scene, not for any of the girls in the film, but for the teacher the girls make-over. When the bride throws the bouquet, Cher emerges from the pile of struggling girls and women with the bouquet, a clue that there will, of course, be marriage (and sex) in her future.

While Cher defies many stereotypes and *Clueless* exposes many myths, neither the character, nor the film, do much to subvert these myths. Rather than take issue with the myth of virginity, Cher strives to experience this landmark because she feels left out when Di finally goes all the way. The romantic ending of the film, not only for Cher, but also for Di and Ty, is the only way this film can end. The girls fight over the bouquet as the boys joke about them planning their weddings and this reinforces the idea that women want marriage and men want to do anything they can to avoid it. But during her coming of age, Cher also goes from being a selfish princess to being a selfish princess who takes interest in charitable causes and global issues. Perhaps post-narrative, when she completely grows out of adolescence, Cher will be a more developed version of this person, with the help of Josh, of course, since he is the catalyst for the change in Cher during the narrative.
A different form of the romantic is seen in *The Incredibly True Adventures of 2 Girls in Love*. When the movie begins, Randy Dean is ostracized because she is a lesbian. People yell “Dyke” at her from moving vehicles. Her only friends are a gay male friend, her female co-worker at a gas station, and her older lover (who totally controls their relationship). Evie, on the other hand, is a picture of perfection and is trapped by the expectations of such perfection and popularity. When the two meet, they begin to test the sexual waters not through sex, but through a close friendship, a friendship like neither has had before. Their relationship is a part of coming of age for the two, but in different ways. For Evie, it is a way of separating from her mother “which is a totally normal adolescent impulse, and in fact crucial to [her] adult development,” as she reminds her mother in a quick tirade of words. It is also a way to “traverse [her] own landscape.” For Randy it is a kind of coming out even though she is already “out.” It is a relationship that lets her be happy with who she is. She may be shunned by the rest of school and society, but she is close to Evie, and the personal is more important than the public. But Evie also makes Randy deal with herself publicly rather than hide from view. Since she hasn’t dealt with the harassment Randy has been subjected to, she doesn’t understand how people can be so cruel. In both of their situations, their relationship—love (and coincidentally, lesbian sex)—is at first, a way of escaping who they are expected to be, and later, a way of making the world (their family and friends) deal with who they are.

The sex scene in this movie is not post narrative or off camera like many other romantic films; rather, the entire movie anticipates it. The girls cook and eat and smoke and drink together, pushing their way into adulthood by “playing house.” Evie knows that her mother will be calling, but she doesn’t pay any attention. When the phone rings the minute Evie turns eighteen, she has completely separated from the phone’s umbilical chord. Instead of answering her mother’s call, she doesn’t even
hear it. She is in the throes of passion. Since there is no penetration, no power struggle, this sex scene is unlike heterosexual sex scenes—there is no top and bottom, especially since both girls confess that they have never done this before. It doesn’t matter if the girls are “virgins.” Sex, unsanctioned by society, is the way that these two girls express their love; and sex is also the reason their relationship is forced to meet the eyes of the public.

Evie’s mother is the one most jolted out of her expectations. She comes home expecting to surprise her birthday girl and she discovers the kitchen in shambles. She ventures upstairs totally unprepared for what she is going to see next—Randy and Evie scrambling out of her bed. She can’t stop saying, “it’s a girl.” Her perfect little girl has been hiding something and it is nothing that her mother could have imagined. Confronting her mom with a mess and a half-clothed girl is the only way that Evie can traverse her own landscape and make her mother deal with it.

The two try to run, but there is no escaping. They end up surrounded by all of the players in their lives (and in the movie). Randy’s aunt, her aunt’s lover and ex-lover, Randy’s gay friend and co-worker, Randy’s ex-lover and her husband, Evie’s mother and three friends who dump her because she loves a girl, are all loudly waiting for the two of them to come out of hiding, to surrender. But the movie does not show the details of their surrender; instead they pledge their love forever. The words of Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, a book Evie gives Randy as a gift, overpower the urgings of the crowd outside their door, then their voices overtake all others, “Let’s change that to girlfriend whose embracing awakes me.” Their embrace, framed by the doorway that leads to their immediate future, is frozen before they have to face this future. Instead of ending the movie with the girls’ surrender, the image of their embrace stands against the backdrop of confusion, anger, and nervousness that awaits
them. And then there is silence and a cut to black, and the words: “For my first
girlfriend. May our relationship finally rest in peace” appear. The film has achieved
what the individual, alone, could not, and it is helped along by the strength of character
in Evie and Randy Dean. Unlike the romantic endings of *Clueless* and *10 Things*,
this romantic ending subverts the dominant rather than surrender to it (but the sex in *2 Girls* also fulfills a male fantasy).

One film that does not and cannot submit to the masculine gaze or male fantasies is *Welcome to the Dollhouse*. In this teen nightmare the bare bones of adolescence are exposed through this biting representation of junior high. Dawn is searching for popularity, attention, and acceptance and instead she is hit with all of the pain of junior high where she is an outcast. Dawn’s little sister, Missy, who is always dressed in her pink ballet clothes, constantly prances around Dawn (literally and figuratively) and no one can stop talking about how cute she is. Missy, aside from being a constant nuisance, reminds Dawn not only of what she lacks as an awkward teen, but also of what she cannot go back to—childhood.

Dawn thinks the path to popularity is sex, though her concept of sex and flirtation is childishly naive. She lusts after Steve, the high school boy who is “the next Jim Morrison,” the embodiment of sex with his long hair and soulful lyrics. But Dawn cannot mask her blundering naïveté with romantic notions. Instead, these romantic notions expose her lack of experience. After Dawn finds out that a girl she knows has been “finger-fucked” by Steve, a description that has Dawn staring at her hands for hours, she makes him fishsticks and Hawaiian punch, and plays the piano for him. Then she asks: “Want to see my fingers?” Her seduction is a mixture of ignorance and romance, two things junior high girls know plenty about. But the real
world of junior high and the inescapable world of family still impose upon her
romantic fantasy; she has to deal with boys her own age.

Dawn’s relationship with Brandon begins with a threat that seems like a pre-adolescent version of the bully-teen comedy *Three O’clock High.* He tells her that he’s going to rape her at three o’clock. Dawn really doesn’t understand the concept of rape and decides to wait until the inevitable happens. It never does. Instead, they develop a friendship from their common state of being misunderstood. They have all of the same frustrations with their common enemies of school and parents, and they kiss in the clubhouse that Dawn’s cruel family is tearing down the next day. But the romantic in Dawn cannot forget Steve. Torn, Dawn says, “I can’t be your girlfriend,” and she and Brandon play out a juvenile, melodramatic scene. Brandon becomes jealous and yells “What’s his name? Tell me his name!” Dawn tells him that she is in love with Steve Rogers. She says, “He’s in high school. You don’t know him,” and Brandon calls her an asshole and storms away.

Most other teen and pre-teen girls are content to worship manufactured stars like the Backstreet Boys or N’SYNC, but for Dawn, who receives no positive (non-sexual or sexual) attention at home or at school, posters are only two-dimensional alters. She builds herself a three-dimensional one and she worships a star-in-the-making, rather than the packaged stars that other girls worship. His realness holds more possibility and she chants “Steve, Steve, Steve” over and over again in an adolescent seance. She says: “Steve, hear me. You will fall madly in love with me. You will make love to me. You will take me far away from this place.” Of course, Dawn is as confused about making love as she about rape; the key is that Steve has the potential ability to take her “far away from this place.” In “this place” Dawn is dressed like a child and treated like a child. She can only look forward to the future or fantasy.
When Dawn tries to fight back against her reality—the boys who harass her and throw spitballs at her—she and her parents are called into the principal’s office where she is further humiliated and misunderstood as the principal asks, “are you having social problems?” Dawn’s mother confirms that she is because she’s a “loner” and she has no friends. (Her family hardly instills any confidence in her; if anything, they take her confidence away.) When Dawn tries to explain herself by saying that she was “fighting back,” her mother asks, “who ever told you to fight back?” Clearly Dawn is operating from a position where she has no power, not even the power to be listened to and certainly not the power to be understood. She is urged, like so many other real and celluloid girls, to be complacent, and not to stand up for herself. In this movie, Dawn’s parents and principal represent all of the forces of institutionalized adult culture. Instead of being assured or helped by the powers that be, she is given a lecture about her “permanent record,” as if something so inconsequential is of any concern to her while she deals with her “social problems.” Instead, she invests her romantic dreams for the future in Steve and while Dawn isn’t thinking about where Steve may take her, this unknown is far more comforting than the reality she lives with daily.

If Dawn was popular, she’d have sexless power, but her lack of friends, coupled with a cruel and self-absorbed family, leaves her to navigate the sexual waters blindly, sexlessly, and powerlessly. She can only wait for high school where her socially outcast brother assures her she’ll at least have a niche where the harassment will lessen. While the future scenario is less than ideal, it is better than what she has now, and all she has now is a crush who understands that “junior high sucks.” She clings to this commonality because Steve actually talks to Dawn, not to make fun of her and not because he likes her, but because he is indifferent to her. She is there and she listens to him, so he listens back. Dawn invents a relationship with Steve that is
only destined to disappoint her. She identifies with his music as he sings to his
“little girl” and says, “Welcome to the Dollhouse. I’ve got it all set up for you.” In
her mind and her fantasy, it’s as if he is singing just to her. The only powerful act
Dawn has is her crush on Steve; it is powerful because it is her own endeavor, her
own creation, and her naiveté allows her some promise for the future, even if that
future isn’t with Steve. When she’s done dealing with junior high, Dawn has a whole
other world to survive before she can begin to breathe.

This film relies upon the same myths that films like 10 Things and Clueless
also rely upon, but Welcome to the Dollhouse subverts the myth of romance. Dawn
represents the “real” Lolita—the Lolita that most films sexualize. But Dawn cannot
be sexualized because she is not a “Lolita” in the terms of dominant culture—she is
a seventh-grader who is as torn by the Lolita paradox as any other real or celluloid
teen girl, but she is not desirable according to the standards of dominant culture. She
searches for sex because it is tied to the romance that allows her fantasies to make her
life more livable, but she isn’t prepared to deal with society’s expectations of her or
her sexuality.
Part 2

The Adolescent Abyss and the Consequences of Sex and Sexuality

Mahdi identifies the puberty rites of passage as being “the most important of all transitions” because these rites establish patterns “for all later patterns,” but these rites are also of utmost importance for girls because “the young woman is taught how, symbolically, she becomes a carrier of culture.” If rites of passage are not only a personal transition, but also a transmission of culture, girls today find themselves carrying and transmitting a culture that does not view or represent them favorable or powerfully. But if girls and women choose to carry and transmit a culture (or parts of culture) that are more favorable to them, they have the power to change the culture that limits and confines their coming of age process. Sexuality is key in this power because girls’ and women’s sexuality is so closely monitored and confined by dominant culture and this confinement directly influences and impedes a girl’s search for self.

Because sexuality is connected to the macro level of society as well as the micro level of emotions and desires, a change in sexual ideology on the micro level can also effect a change on the macro level and vice versa. For instance, in her book, Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920, Mary E. Odem writes about how “in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the sexuality of young single women became the focus of great public anxiety and the target of new policies of intervention and control by the state.” In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “the particular anxiety about adolescent female sexuality stemmed from profound changes in the lives of young working-class women and girls that increased their opportunities for social and sexual autonomy.” (One advice book from 1914 makes the threat of
autonomy clear through its title alone: Training the Girl, as well as through its advice on “The Girl and the Sex Problem,” which includes treatment of the danger period, sex hygiene, and the results of a missed opportunity for marriage—derangement.71) Despite their “training,” women found opportunities for social and sexual autonomy as they “earned wages in stores, offices, and factories and spent their leisure hours in dance halls and movie theaters”; these “young women were constructing a new social role for themselves.”72 Girls and women today can also construct new social roles for themselves, roles that continue to build upon reconstructions that began in the past or upon new opportunities for social roles that are rooted in the subversive elements of contemporary narratives and empowering rites of passage.

Rites of passage are not “celebrated in a constructive way with mentors and elders,”73 the way that Mahdi thinks they should be in order to be a “major moment in the transmission of culture.” But the ways that girls in film negotiate adolescence, the rites of passage that compose their coming of age, can be “celebrated in a constructive way.” This celebration can create a conscious role for teen girls in the “creation of their own identity as a sexual category,” a role that, according to Constance A. Nathanson, “sexually unorthodox adolescent women” (unlike homosexuals or prostitutes) have not had in the past.74 Films bring sexuality (which can be viewed as unorthodox depending on a variety of personal or social definitions) into consciousness and connects these struggles with the search for self. In all of the films that comprise part two, rites of passage are diverse and coming of age requires negotiating sexuality as well as self. These are the rites that write powerful and empowering myths.

Rosie’s first few words of narration sum up the parents that she and her sister leave behind as Ripe begins: “Our dad was a real motherfucker. So when he bashed
that deer, I dragged Violet from the burning car and watched mom and dad explode.” The story that follows this explosion is one that could not take place with any kind of parents in the way, and Violet and Rosie are free to develop according to their own devices. As their names suggest, Rosie is only a blush while Violet is a deep purple. Rosie is not interested in sex; there is nothing that has caught her attention. Violet, however, is beginning to become aware of sexuality and her body, but she has always been the one the boys liked, according to Rosie. Rosie is awkward, gangly; Violet is sexy. Rosie is annoyed by her sister’s curiosity about sex and Violet is confused by her feelings, even as she begins to discover the power of her sexuality.

The split between these two sisters is evident from the first few frames of the film. In glimpses of their childhood, a young Violet curiously looks at two bugs mating. She asks her sister if she can imagine what it would be like if they were those bugs. But the young Rosie prefers not to use her imagination; she hits the bugs with a stick, chanting “kill them.” While this scene may seem like an innocent childhood game, in the scheme of the narrative, it foreshadows what is to come. Also clearly evident from the first few frames is Rosie’s obsession with Violet. She says, “I’d do anything for Violet,” and goes on to show this dedication throughout the movie. She says, “I made her promise me, no boys, just me and her forever.” But this is a promise that Violet cannot keep. Once a piece of fruit is ripe, it must be eaten, otherwise it will spoil. This is the same inevitability that drives the narrative of Rosie and Violet.

A more developed version of the bug scene takes place when the girls are adolescents. The sisters see two rats mating and Rosie quickly smashes them with a shovel. Violet asks her, “why do you always have to do that?” Rosie gives no answer, because she can’t. The narrative to follow asks the same question, but has as much trouble answering the why. Why does Rosie stay rooted in the realm of
childhood and platonic friends while Violet propels forward into the world of sex? The question cannot be answered, especially not by simple biological development, but the film explores the ripeness (and rancidness) of sexuality and the inevitable death of childhood.\textsuperscript{75}

The entire narrative is saturated by sex, but a portion of the film juxtaposes childhood (innocence) with adulthood (sex) in a series of scenes. When the girls hide in Pete’s truck because their picture dominates the front page of the paper, they find their ride is filled with pornography. Violet is especially interested as she reads from one of the magazines. Annoyed and disgusted, Rosie explores the other boxes and the two girls find all sorts of toys to enliven their imaginations and ignite their giggles, including the anal intruder. Like many of the scenes in \textit{Ripe}, sex is exposed to Rosie and Violet and as they ride in the back of Pete’s truck, even with boxes full of porn, they don’t have the context to make sense of it all. The actual use of the anal intruder is clear enough to the girls, but the sexuality connected to it is something that is pushed just below the surface on the military base—a seething cauldron of testosterone and dirty sex mixed with discipline.

Pete innocently lets them stay the night and the girls continue to be pulled between the world of childhood and the steamy world of sex when they go exploring the next day.\textsuperscript{76} A group of military men begin a chant, “I don’t want no beauty queen,” but Ken, who later becomes a mentor to Rosie, squelches their chant before it can go much further. This scene cuts to Rosie and Violet mocking a military chant as they step in time. The girls chant their way right into a line of cat calls which Violet loves as she lingers to bask in the whistles and words that Rosie hates. They run right into a younger girl absorbed in her hula hoop. They scamper around her, mock her and try to mess up her count, but are shooed away by the girl’s mother as if they are pests. The girls then encounter Pete and the lady who wants him to “sell her a
vacuum cleaner” as she anxiously and obviously seduces him. They peer in through the window and burst into giggles at the sight. They run in opposite directions and agree to meet later, and what follows their separation only further foreshadows the end to this inevitable struggle between childhood and sexuality.

When the two split, Violet encounters a building full of recycling and looks at a magazine with a picture of a naked man. She looks and then blushes as she puts the magazine down. Rosie comes across a bunker full of guns and ammunition. Searching for a gun and role-playing as secret agent 007, she is apprehended by Ken. Once he realizes the perpetrator is only a young girl, he pretends to give her a hard time, but lets her go, telling her, “you come see me. I’ll show you a few things.” (While Ken’s words could be interpreted sexually, this is far from what he and the film have in mind. He wants to set Rosie straight with discipline, the same thing that set him on the right path when he was a wayward youth.) The girls meet back up again and Rosie is excited about a “really cool guy” she met who is going to teach them to “shoot and stuff,” but Violet is bored and ready to move on to Kansas like they planned. Without money, the girls are temporarily stuck at the base and Rosie is able to pursue Ken’s teaching. Violet even offers to work the coat-check at the Fourth of July dance so they can steal the money they need in order to leave the base and move on. But while the girls wait for their chance, Violet begins to discover autonomous sexuality—the only thing of which her sister is not a part.

While Rosie is discovering the phallic power of the gun, Violet gets her period. The only adult around to help Violet is Pete and he fumbles for the words to explain and reassure her. Instead he comes up with, “you’re just so beautiful.” Violet initiates a kiss and asks him not to tell Rosie. Meanwhile, excited by her ability to shoot a gun, Rosie exuberantly hugs Ken. The split between the two girls is evident in their reaction to these two different situations. Rosie calls for what she is
most comfortable with—a platonic hug. Violet chooses not a platonic hug, or even a platonic kiss, but a kiss that responds to Pete’s flattery, and initiates a sexual relationship with him.

While Violet was curious about sex before, she begins to actively pursue it after she begins to menstruate. She returns to the bunker where she looked at porn earlier, but she doesn’t just look. Alone, among the porn that others have thrown away, Violet masturbates. She is interrupted by Rosie as she busts in and tells her to freeze, while holding up her gun. Rosie laughs about the look on her face, not realizing that the look she has walked in on is not one of surprise or fear, but one of interrupted pleasure. Violet’s interest in sex also leads her to become more interested in Pete not only romantically, but sexually as well, and Rosie’s jealousy is obvious. The Fourth of July Dance becomes the pivotal moment in the movie, as well as in the relationship between the girls. The dance and the day are a kind of “independence day” for Violet, and what happens after the dance creates a rift between the two girls.

At the dance, Violet dances and enjoys herself despite Rosie’s annoyance. Violet pretends like her plan to steal from the coat-check does not produce enough money for them to leave and Rosie is distraught. Not only are they still short on cash, but now she is losing Violet to a man. While Rosie pounds down shots at the bar to alleviate the pain of seeing her sister dancing with Pete, Violet leaves with him. As they walk out the door, Violet looks over at Rosie and the last shot as they leave is of Violet’s look toward Rosie. She knows she is leaving her behind.

When Rosie realizes Violet has left with Pete she becomes frantic and runs back to Pete’s. Rosie peers into Pete’s bedroom window, and she is torn apart when she sees Violet in Pete’s room. Rosie runs off and while her sister is losing her virginity, Rosie stumbles upon the military men and their strange, homoerotic mix of chanting, wrestling, and dancing. The scenes flash between the blue glow of Pete’s
bedroom and Violet’s pained face, to Rosie’s observation of men wrestling each other to the ground. When one man sees Rosie, she makes a run for it, and he chases her down. While Rosie runs as if trying to escape from his sexual advances, she changes her mind and surrenders to his drunken pursuit. She grabs him and kisses him. She takes off his belt and pants and pulls down her underwear. Just when Rosie has completely (and actively) surrendered, Ken comes along and threatens to kill the man if he doesn’t get off her. Rosie flees, throws up, and returns to Pete’s to find Violet waiting in their make-shift bed. The two have each been initiated into sex, but hardly in the same way. Despite Violet’s physical pain, she continues to be interested in sex, and because of Rosie’s emotional pain, she is only further disinterested and confused.  

Rosie cannot forgive Violet, but when Violet takes off for a ride on Pete’s motorcycle and Rosie discovers Pete’s money, she cooks up a plan that she thinks is sure to win back her sister and will enable them to move on with their journey to Kansas. While playing a game called “30 seconds in the closet,” Rosie shoots Pete. Violet is shocked and calls the military police, but when Ken gets there and demands an answer, Violet protects her sister, telling him that Pete shot himself. Rosie thinks that it is all over, but when the girls return to collect their money, Rosie finds that Violet also has a plan. Violet pretends to play the game with Rosie that their father used to play. She pulls a gun on Rosie and tells her to hide. Rosie protests at first, telling Violet that she doesn’t know how to use the gun. But Rosie quickly complies as Violet points the gun in her face and chants the words that their father used to chant: “Fe fi fo fum I smell the blood of a little one.” Violet quickly disappears and the movie ends with the vision of a runway, Violet on a plane, and Rosie curled up on the floor of Pete’s house, shooting a gun into her mouth. Violet opens her hand and she is holding the bullets.
We know that Rosie survives because the film begins with her narration. She tells of the long-haired guy with a broken down motorcycle who will come between the two sisters. But it isn’t simply the long-haired guy who comes between these girls. Rosie’s love is platonic, but it is also obsessive and unhealthy. In her opening narration she could be describing a lover just as well as she is describing a sister. With Ken’s mentoring, Rosie lights up and has confidence in herself. He is teaching her discipline, but she is not only gaining inner power, she is also learning to shoot and acquiring a power that is outside of herself. The discipline is inconsequential and the phallic power of the gun and the consequence of its use are more than she is prepared to handle, especially when she faces a future without Violet.

Is Rosie’s decision to kill Pete ignorant, devious, or both? She killed Pete, but her intention was not only death, but freedom for her and Violet. What results is freedom for Violet from her sister, the exact scenario that Rosie was afraid to face. With Rosie, Violet knows that she will never be autonomous and she will never be able to be free in her self or her sexuality. The split between these two girls is inevitable once sex, through puberty, has the chance to come between them. It is inevitable because Violet develops more quickly than Rosie, but eventually Rosie would mature and she and her sister may have become closer as women than they were as girls. But the split between Rosie and Violet is unavoidable not only because of Rosie’s obsession with her sister, but more importantly, because Rosie’s action makes reconciliation impossible. She has killed not only her sister’s lover, but she has also denied Violet the choice to continue to mature, and in so doing, to make her own decisions about sex, life, and love.

But there is also a freedom for Rosie. She no longer has to be obsessed with Violet and everything that Violet does. Rosie also has the opportunity to be
autonomous to further develop her own sense of self, not a sense of self contingent upon Violet.

* * *

Experience, age, peer pressure, and development are factors that push a girl from childhood into adolescence. Crossing this line may be an inevitable and exciting transition, but many girls are forced into it before they are ready. Physical development is, perhaps, the greatest determinant because it makes the transition visible, and, therefore, public. Two movies deal specifically with girls who are plunged into the abyss by virtue of their bodies and are forced to deal with the stares and assumptions of those around them. In *Smooth Talk*, Connie’s legs grow faster than anything else and she can wear clothes her friends can only stare at with envy. Connie enjoys the attention, even as she is unsure of what to do about it. In *Slums of Beverly Hills*, Vivian is plunged into womanhood by her breasts and she cannot stand the way that everyone, including her brother, constantly stares at her chest. While these two movies share this theme, they are drastically different. *Smooth Talk* is a surrender to the confines of womanhood, while *Slums* is a celebration of one girl’s strength and ability to define her own life.

Connie is playing childhood games with her friend when the movie begins, but she quickly dumps her friend and strikes forward into the world of men. When she and her new friend cross the highway to get to this other world—a hamburger place damp with testosterone. Connie is clearly not prepared for what awaits her on the other side of the highway. She flees one guy’s car because she’s “not used to feeling this excited.” She runs away from these feelings, but she cannot hide for long.

After a fight with her family, Connie is left at home, free from the responsibilities of a family barbecue, and left to the ennui of adolescence. She plays
her music from every radio in the house. She sunbathes and makes bracelets. She is left to her own devices. A friend is the only intrusion that this day may bring, but the friend who shows up may be A. Friend (Arnold Friend) but he is not a friend at all.

At first Connie is drawn to Arnold Friend, with his flashy car and his smooth talk. But his smooth talk quickly brings to surface what Connie is not prepared to deal with. A. Friend’s smooth talk is not the romantic words, the benign flirting, found in similar scenes on and off the screen. Instead, it is threatening and manipulative, violent and sinister, and even criminal. It brings to the surface the subtext of any “innocent” smooth talk where the victim is unsuspecting of the intentions and consequences of words. But A. Friend’s smooth talk is not merely threatening her chastity or her virtue, these things are farthest from Connie’s mind. Instead, he is threatening her sanity, her power, her autonomy, and her right to make her own moves in the game of sex.

A. Friend knows everything about Connie. He knows that her family went to a barbecue and that they won’t be back for hours. He knows about the friends she’s left behind and the men she’s been exploring. He acts like he’s doing her a favor, or he is about to do her a favor, but it is on his terms, not hers. His talk is the kind she has not heard; it is about experiences she has not had, but it is also talk she has not heard because, as she tells him tentatively, “no one talks like that.” He becomes openly, terrifyingly sexual, calling himself Connie’s lover and telling her he’s going to “come, come deep inside where it’s silent. . . .” She has nowhere to run and nowhere to hide, and she is left having to confront sex, not on her terms, but on terms that compromise her self and her sexuality forever. Connie can no longer explore sex on her own terms; the terms have been set and now she is just along for the ride.

Because he makes her feel as though she has no choice, Connie gets in A. Friend’s car. Rather than being forced to witness the reality of A. Friend’s words,
the viewer sees a visual metaphor. The screen is nearly silent, but Arnold’s car, the “vehicle” of his control, sits silently in the middle of an empty field. When Arnold drops Connie off back at home, she has the last word—I never want to see you again.

Connie is reunited with her family, but she is hardly the same girl that she was when they left for the barbecue. She reaches out to her sister as Connie tries to remember the tactile feeling of youth. She makes a joke about being tainted as she convinces her sister to dance with her. She has silently accepted her sexuality and even though she told A. Friend off, she has lost all of her fighting words. She has silently accepted her place on bottom and she knows there is no turning back. Connie represents countless real girls who have their virginity (and thus their sexuality) stolen from them by sexual predators far worse than A. Friend. But girls can learn from Connie’s mistakes and other celluloid girls have.

In *Slums of Beverly Hills*, Vivian also faces the point of no return, but for her this realization is not a surrender to the confines of womanhood, but a propulsion into waters that must be explored. At the beginning of the film, Vivian is faced with what she can no longer hide—her breasts, and thus, her sexuality. The film opens with Vivian being fitted for a bra and Vivian, in her bra, occupies most of the screen while her father and the saleswoman discuss her and her bra loudly in the background. Everyone in Vivian’s family feels the need to make comments about her breasts, including the “building guy,” Elliot, the guy Vivian uses to experiment with sex. One of the ways Vivian confronts this constant exposure is with her attitude—she talks back. When her brother makes a comment about her breasts (and he makes many), she snaps at him, “I don’t go around talking about your morning wood, don’t go around talking about my tits.” (Of course, he is hardly as sensitive about his show of masculinity as she is made to feel about her feminine exposure.)
Vivian's visibility is only one of the ways that her burgeoning sexuality is brought into the gaze during the film; she is constantly confronted with stares, but she is also exposed. In one scene her father makes her put a bra on underneath her halter top which draws the stares that its ridiculousness deserves. At a fancy dinner, she stains her father’s potential companion’s needlepoint seat cover with menstrual blood. The woman screams as if Vivian has just committed a mortal sin and Vivian leaves with an ancient menstrual belt and a box of pads so big that it cannot be missed. In an earlier scene, her cousin, Rita, applies cream to get rid of her mustache dibilitory, and everyone has to comment about that as well. Also with her cousin, Vivian’s father catches them dancing with a vibrator and Vivian can’t turn it off despite her embarrassment. All of these situations force Vivian’s development into the open and throughout the course of the film she deals with both the attention she receives and the situations her physical, emotional, and social development bring.

Instead of simply loving or hating the attention her breasts get, Vivian gazes at it from within, evaluates it, and appropriates it throughout the course of the narrative. At the start of the film, when Vivian is getting her first bra she stares at her viewers while she simultaneously stares at herself in the mirror. She sees her image and thinks she’s deformed. She continues to think this until visiting the plastic surgeon forces her to come to terms with her body. She tells him, “I don’t like them. . . . I don’t want them.” And when he agrees to consult with her, she looks in the mirror and sees her mother in her breasts (something both her father and Rita comment on earlier). She confronts her exposure by looking within herself and coming to terms with her body. But Vivian is also forced to gaze at herself (both literally and figuratively), an act necessary to the process of coming of age.

While Dawn and Connie both have factors pulling them backward toward childhood, Vivian has factors pulling her toward womanhood. In addition to the
development of her breasts, Vivian has the responsibilities of a woman in a family that consists of her father and two brothers. She thinks there's something wrong with her family and she thinks there's something wrong with her body. But in the end she realizes that her family is a part of her self and her self is a part of her body just as much as her body is a part of her self. Just as she sees her mother in her breasts, she sees her family in her life. At the end of the film, Vivian narrates: "I used to think the good life was somewhere just outside the window of my father's car. But now I see it's on the inside. Sure we didn't know where we were going to live, but we knew where we were going... A meal at Sizzler meant that we were halfway home."

With these final words Vivian not only comes to terms with her family and their life as nomads, but she also comes to terms with her body. What's important is what's inside—both herself and her father's car. While in the beginning of the film she seems to be drifting away from her unsatisfactory family, in the end she pulls them back together. She is becoming a woman because she has begun to do the work of the woman.

Unlike Connie, Vivian has mastered a nonchalant attitude about sex. Nothing is going to let her feelings get away from her. When she makes out with Elliot in the laundry room, she controls the situation. When he immediately begins taking off his pants, Vivian is instantly on the defensive, saying, "I'm not gonna do it in the laundry room. I wasn't talking about that. Just breasts. Second base. That's it. Not all the way." Vivian does not spare him a word and he quickly complies to her lead. When the dryer buzzer goes off, Vivian calls off the make-out session and tells him not to tell anybody.

Vivian is also in control when she has sex for the first time, perhaps because she has already negotiated sex on her own, with the help of Rita's vibrator. (Unlike
most other girls in these films, she experiences the “big O” before she has intercourse.) Elliot is teaching her how to drive (and she is, appropriately, in the driver’s seat) in an empty parking lot and when the cops approach, he tries to get her to stuff his pot (he’s a dealer like Ricky) in her panties because the cops can’t search a girl. At first Vivian refuses, but she suddenly tells Elliot to kiss her, to put on a romantic show for the cops. The cops disappear, but the scene doesn’t end. An overhead shot passes by the car and Vivian and Elliot are naked, side by side, in the backseat. Afterwards, when Elliot finds blood on his seat, he panics. He asks, “are you telling me I popped your cherry?” Vivian replies, “I didn’t say that.” And she didn’t say it, but he knows it is true and he rants about the pressure involved in such a ceremony, even though the act has already been completed. Vivian explains that she “just wanted to do it with some guy to get it over with. No ceremonies.” Despite Elliot’s reaction, Vivian has emerged unscathed and in perfect control of her situation. She hasn’t been taken in by the myth, but he has.

Also unlike Connie, Vivian knows what she’s getting into. When she dumps Elliot, she tells him what she told him from the beginning—it was just a building thing. She adds, “I just can’t get attached. We’re nomads.” Vivian, in the midst of all of the other demanding factors in her life, has negotiated sex. She has learned that she is in control of her body and her pleasure. She has refused to take her place on bottom. She too knows that there is no going back to childhood. She also knows that she can continue to have self and autonomy despite whatever is thrown her way.

When Vivian isn’t looking at herself in the mirror—which brings disgust the first time she does it and closure the next—she is forced to look at her cousin, Rita, who, in almost every scene, somehow ends up naked or nearly naked. In her first scene, Rita needs a ride and she stops a trucker by throwing her robe open in the
middle of the street. When Vivian first comes across Rita, she is in the shower and
she is so ecstatic to see Vivian that when the two hug, Rita’s towel falls off (and it
falls off again later). Rita’s constant exposure reminds Vivian of what she is
becoming—a woman. But Rita does not offer the most empowering model of
womanhood because she is still dealing with the same issues that adolescence
introduces. Rita’s primary role in Vivian’s narrative is to remind Vivian that she is a
woman and to help her with the little things that a father can’t handle. But Rita can
hardly handle her own life. Rita gives Vivian all sorts of guidance on the sexual and
feminine fronts, but when it comes to life, Rita is not in a position to give advice. She
joins the family after escaping, once again, from her drug treatment center, and it is
clear that Rita has not kicked her drug habit. What Vivian finds out is that Rita is also
pregnant. Rita puts up a front about the baby’s father, trying to convince Vivian (and
herself) that her situation is better than it actually is. She tells Vivian that she is “so
ready to domesticate,” and giggles like she is playing house. When Vivian shows
concern, Rita tells her “don’t worry Viv. I’m a grown-up; I’ve got it all under
control.” While Vivian knows that Rita does not have anything under control, this is
a realization that must wait until the end of the film, when Vivian comes to terms with
the weakness of adults, in general, and her father, specifically.

Despite Rita’s ability to help herself, she does help Vivian. She helps her to
see what Vivian has not been able to accept about her father as well as the very things
that Rita has yet to conquer herself. Rita helps Vivian come to terms with her self
(and her body) shortly before Vivian watches Rita fall apart in front of Rita’s father.
As a role model, Rita may not provide the best vision of the future with her drug habit,
hers eating disorder, and her general lack of direction. But Vivian is not touched by
her cousin’s weaknesses. In her relationship with Rita, Vivian takes the good, the
positive things that Rita has to offer and Vivian sees Rita’s problems more clearly
than Rita (even though Vivian’s vision is also obscured). Vivian tries to help Rita, but Rita’s problems are too big to be fixed by Vivian. At the end of the film, Rita is carted away by her father and everyone is back where they were when the film began, except for Vivian. During the course of the narrative, Vivian has come of age, but more importantly, she has come to terms with her life.

* * *

High school graduation is considered a standard rite of passage in life as well as film. Symbolically and realistically, it is an event that propels a teen forward into the rest of life. However, there are several factors that qualify graduation as a rite of passage. If there is nothing to look forward to after graduation, then it loses its power as a rite and becomes a frightening shove or an inconsequential event. Also, because coming of age is a process, graduation does not necessarily equal adulthood. A teen can graduate and still have many trials ahead of her as she passes out of high school and into college or the “real world.”

For the girls (and boys) in American Pie, high school graduation and prom are definitive markers because the boys (and some of the girls) make them so. Graduating is simply a marker that signals more time to grow in college. But what happens when there is no college to look forward to, when there is only an uncertain fate ahead? The film Whatever does not make the assumptions of college not only because it deals with a different social class than films like Clueless, American Pie, 10 Things I Hate About You and other high school coming of age films like Can’t Hardly Wait and She’s All That, but because the protagonist, Anna, cannot be defined by her class and because her high school experience is not romantic. Like Randy Dean in 2 Girls in Love, Anna does not do well in school. But Anna’s problem is not with math, it is with English class. And it is not because she can’t do the work, it is because she won’t. Anna understands that her future does not depend upon the work
she does for her patronizing English teacher, but the work she does for her mentor,
hers art teacher. One thing that Anna comes to understand is that in order to get where
she wants to be she has to jump through some hoops. But Anna’s “surrender” is
not a surrender at all. It is survival and it is a choice not to end up like her friend,
Brenda, or her mother.

In Whatever, prom is never mentioned and, because of Anna’s struggles in
English class, graduation is not an automatic. At the start of the film, Cooper Union, a
prestigious art school in New York, has had Anna’s portfolio for two months. She’s
getting restless as she waits for a reply because she has pinned all of her hopes on
Cooper Union (and its scholarship) and her romantic notions of being an artist in
New York. Like Chantal in Just Another Girl on the I.R.T., Anna has big dreams, but
a reality that makes those dreams difficult to realize. An art teacher, a mentor not
unlike Ken in Ripe, helps to bolster Anna’s confidence. He tells her that she is the
most difficult, and possibly the most talented student that he has ever had. He feeds
her dreams of Cooper Union and he is the only positive encouragement Anna has at
school or at home. But Anna’s biggest encouragement and discouragement is
Brenda.

Brenda is everything that Anna is not. She is confident, sexy, directionless,
and, most of all, easy. Throughout the first part of the narrative, Brenda supplements
parts of Anna. Brenda helps her put on eye make-up and encourages her in the
matters of men and sex. Brenda coaches her on how to act in front of Martin and
how to dress when they go to New York. One scene shows the difference between
these two girls as they get ready for a party; Brenda controls her image and Anna is
annoyed by hers. Anna tries on outfit after outfit in front of her mirror, trying to look
good for the “boy” she likes (Martin). She is displeased with outfit after outfit and
her snotty little brother comes in to tease away her confidence, calling her fat and
ugly. In direct contrast, Brenda stands in front of her mirror as she dresses and applies make-up like a pro. She gives herself sexy looks and kisses in the mirror. She dresses sexy (bordering on “slutty”) and knows she looks good. Anna puts on a skirt and she looks different enough that her mom and a friend (and later Brenda) comment on how nice she looks.

While Brenda urges Anna to have sex, Anna pursues the object of her desires in her own nonchalant way. But Anna thinks that Martin is something he is not. He is alluring because he is older and he is an artists who has just recently returned from a (bogus) journey to find himself. Martin knows Anna is a virgin, and he stalks her in a way that is not unsimilar to A. Friend. He waits around by the keg at a party and then says lame things to Anna until he pushes her up against a wall, tells her that he thinks she wants it, and kisses her. She doesn’t protest and the two go inside where Martin becomes more aggressive. He is pompous and his smooth talk hits Anna right where she is most vulnerable. When he plunges his hand between her legs and she tenses up, he asks her what she is afraid of. She tells him that she’s afraid of being ordinary and he tells her that it is easy to be ordinary. Martin thinks that he is extraordinary, but the irony of his smooth talk is that he is the one who is ordinary. He offers Anna nothing except a means to an end (though she still has a crush on him).

Later, Anna shows up at Martin’s place after having a fight with her mother, and he is more than willing to have sex with her since that has been his goal the whole time. (Anna is grounded so sneaking out to see Martin is an extra act of defiance). Martin’s foreplay is as lacking as his seduction technique. Once he knows Anna is willing, he takes little time with the preliminaries. He only partially undresses her and his version of foreplay includes a prodding question, a placement of her hand, and an in-depth conversation about a penis she saw during a trip to an amusement park,
which is followed immediately by penetration. Being the pseudo-sensitive man that he is, Martin asks Anna if she is okay, and she lies, telling him that it feels good despite her apparent look of pain. Martin forge ahead. When Anna leaves Martin’s house, she seems not to have gained anything, but, rather, symbolically, to have lost something. Anna arrives at Martin’s house on the symbol of her autonomy—her bike. But when she leaves, the pain is too great to ride her bike and instead, she silently walks it home. The next day she waits, and waits, for a phone call that never comes. Martin is done with his prey.

During intercourse, Anna’s face shows anything but pleasure. The only pleasure she does get out of the experience is when she shares the information with Brenda. But in this sharing, she also reveals her disappointment. She tells Brenda that she liked it until he put it in and then it just hurt. Brenda, as sexually experienced as she is, tells her that it does hurt a little, but it helps if you’re drunk. During the many scenes in Whatever where Brenda is having sex, she is drunk and while her expression doesn’t reveal the pain that Anna’s expression does, Brenda doesn’t exhibit pleasure either. In Brenda’s case, her words express a deeper pain that she feels. Small details like the way she clings to one man’s back or how she reacts to another’s voice afterwards, show how Brenda feels about what she is doing. She’s doing it to feel the affection and pleasure that other parts of her life lack. While Brenda seems to be an almost-too-typical case, she represents the lives of countless girls (and women) in similar circumstances.

Throughout the narrative, Anna encounters several different influences that either deter, detain, or foster her hopes for her future. The art teacher fosters, but the other characters in her life mostly complicate feelings and insecurities that are already on her mind. Martin tells her that art school can’t teach her how to paint. He tells her
that painting is about passion, and Anna is afraid she has no passion. Brenda takes Anna (literally and figuratively) on a wild ride that reveals to Anna what kind of future she will have if she follows Brenda. It is a future that is completely undesirable, but also a last resort. When Brenda mentions going to New York with Anna, Anna makes it clear that she’s not interested in the idea of moving to New York with Brenda, and Brenda’s desire to move to New York expresses her desire to get away from her life as well. (However, Brenda’s fate follows her wherever she goes.) Anna can be friends with someone like Brenda because she knows (or at least hopes) that she will soon leave Brenda (and everything else in her life) behind for New York.

While Brenda gives Anna advice and guidance that she cannot get anywhere else, Brenda also drags Anna into potential trouble on more than one occasion. Brenda’s ability to find trouble stems directly from those elements that make the two girls different. While Anna has to grudgingly deal with her mother, this is easy compared to the family situation that Brenda is forced to deal with. Anna’s mother is searching for a husband, but Brenda’s mother has already found one. When Brenda asks to borrow her mother’s car, her mom says that she has to ask her step father. It may be Brenda’s mom’s car, but it’s also the family car and he, according to Brenda’s mom, is the head of the family. This scene is only a precursor to what Brenda’s family puts her through. When her step father comes into her room one night after she gets home late, she tells him to get out. But instead of leaving, he shuts the door behind him and turns out the lights. The scene ends here, but in a later scene, Brenda reveals what happened in her room. While trying to steal her stepfather’s money, he comes down and catches her and begins to hit her. A scuffle starts and Brenda’s boyfriend hits him and takes him down to the ground. Brenda beats him with a fireplace poker as her mother, Anna, and the guys look on. As she beats him, she repeats what he said to her in her room. “Make Daddy feel good.
Daddy loves you.” When Brenda finally stops, she looks at her mother and tells her she hates her. In this brutal and violent, rite of passage, Brenda gets revenge, but she also forces herself into a certain fate. She has come of age in her own way, and she is hardly able to control her enthusiasm.

Through Brenda’s escapades, Anna meets another influential figure in her life, an ex-con, Zak, who appears to be a tough, scary guy, but turns out to be a kind of tough-guy Zen master. The first night the two talk he tells her about prison and his perspective on life turns out to be a perspective that helps to save Anna in the end. All of these people play roles in Anna’s narrative, but her mother seems only to be a thorn in Anna’s side. She has almost no clue what is going on in her daughter’s life. She tells Howard, the fat, bald, married man that she’s dating (under the illusion of a future for herself and her children), that Anna is doing well in school, a lie that makes Anna almost laugh in his face before she tells him that she is planning on becoming a nun.84

Anna cannot find respect for her mother and it is easy to see why. In the first scene with her mother, she arrives home looking hungover and used just when Anna and her little brother are getting ready to go to school. Her mother attempts to do her job as a mother, yelling through Anna’s door for her to wake up, while Anna lies in bed wide awake, telling her mother to shut up. Later, Anna really tells her mother off, insulting everything Anna finds wrong with her mother’s life. Her mother slaps her, not after Anna’s many attacks on her character, but after Anna insults Howard and her mother’s plans to marry him. For the most part, Anna avoids her mothering, partially because she isn’t a desirable role model. She tells Anna not to drink when she has a drink in her hand, and everything else she tries to tell Anna seems to be contradicted by her own self-defeating behavior.
But there are a few instances when Anna’s mother has something poignant to add. When Anna arrives home late after her visit to New York, her mother is watching TV and waiting for her. Anna’s mother tells her that she was going to go to Paris; she had an internship at one of the fashion houses. But when Anna asks why she didn’t go, the answer is chilling in terms of her own life and her mother’s life—because she got pregnant. Suddenly Anna is staring not at the woman she despises on a daily basis, but at the woman she could easily become. She is faced with this version of her future just as her mother gives Anna her rejection letter from Cooper Union. Her mother tells her not to expect so much; it’s easier that way.

After Anna gets the rejections letter, her situation seems even more hopeless. The art teacher gives her a bag that he had in New York and she cannot bring herself to tell him that she didn’t get in. As she takes off he senses the disappointment in her face. After she leaves the art teacher, she has no one else to talk to and shows up at Martin’s place. Surprised to see her, he puts on his smooth talk and asks her what he can do. She begins to tell him that “things aren’t really happening the way [she] planned” and he pontificates: “life’s what happens while you’re busy making other plans,” just as his date walks in. Martin has failed her once again philosophically as well as personally. This time when she leaves, not only can she ride her bike, but her mobility is a defiance as well as he offers her the only thing he can—a ride on his way out with a woman much older (and probably more “sophisticated”) than Anna. Anna’s refusal and her icy stare are her only weapons.

Brenda is the only option that Anna has left and as undesirable as that path is, Anna isn’t sure what else she is going to do. She shows up at a party looking for Brenda. In contrast with earlier party scenes, at this party, Anna is clearly out of place. She sits and waits for Brenda and Zak sits down next to her and lights her
cigarette. When he asks her what she’s doing there, she answers honestly—she doesn’t know. She follows Brenda because she thinks she has no choice.

Brenda becomes more and more annoying and as the four of them share a hotel room, and Anna turns to the substances that have helped her cope with the pressures in her life throughout the whole movie—pot and alcohol. She rummages through the guys drugs until she finds a joint and smokes it adamantly. Her vision becomes altered and the scene fades to black as she and Zak kiss. In the next scene Anna awakes lying naked on a beach. She jolts upright and hugs her legs to her body. In an echo of the first scene, Anna collects not Brenda’s clothes, but her own clothes. When Zak approaches, she yells at him and cries, but finds out that she has gotten lucky once again. Zak didn’t do anything except search for her and try to keep her from hurting herself. She accidentally smoked a joint laced with dust and in doing so, she put her world into a spin for which she wasn’t prepared. As Anna and Zak stand on the beach, Zak makes things easy for her. He tells her that there is a bus station nearby, and these minimal words are all she needs to hear.

But even this awakening, Anna’s rebirth, does not complete her process. When she returns home she still has her mother, her art teacher, and school, in general, to face. Her mother is again waiting, burning holes into the plastic that surrounds a fruit basket—Howard’s “going away” gift to her. (He got a new secretary.) Anna sits down and stares at her mom’s cigarette, and when her mom offers Anna one, the two share a moment unlike any they have shared before, a moment of understanding, and Anna even hugs her mother to console her.

In one night Anna writes the term paper that is her ticket to graduation and shrugs off her teacher’s threats that its an hour late. She discusses alternative plans for art school and asks her mentor if he’ll still let her have his art bag. Finally, at the end of the narrative, after Anna has weathered all of the turmoil of her adolescent life,
she is ready to move on, not to the future that she so carefully planned, but to whatever the future may bring her, because now she is ready to take on anything. She rides her bike away from school, rejuvenated after surviving her many rites.

In Whatever, sex is only one rite among many others like police chases, broken wine bottles, road trips, essays, cigarettes, and sex. Anna’s relationship with her mother, her mentor, and with Brenda all require her to come to terms with them as people. She must see that her mother is doing the best she can with her situation, that her art teacher did not fail when he left New York, but simply chose an alternate path, and that Brenda’s fate is not necessarily Anna’s fate as well. Most of all, Anna, like Chantel in Just Another Girl on the L.R.T., must realize that just because reality conflicts with her dreams, that doesn’t mean she can no longer dream. There are plenty of things that are worse than being ordinary, but by surviving all of the barriers in front of her, Anna is not ordinary at all.

* * *

While sex is one rite of passage to be negotiated, dealing with the consequences of sex can be just as painful, dangerous, or empowering. Most of the consequences in film revolve around pregnancy (and this will certainly be my focus). But one independent teen film stands out from others, not only because of its treatment of its subject manner, but also because of its focus on sex and the consequence of HIV and AIDS. While Kids is not a mainstream film, it is certainly one that caught the attention of the mainstream because of its treatment of sex, but also because of the way in which Kids presents sex. According to one critic, “Kids pulls the rug out from under white-bread notions of what makes some teens tick—and exposes a world that is at once fascinating and deeply disturbing.”85 It is this fascinating and disturbing world that does not subvert mainstream notions of
teens, but simply reinforces them while hiding beneath the guise of a “realistic” and relevant film.  

In *Kids* (1995), Telly makes it his quest in life to deflower virgins—the younger, the better. Telly’s commentary on virgins, allows girls no room for negotiation and shrinks them to nothing more than object— “No diseases. No loose-as-a-goose pussy. No skank. No nothing. Just pure pleasure.” The film opens with Telly smooth talking his current victim, a very young girl who is assured by his persuasive words. But one thing that is clear from Telly’s words as much as from his sexual activity on screen, is that the “pure pleasure” is his alone. While this opening scene is immediately disturbing, it also reflects parts of similar scenes in other teen films. And, while Telly is the protagonist, one of his victims is the center of the narrative.

After being tested for HIV, Jenny searches all over New York for Telly. She wants to tell him, but what Jenny doesn’t know is that Telly is already on a quest for yet another victim. And when Jenny finally finds him, she is too late. She collapses on a nearby couch (under the influence of a mind-altering drug) and she is later raped by Telly’s best friend (one of the few characters who will share Telly’s fate because he forced it upon himself). In this film is yet another world where girls are consumed and disposed of and Jenny is powerless to change her fate or anyone else’s. But in *Kids* it seems to be the wild ways of these teens and the actions of the boys that are responsible for the fate of this generation of kids rather than their surrounding “landscape” that can only be represented by New York in the heat of the summer. Telly and his “social disease” define these kids on screen, not their lack of parental supervision and hope for the future or their general boredom with adolescence. Because Telly has earned his fate, it is easy to dismiss him. But what about the lives
of the girls? How many girls are literally or figuratively killed not only by the boys and men like Telly, but also by circumstances that they cannot escape?

Pregnancy is a consequence of sex more often portrayed in films in general, as well as teen films. Those who visibly transgress the limits of sexuality—pregnant girls who cannot hide their stigmatic mark—are considered a “social problem,” but the “teenage sex” that creates social problems is usually the result of direct adult influences, not teens simply copying “adult” behavior. One article, “Teen Girls are Easy Prey for Over-20 Predators,” claims that “a substantial portion of teenage sexual activity is more a matter of manipulation, coercion, or abuse than anything else.” This article shows that teenage pregnancy really only reflects the age of the mother. “For girls in junior high, the father is on average 6.5 years older. When the mother is 12 years old or younger, the father averages 22. Most of these older fathers abandon their ‘used girls.’” A pregnant girl is visually stigmatized as a statistic of a social problem, a social problem labeled as “teenage pregnancy” despite the age of the father, and the teenage mother is left to deal with her stigma while the father continues to live untouched by any such stigma.

In many debates about teen pregnancy, abortion is left out for political reasons. But abortion is not absent in teen films; in fact, it is presented as a valid option. In Fast Times at Ridgemont High, Stacy gets an abortion, even after the father (Damone) fails to deliver his half of the money and a ride to the clinic. In Dirty Dancing, the horrors of the implications of illegal abortions are apparent not through the protagonist, Baby, but through one of her idols, Penny. It is not the abortion that is “wrong,” but the method—a folding table and a dirty knife. Baby’s father reprimands her for being involved in something illegal, but through the narrative she
proves that she did the right thing. In *For Keeps*, a mother tries to convince her
daughter to get an abortion, but she and her boyfriend decide to make it on their own.
The path is not easy, but it offers a romantic ending to a hard choice and a narrative
full of strife. These films don’t discourage girls from getting abortions or
encourage them to have babies; they enable girls to make mature, reasoned,
autonomous decisions that work the best for their personal, individual situation. The
girls in the following films find creative ways of dealing with their individual
situations that subvert both the “social problem” notion and give the pregnant
teenager options that she doesn’t normally have in life. The characters don’t get
abortions not because of politics, but because pregnancy allows these films to explore
the complications and tribulations that accompany childbirth and, more generally,
coming of age. These celluloid girls’ solutions may not work in “real life,” but they
are still valid commentaries on a real problem; and they are solutions that don’t
undermine, expose, or attempt to define and confine the girl.

In *Just Another Girl on the L.R.T.* Chantel lets the viewer know immediately
that she is going places, specifically to college and on to be a doctor. She says “my
life is gonna be way different,” but the title of the film assures us that her life will not
be any different. Like her friend points out “lots of girls have babies in high
school,” but Chantel refuses to believe that she is like other high school girls.
Chantel thinks she can avoid her parents’ fate by having big dreams and going after
those dreams with a vengeance. But her relentless pursuit of education as a means
out of the projects only gets her so far. When she wants to graduate early, the
principal tells her she’s not ready. First she has to “behave more like a lady” and
“tone down that mouth.” The principal’s advice is unsatisfactory for Chantel
because he is speaking for the status quo. He cannot convince Chantel that she is too
immature for college because his only reasons are her behavior and her mouth. These aren’t good enough reasons for Chantel because, to her, her mouth and her behavior are her essential self. To tell her that these things will keep her from achieving her dreams is not a legitimate claim because her mouth and her behavior are the only things she can use to survive. One reason Chantel cannot recognize her physical situation is because her pregnancy makes her a part of a structural problem rather than a personal problem. If she admits that she is pregnant, she admits that she is just another girl and she seals her fate. She’ll end up like her mother (and, thus, her family), stranded in the projects, the place Chantel most wants to escape. Instead, Chantel ignores her pregnancy because, at the time, it is the easiest thing to do.

At first she goes about “business as usual” (which includes having sex) saying directly to the camera, “maybe I’m not pregnant. Maybe it’s just a dream and it’ll go away.” Chantel tries to avoid her mother’s suspicion by throwing away food (that way she’ll just think I’m a pig and not pregnant) and buying two sizes of clothes (one in the size I used to be and one in the size I am now). She also hides her pregnancy from her best friend and she uses the money that her boyfriend, Ty, gives her for an abortion to go on a shopping spree. But all of these attempts at denial are useless and she ends up screaming and writhing in premature labor when the inevitable finally happens.

Hysterical, Chantel tries to make her boyfriend “take it away.” She sees the baby as the end to her future and the beginning of her life stuck right where she is and right where her parents have always been. But she deals with the life that she thought she could avoid. In a way, the principal was wrong, but he was also right. It isn’t her disruptive behavior or confrontational words in the classroom that will keep her from success. It is her sexual behavior and her naiveté that will determine her fate. Only Chantel’s narrative can convince her because it has all of the necessary
markers for maturity. In many ways Chantel ends up “just another girl,” but at the same time, she has ceased being a girl altogether.

When *Manny and Lo* begins, both girls have been abandoned by their mother’s death. While Lo is old enough to remember all of their mother’s flaws, Manny can only try to remember her and she sprays the sheets with her mother’s deodorant in an attempt not to forget. Lo has kidnapped Manny from her foster home in an attempt to find her good parents and the two are running not from those who want to find them, as Lo pretends, but from those who don’t even care to look. The two girls steal their food and other necessities from convenience stores and stay in model homes or in parks, until Manny notices Lo’s pregnancy and their plan has to change.91

Rather than submit to the “normal” way to do things, Manny and Lo kidnap a baby authority—a woman (Elaine) who knows everything about babies. Elaine is, in many ways, the adult version of Manny and Lo. She has no children and her family hardly notices when she disappears. Elaine also has all of the criteria that Lo is looking for, but since Lo is, as Manny explains, one of those people who “won’t trust somebody unless that somebody’s wearing a chain on their ankles,” she makes Elaine prove her worth. Part of Lo’s coping strategy is the character she has made for herself. She is tough, impenetrable, a juvenile delinquent, and she is annoyed with anyone who shatters her illusions. Lo plays her part the way she thinks it should be played and she gets angry when Manny (and later, Elaine) won’t play along. When the girls go to the store for supplies, Elaine escapes and starts a signal fire. The girls catch her just in time and Lo struggles with Elaine until Elaine stops at the sight of Lo’s protruding belly. It is the visibility of Lo’s situation that makes Elaine realize why she has been kidnapped, and also makes her stop trying to escape.
As much control as Lo has as a kidnapper, Elaine knows what Lo needs physically as well as emotionally. Because Lo is "one of those people and...Elaine knew it," Elaine plays along with Lo's kidnapper scenario so that Lo will let her help. To earn Lo's trust, Elaine pretends like she is still trying to escape while she cooks dinner, tends to Lo's condition, and even takes a hostage of her own when the owner of the house they are hiding in comes home unexpectantly. But when Elaine's hostage escapes, Lo is angry (mostly because hostages aren't supposed to take hostages). The girls are forced to move on and Lo decides to leave Elaine behind.

Despite Manny's disapproval, Lo abandons Elaine at the side of the road. The two drive on, but Lo soon goes into labor. Lo stops the car and she and Manny sit in the middle of the road waiting for someone, anyone, to come to their rescue. When no one comes, Manny finally convinces Lo that no one is going to come and Manny drives the car back to where they dropped Elaine. Lucky for the girls, Elaine has been waiting for them. In the end, Manny and Lo find exactly what they were looking for even as they were trying to run away—family—as Elaine gets in the driver's seat and tells everyone to buckle up.92

In *The Opposite of Sex*, Dedee reconstructs her average story, the blunderings of a pregnant and savvy, but savagely naive teen who has no satisfying alternative to her compromised situation, into a narrative structured, staged, interpreted, manipulated, subverted and delivered by her crude, confronting narration. While in this narration Dedee makes her plan sound sophisticated and nuanced, it is really only a glamourless and dramaless plan full of real work and real, dire circumstance. She acts to remedy her situation before she is stigmatized by visible pregnancy, something that will mark her and severely limit her options. Her narration fools the audience into thinking that she has a plan, but she makes her plan from the situation she
discovers at her brother’s house. Dedee reads the people she encounters and uses their vulnerabilities. Through her manipulated narrative she moves the characters in her life (and the movie) like pawns on a chessboard. Although Dedee’s physical situation makes her powerless, the lack of power that her brother and Lucia have limits them more. They are both hung up on sex, partially because sex has not led them to a satisfactory opposite of sex (relationships).93

Although Dedee is as ignorant about pregnancy as Chantel and Lo are, she is able to take control of the powerlessness of childbirth through her narration in a way that Chantel and Lo cannot.94 Just before she gives birth, she apologizes for her “really fuckin’ low” behavior and becomes a vulnerable child looking for approval. But before we can get used to this side of Dedee, she begins the standard movie screams of childbirth, something we’ve “seen a million times.” So she gives us something else to watch, an empowering sexual moment between Lucia and Carl. As Lucia takes control of her sexuality, or, rather, lets loose the control she has on her sexuality, Dedee grunts and screams. These two scenes are different forms of powerlessness. For Lucia, powerlessness is not a void, it is a space of possibility. For Dedee, only through pain and struggle can she overcome the state of her powerlessness. The two frames together are empowering.

While the narration has been focused around Dedee’s pregnancy (the sex act that happens before the narration begins puts Dedee into her state of powerlessness) at the end she seems more ambivalent about sex. She says: it “seems like everybody’s having sex but me, not that I’m against sex.” Dedee is obviously not against sex; she uses it to get what she wants. She tells us she’s against “all of the attachment that goes along with it.” She tries to convince us that she wants no attachments, but her argument is less than convincing. “Sex always ends in kids, or disease, or like, you know, relationships. That’s exactly what I don’t want. I want the
opposite of all that. Because it’s not worth it.” But as she is reminded by her reflective introspection, what the viewer sees as flashbacks from the movie—“maybe it’s not all shit.” But even if “it’s not all shit,” to Dedee, what she would’ve had with Randy, would be nothing but shit. She has greater expectations for herself (even if these expectations are romantic, unrealistic, or unclear), but is limited by her circumstance. It’s not detachment she wants. She wants autonomy, something she’s never had and can never hope to have with a baby and a one-balled boy (Randy) or a brother and a parole officer.95

Through her journey, Dedee has overcome her inevitable future and gained the position and perspective necessary for a search for autonomy and self—a gateway necessary for her coming of age. Through her subverted, manipulative narrative, Dedee has negotiated her powerless position and escaped the inevitable outcome of her compromised situation. She, like Rita in Slums, has helped others with their problems of sex and sexuality, despite her own inability to help herself in the same way. But Dedee has a second chance at an autonomous search for self. While Rita is carted off by Daddy, Dedee has a fresh start, without a baby and without any other attachments that are going to drag her down. She is not detached, but disentangled, and that’s the opposite of sex.

At the end of the movie Dedee does not have the same narrative control that she greeted us with in the beginning; she no longer knows the end of her own story. She says, “I thought the whole idea was I know what happens next.” But like all other teen girls and women (and people in general), this is a power that she cannot be granted by anyone. Dedee’s refusal to have a contrived ending is also a defiance. Despite the romantic narrative she has constructed, Dedee won’t have anything forced upon her, not even a happy ending. In the closing narration she says, “I told you right off I don’t grow a heart of gold and if I do, which is like so unlikely, gimme a
break, and don’t make me do it in front of you guys.” She brought us, the viewers, into her life, but under qualified circumstances. She wanted someone to talk to, but she doesn’t want our advice. Dedee breaks the camera’s gaze and demands that the camera “go, okay” finally leaving her alone. She asks, in the end, what all girls ask from the gaze of dominant society—don’t watch me grow up, “don’t make me do it in front of you guys.” It is quite a different experience of being viewed when Dedee knows her story. She controls and constructs what her viewer sees and hears. She redefines the gaze as she gazes at herself at the very same time we are gazing at her. When she doesn’t know “what happens next,” she pushes us away so that she can continue to have the power over her narrative. This power is one that other female, teen narrators don’t often have—the power to reconstruct her own story, to put her shattered life back together in a pattern that makes the most sense to her and allows her to be a person rather than an image. The end of the film leaves her where she was in the beginning, but she has survived various rites of passage and she has determined her own narrative. The gaze leaves her, in the end, ready to embark on her journey, not under the watchful eyes of her audience, but out of the gaze of the camera, on her own. Off camera she no longer has to explain herself to anyone except herself.

While the previous films in this chapter deal with the consequences of sex, only one film deals with the personal consequences of the act of sex as well as the biological category and its gendered implications. The consequences of sex in Girls Town cannot be remedied through happy endings because the consequences are both personal and structural. When the girls in this film, like girls in life, try to deal with the consequences of sex on their own, they get nowhere. But when the girls try to understand the structural consequences by remedying their personal situations, they begin to subvert the structures that aim to keep girls and women in their place.
When the movie begins, all four girls are in situations of powerlessness and the movie quickly makes this an issue when Nikki, for reasons revealed later in the film, commits suicide. While she may have seemed like a girl who had it all together—smart, attractive, on her way to Princeton—she could not keep her self together in an atmosphere that tore her apart. Before her suicide, in a speech to her class, she says that she wants to major in African-American studies, but that her father wants her to major in business. This situation may seem trivial, but it obviously has an impact on her since she never sent in her housing application. She may have had no intention of going to school. But Nikki had also been raped while working as an intern at a magazine; this is a secret that dies with Nikki until Emma steals her diary from under the nose of the cold and rigid mother of Nikki (yet another clue to her suicide). Nikki tried to keep control of her self by writing “Fuck you Richard Helms” in her diary, the only place where she had total control. She could not confront her rape in life, and her journal is the only place where she can express powerful feelings with powerful language.96

Even with all of the “pieces,” Nikki’s friends cannot completely understand why Nikki would kill herself rather than talk to them, and through this experience they come to understand their own powerlessness. First they talk about all sorts of issues from date rape to woman’s place in society and they argue about the very issues and arguments that society debates again and again. When the girls realize that their arguing gets them nowhere, they feel even more despondent because they realize both their powerlessness, and their inability to remedy this lack of power. Their parents and their school only reinforce the way the girls feel.

While the girls don’t know how to remedy their structural situation, Emma cannot let her personal situation go. One of the few weapons the girls find that they have is visibility since they are dealing with issues that culture pushes into the dark
like abuse and rape. Emma gets revenge on the boy (Josh) who date raped her by going after his car (like A. Friend, the vehicle of his control). After ditching a school assembly, she and Nikki and Angela deface his car with the word "rapist" and then they break windows. This vandalism is not something that they planned to do, but an opportunity that presented itself and this opportunity opens more empowering possibilities.

Later, the three girls confront Nikki’s rapist and beat him down on the street. The first act, while violent, is violence taken out on an object, not a person. It is an act meant to affect but not be immediately threatening. But it is seen as a senseless act of violence by those who cannot (or don’t want to) understand the purpose behind it. The second incident is violence taken out on a person, but in this case the girls see Richard Helms as an object from Nikki’s diary. She could only curse him on paper, but the girls punish him for his objectification of Nikki. By attacking him on the street and in front of a friend as he leaves work, Richard cannot hide. Even if people don’t know why three teenage girls attacked him, he is forced to confront some level of exposure.

Violence is not the only form of revenge. Patti gets revenge on Eddie, the slimy, controlling, and abusive father of her child by pawning his beloved stereo equipment. He is more careful with the objects in his life than he is with the people. Patti and the girls make him pay for such transgressions. They make Eddie recognize them by making important things disappear, and they replace Eddie’s prized objects with the practical things he should have been supplying his daughter like clothes. While this act of revenge is not violent, it is still illegal and unsanctioned. But it is also the only way Patti can fight against the abusive force Eddie exerts over her and her life.
These acts are inarticulate expressions, like all violence, but they have meaning for these three girls (even if the meaning is only fully discovered when they talk about it afterward). Though what these girls do is “criminal,” they are also getting revenge on the criminals for the crimes that cannot be prosecuted. In many ways, this delinquent behavior is the only option that these girls have in an environment where, as Patti describes, “you [usually] don’t complain. You just keep on taking it like everybody else does.” The only way they see to “subvert the patriarchy” is to do so inarticulately.

Because their resistance is not community-sanctioned, neither is their written resistance. They write on the bathroom stall that “these guys will fuck with you,” an act that a couple of snotty girls in the bathroom challenge them about. Nikki and Patti end up getting suspended for fighting (only after these girls make an unfeeling comment about Nikki), but the bathroom walls preserve and enhance their subversion. While the girls lash out in acts that seem inarticulate, they are, to a great extent, successful in what they set out to do. They get revenge on the people who individually wronged them and Nikki, and they begin a kind of community where some other girls appreciate that they were “representin’ for all of us” and add to the written rebellion on bathroom walls.

By the end of the movie, the girls have worked through many of the issues surrounding their powerlessness. Rather than fighting and rather than submitting to the circumstances that attempt to define them, the girls sit on the dugout at an empty baseball field and talk about all sorts of things, including the future, the very thing that has been such a source of stress for them throughout the narrative. As the camera slowly pans away from the girls’ talk, their voices can still be heard. As the credits intersperse with the final few frames, the girls’ voices fade as the train passes by them and moves out of town. Like the ending of The Incredibly True Adventures of 2
*Girls in Love*, these girls are frozen in a powerful pose. They most certainly will face all kinds of turmoil in the future, but they have been empowered, and regardless of what they will face, they will be better prepared than they were when the film started.

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Even narratives that uphold “girl-poisoning” myths and expectations can be subverted by girls’ and women’s interpretations. While mass media continue to churn out damaging and limiting myths and narratives, girls and women can refuse to consume these myths and narratives uncritically. Susan Douglas sees hope for the girls and women of the future, not in mass media, but in the way she is raising her daughter—“to be a resistant, back-talking, bullshit-detecting media consumer, and to treasure the strong, funny, subversive women she does get to see.” Douglas’ micro solution is definitely one aspect of empowerment for future generations of women, but her solution has the same problems that most solutions have—they call for more of what American culture is already lacking—role models, good parents, empowering media. What American culture does to girls (especially during adolescence)—sends their voices underground, sexualizes them, and undermines their intelligence and potential—is what girls need to be aware of in order to be “resistant, back-talking, and bullshit-detecting.” They cannot only be so when consuming media, but when confronting all aspects of culture in all parts of their lives. Media literacy is only one part of empowerment. Cultural literacy (not Hirsch’s kind of cultural literacy) is even more important since media is a part of culture that reinforces the mainstream ideology that defines and confines girls and women.

Of all of the American institutions, the media is, as Douglas agrees, “still our best and worst enemy.” It is our worst enemy because media continue to produce poison, but it is our best because media is full of subversive narratives, plots, characters, and other elements. When girls and women are media-savvy, they are
more autonomous consumers of ideology as well as products. The mainstream movies of the 90s have begun to be more empowering and indie films are clearly powerful. Perhaps the films of 2000 and beyond will continue to create subversions, or maybe the mainstream will only become more limiting. If the latter is the case, then at least we can raise girls who are not molded by other’s expectations, but girls who can truly decide for themselves and initiate positive change in their personal and social lives.

In the films in this study, girls voices do not go underground; they begin underground and the girls don’t only talk—their words are the films. The commonalities among these films begin to weave myths that are girl-centered and unadulterated like the subculture of riot grrrls, not like the “girl-power” of the status quo. American myths that require girls to be sexualized like Lolita, but refuse them their own sexuality, are negotiated and subverted in film as girls explore sexuality and deal with the consequences of their sexual actions (or inactions). Romance is subverted so that it does not adhere only to dominant culture’s ideas about romance; romance is both intimately connected and cunningly disconnected from sex and sexuality. And in film, rites of passage are not limited to community-sanctioned rites and coming of age is not determined by obsolete markers or definitions. Instead, a girl’s coming of age is composed of whatever rites are involved in her adolescence. Because there is a general lack of community-sanctioned rites of passage, rites are more personalized since they more closely match the individual situation. A rite of passage in one situation may be an inconsequential event in another one. Also, the variety of experiences, experiences that are inherently rites of passage, can have the same empowering effects without being labeled as community-sanctioned (and, thus, imbued with the weight of cultural power). Instead, these experiences are free from
the requirements and homogenizing tendencies of anything that is community-sanctioned, and they are allowed to determine their own weight.

The films in this study are only a small part of an oppositional, subversive culture, and an even smaller part of the morass of dominant, mass culture. When used as a part of education, as a social or personal tool, or as the background for new narratives, these films have the potential to create new myths and rites that do not compromise the characters or the futures of girls and women.

Whether romantic or realistic, celluloid girls find alternative narratives for real girls. Despite her refusal to submit to the conventions of romance, in the Opposite of Sex Dedee does give us a bit of romance as she says at the end: “I will tell you this though...I never was the same again after that summer.” Just like Dedee, if we refuse to be limited and confined by the expectations of dominant culture, if we refuse to come of age under the limiting gaze of masculine, dominant culture, if sex and sexuality are on our own terms, none of us will ever be the same again, and neither will our culture.
Endnotes


3 Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women* (New York, Double Day, 1998) 116. Inevitably, a male who can’t or won’t play into this trajectory suffers at least as much as all girls do. He knows that he must conform in some way to these expectations because these are the expectations of the culture at large. Boys’ selves may not crash and burn in the same way as girls’, but they do literally and figuratively end up in car wrecks. This is a prime example of how a culture like ours is damaging for men just as much as it is for women, and as compelling and interesting as this argument is, here I am only concerned with the girls and women.


5 As quoted in Tanenbaum 170.

6 In *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media*, Susan Douglas connects the Spur Posse to the images that adorn MTV: “Anyone who doesn’t think such representations matter hasn’t read any headlines recently recounting the hostility with which all too many adolescent boys treat girls, or their eagerness to act on such hostilities, especially when they’re in groups with names like Spur Posse.” This observation comes in the epilogue (303) because Douglas’ book is primarily about how her generation and the feminist movement have been affected by growing up with the mass media. According to Douglas’ observations, the mass media have only become worse.

7 See Tanenbaum 154-160 for a more in-depth discussion of the Spur Posse and the culture of entitlement. See also 167-172 for discussion of a similar incident in Glen Ridge, New Jersey (but involving sexual abuse of a mentally retarded girl) and how these types of incidents are rites of passage. It is also important to note here that part of what drives these boys to such destructive rites of passage is the lack of power that they feel, especially when society tells them that they are entitled to such power. This is something that Joan Didion recognizes in Lakewood, a town abandoned by defense industry cutbacks. The boys clearly gained power from their acts as they were supported by their parents and their town and the girls were further humiliated. The boys also had national attention as a new form of scoring came by measuring the offers they got to be on countless TV talk shows.

8 In the preface to *Reviving Ophelia* (p. 12), Pipher writes: “As I looked at the culture that girls enter as they come of age, I was struck by what a girl-poisoning culture it was. The more I looked around, the more I listened to today’s music, watched television and movies and looked at sexist advertising, the more convinced I became that we were on the wrong path with our daughters. America today limits girls’ development, truncates their wholeness and leaves many of them
traumatized.” Pipher sees two solutions to this effect of culture: to strengthen girls and make them ready to face the culture, and, most importantly to change this culture. Also in the preface Pipher writes: “I hope this book fosters a debate on how we can build that society for them,” a society that is “less complicated and more nurturing, less violent and sexualized and more growth-producing.” This thesis is a part of this debate, a part that looks at using culture, subversively, against itself.

9 Sara Shandler, Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write about their Search for Self (New York: Harper Collins, 1999) 208. Sara Shandler wrote this book because when she read Mary Pipher’s Reviving Ophelia, as good as she thought it was, she felt that voices of teenage girls were absent.


12 In his books The Scapegoat Generation: America’s War on Adolescents and 10 Myths Mike Males does point fingers at those who hold power.


14 Pipher 205, 206 respectively


16 Pipher 207

17 According to Sexuality in America

18 All of the quotes in this paragraph come from Pipher 207-208


20 Tanenbaum 11

21 259

22 “Stud” and “slut” are not the only two terms that limits girls’ sexuality. Tanenbaum lists many labels for sexual women versus labels for sexual men, and the comparison shows that there are far more derogatory words for sexual females than there are for sexual males. They are also words that are often used to describe women.

23 Pipher 208, 209, respectively

24 Shandler 187
25 Haag 54


27 ibid. 191


29 Requote from opening paragraph. Also, see Dick Hebdige. *Subculture and the Meaning of Style*.

30 Mary Celeste Kearney, “‘Don’t Need You:’ Rethinking Identity Politics and Separatism from a Grrrl Perspective.” From *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World* edited by Jonathon S. Epstein. (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1998) 148-9. Kearney discusses these changes and asserts that the riot grrrls have been responsible for the way in which we “explain” girl-powered bands, *Sassy* magazine, books and films. She also discusses the way in which many journalists have tried to describe the riot grrrls as a thing of the past and asserts that they are alive and well and have had an impact on the politics of youth as well as the politics of feminism.

31 Deidre E. Pribram, *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television* (London: Verso, 1998) and *The Young Audience, Hall and Whannel* 32, respectively.

32 Mary Pipher and Judy Mann also support Hollywood’s treatment of women, especially when it comes to sex and female characters. See also Wurtzel and Douglas.

33 Kuhn 98 and 8, respectively


35 Whenever a female friend asks me about my thesis, she is very interested in the subject, but when I tell her what films I am writing about, she fails to even recognize many of the titles. I know very few women who have seen more than one or two of the indie films I write about, but they all recognize the titles of the mainstream films, even if they have not seen them.

36 Haag 19, Brown 127

37 In the interest of bringing together a body of work that can be used to replace or renegotiate harmful myths, I also mention other films that relate, when they seem appropriate for understanding or in order to put the films I write about in detail into the context of similar (or not so similar) films.

38 Many of the films I include in this study are films that I happened upon by accident and some I had to track down. When I read about *Slums of Beverly Hills*, the only local video store that carried it had all of their copies stolen. My husband discovered *Manny and Lo* by accident. He got it for me because the cover said it was a teenage Thelma and Louise (which is a horrid description). *Ripe* is another film I happened upon by accident along with *The Opposite of Sex*. *Welcome to the Dollhouse* plays endlessly on the Independent Film Channel and became a 5 million dollar box office hit after it won the jury award at Cannes.
For instance, during previews an empowering movie or a movie with powerful female characters or at least female protagonists might be “sold” as sex objects in order to market the movie. A current film about high school cheerleaders doesn’t hide its angle. The preview states clearly that guys should go see this movie to look at the girls.

Only time will tell what kinds of films continue to be made and marketed, but by “reading against the grain” we can determine the place of all films in the social discourse.

These teen films have flooded the market in the 1990s and continue to do so. Films like *She’s All That* (another movie with a bet, but this bet is that the male protagonist can make the school’s biggest nerd into the school’s biggest babe) make use of many stereotypes as well as conventional romantic plot lines. *Can’t Hardly Wait* is like a 90s version of *American Graffiti* full of chance encounters and the standard romantic ending. The success of *Scream* has influenced a whole crop of horror films (some of which are horrifyingly bad): *I Know What You Did Last Summer, I Still Know What You Did Last Summer, Teaching Mrs. Tingle, Disturbing Behavior*, etc. After the success of *American Pie*, a new crop of teen sex films have also begun to appear like the latest, *Loser* and before that *Boys and Girls*. The former stars Jason Biggs (Jim) from *American Pie* and Mena Suvari (Angela) from *American Beauty*.

Many popular, mass-marketed films subvert the conventions of dominant culture like *Clueless* does with its humor. *Scream* is another one of these recent films that offers a strong female protagonist; and *Scream* also subverts the conventions of the horror film, a genre known for being particularly damaging to girls and women. The 1989 film *Heathers* also offers a strong female lead and black humor that parodies the conventions of teen films. In these films the protagonists struggle with definitions of virginity, expectations of adult culture, or the demands of peers. They offer girls who speak for themselves and question what is going on around them. But these films are few and far between among the morass of teen films.

For instance, on the back of the box for *The Slums of Beverly Hills* one critic calls it a “1970s Clueless” which is a far-from-accurate description. The description for *Manny and Lo* is accurate in a way that reflects the mainstream, calling it a juvenile *Thelma and Louise* and a family values movie.

Douglas 16-17; Douglas’ observation is derived from Laura Mulvey’s influential essay, an essay that has provided much fuel for film studies.

Susan Douglas also recognizes this role as she writes (on page 17): “Women learn to turn themselves into objects to be scrutinized; they learn they must continually watch themselves being watched by others, whether they’re walking on the beach, drinking a beer, entering a restaurant, or rocking a baby.”
Suburban decay is also a theme in *The Virgin Suicides* as well as movies like *Edward Scissorhands*, *Splendor*, etc. In comparison to the 1961 film *Splendor in the Grass*, the 1998 film *Splendor* offers an unorthodox (and utterly romantic) sexuality for girls and women.

This is a subversive element of the film since the key to Lester's enlightenment is both engineered and outlawed by the government.

It also could have been a film about a frustrated wife who kills her husband, but it is not this narrative either.

Like many other films, the film's message, and its subversion of the myth of American beauty are compromised by the culture that consumes it. It is Angela's belly that predominates the video cover, and the actress who plays Angela who appears in most of the media surrounding *American Beauty* and it is Mena Suvari who is in *Loser, American Pie*, and other teen movies, not Jane.

While I am far from expert on these types of movies, I think the reason why is important. All of the movies like *Porkies, Animal House, Revenge of the Nerds, The Last American Virgin,* (and the list goes on) came out while I was a teen and pre-teen and I was not allowed to see them. I saw a few at friends' houses, where I saw all of the contraband movies my parents wouldn't allow (*Friday the 13th, Nightmare on Elm Street, Carrie*). There was a reason my mother didn't want me to see these movies, the same reason she refused to let me go see the stupid Andrew Dice Clay movie that all of my other 13-year-old friends were going to see—the way women were portrayed and their roles in the films.

The girls score in a different game, on a different playing field.

Stiffler, a male character who does not come of age and has no redeeming qualities also happens to have what a couple of boys at one of Stiffler's many parties calls a "MILF"—"mom I'd like to fuck." They chant "MILF" at her picture, but only Finch, with his intelligence and his charm, actually gets to fulfill the fantasy of these two losers.

Jim's father is comic relief like Kat and Bianca's father in *10 things I Hate About You*. He and Jim have many uncomfortable conversations including plenty of euphemisms.

Coincidentally, Jessica is played by the same actor as Vivian in the *Slums of Beverly Hills*. Her past film role has something to offer her latest character.

This is certainly a scene similar to the virgin movies of the 80's, but with a more enlightened purpose. Kevin consults his brother for advice on how to make Vikki have an orgasm, not simply on how to get laid. It is this fact alone that allows Kevin access to the sex book that came from Amsterdam, but has been added to by a select group of high school boys and kept in the library for future generations to consult and add to it.

Oz goes on a date with a "college girl" and he brags beforehand about how he is sure to score. But this college girl is nothing like Oz expects. He tries to spout off lines that seem romantic and then follows up with the line, "suck me beautiful." This line ends the date, but only after this Postmodern Feminist Thought major gives him a lecture about women.
In many romantic films the sex is off-screen or post-narrative or at least "softened."

Some of the teen films I will mention later like *10 Things I Hate About You*, and others I don’t mention specifically, like *Can't Hardly Wait* and *She's All That*, have romantic plots and there are no sex scenes. By “chick” movies I mean those like *Sleepless in Seattle*, *You've Got Mail*, etc.

Relationships, whether sexual or platonic, with peers or with adults, are important and integral to girls’ coming of age.

At the end of the film when everyone is trying to get the girls out of the hotel room, one of Evie’s friends tells Evie’s mother that Randy is already out. It is a joke that Evie’s mother does not get.

A comparison of *2 Girls*, with the recent film *Boys Don’t Cry*, shows the difference between a romantic portrayal and a realistic one. Neither Randy Dean nor Evie are playing with their lives in the way that Brandon Teena does.

I saw this movie sometime when I was about Dawn’s age. The protagonist tries all sorts of ways to try and escape his fight with a bully that is set to happen when the school bell rings at three o’clock.


Many reoccurring themes in these films seem to be answered by biology, but, as re-presentation, film is not ruled by biology, but by what makes biology significant—the way it plays out in celluloid (and real) girls’ lives. For instance, Rosie and Violet may be fraternal twins, but they do not begin puberty at the same time. For two girls who are so close, puberty is a huge rift; it puts one girl in the midst of adolescent turmoil while the other continues to be content with childhood (or childish) games. But in the lives of these celluloid girls, who are without parents and without a “normal” social context, such a rift puts a lot more (in fact, everything) at stake.

The sex the girls encounter at the base is not just sex, but the “real” side to sex—sex devoid of any kind of romantic preconceptions. This is the kind of sex that is hidden from the eyes of young
girls, but often finds its way into their lives anyway. For Rosie and Violet it is impossible to ignore this sexuality because it is all around them, not hidden, but merely concealed. They begin to discover this side of sex in Pete’s truck full of porn, but they don’t fully realize what the chocolate sauce or the anal intruder are all about. Violet experiences one version of this side—painful sex. Rosie another—the display of latent sexuality and the link between sex and violence. Violence becomes Rosie’s way of getting back at Violet for betraying her even as she is also trying to secure Violet in her life.

While Violet’s first sexual experience reflects the physical pain that more than one character in these films experiences, Rosie’s first experience emulates similar circumstances that real girls are exposed to by being a part of their surrounding landscape. Because girls are often seen as being a part of the scenery, they are also acted upon like Rosie is (or in far more sinister ways involving sexual abuse, molestation, and other kinds of coercive and abusive sex).

Elliot’s car is his pride and joy and this scene subverts the role of the backseat in common myths about teenage sex. While Vivian and Elliot “do it” in the backseat, their sex is not typical of the usual backseat scenario (which often involves coercion, date rape, or worse).

The difference between Anna’s relationship with her mentor and Rosie’s relationship with hers is that Anna has had time to develop a close relationship and Rosie only has the time for a few lessons. The art teacher is there constantly encouraging Anna, but Ken can only get to Rosie in situations that are crucial to her development. The role of mentors is also another subject that I could have spent more time on specifically, but chose to disperse throughout other sections.

At school Anna has a guidance counselor who is easily appeased by Anna’s plans to go to Cooper Union and an English teacher who seems out to shoot her down. Anna, like the girls in Girls Town and Dawn in Welcome to the Dollhouse, despises school. Anna hates school because it seems to drag her down. She is rude and disrespectful to her English teacher because he is rude and disrespectful to her. Emma and Angela do well in school and Patti just barely gets by, but after Nikki’s death, school means less and less to them, mainly because school does nothing but contribute to their problems. Dawn hates school because the way she is treated there, and she is only in junior high. In Just Another Girl on the L.R.T., Chantel doesn’t despise school. She sees it as her only means to an end, so she does well in school despite the frustrations she has with her “Eurocentric education.” Despite the necessary presence of school in the lives of teenagers, many film completely leave it out like The Opposite of Sex, Manny and Lo, and Ripe. These movies, along with Slums of Beverly Hills take place during the summer so school is not a factor, but what this also shows is that girls do plenty of growing during the summer when they are free from the rigid confines that school puts on them. Other movies totally romanticize high school like Clueless and American Pie. In Clueless, Cher can argue her way to better grades and makeover and fix up her teachers.

In American Beauty, Angela says the same thing to Lester. But her version of not being ordinary is quite different from Anna’s. Anna wants to be a talented artist and she is afraid that she is only an average artist. This worries her mostly because being ordinary means not being able to pursue her dreams of being an artist in New York. But for Angela, it is not a question of talent—it is a question of beauty. For Angela, being ordinary is also a barrier to pursuing her dreams, but to be ordinary is to be ugly, which is, in this case, only an outer reflection. For Anna, being ordinary reflects not her outside, but her inside.
Later in the film, Brenda once again acts as a source of sexual advice for Anna, not unlike Linda and her carrots are for Stacy in *Fast Times*. However, Brenda’s advice comes too late—after Anna has thrown up all over a guy’s lap.

Brenda has plenty of experience to speak about. In fact, the first scene of the movie is a shot looking down on Brenda underneath some guy. The camera pins her into this position like he does and it is clear that Brenda is only somewhat conscious. When Brenda’s “date” revives her she smiles and asks for the bottle. It is unclear whether she knows that the guy who just had intercourse with her is not her date. They leave her in the trees and Anna comes looking for her, collects her clothes, and puts her back together.

In this scene, Anna and her brother are dragged to dinner with Howard. The scene begins with Anna watching her mother dance with Howard to a lounge band version of CCR’s “Proud Mary.” Anna has paint on her face and when Howard tries to talk to them, neither Anna, nor her brother, are very cooperative. After Anna tells Howard she is planning on becoming a nun, he chuckles a little bit and asks why a pretty girl like her would want to do such a things. Ann gives him the dead-pan answer “because I want to marry Jesus Christ.” Howard isn’t sure how to react and he just chuckles again. Anna’s response here is subversive because Howard is equating what he appreciates about Anna’s mother—her looks, her lack of autonomy, her sex—with Anna. Anna undermines his thinking by offering an answer completely devoid of sex because she knows that Howard won’t know what to say.

Scott Steele. “Teenage Wasteland.” Maclean Hunter Limited. August 7, 1995. *Kids* is one of the most controversial of all teen films, so controversial that Blockbuster video refuses to carry it and it was rated NC-17 for its theatrical release. Censoring this film is the worst way to deal with its controversial, and realistic content. (It is, perhaps, so controversial because it is so realistic, or at least tries to be so.)

While I don’t think that *Kids* is realistic or relevant as a whole film, it does have points of relevance. The world that *Kids* brings to light is not far from my experience as a teen or the other disturbing stories that are covered by the media like the Spur Posse or like Frontline’s “The Lost Children of Conyers” which seems to be a suburban alternative to the NY city setting in *Kids*.

On page 4 of *Dangerous Passage: The Social Control of Sexuality in Women’s Adolescence*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991, Constance A. Nathanson writes that “pregnancy makes sex visible; it converts private behavior into public behavior.” This conversion makes a girl’s personal problem into a public “social problem” without offering any public assistance or social solutions.


I saw *For Keeps* when I was twelve years old. My friend and I were big Molly Ringwald fans and curious about the subject matter of a movie about a pregnant Molly. We got to the ticket counter and had to quickly lie about our ages since we hadn’t realized that the movie was PG-13 (one of the first). We had to run back to the car to beg my friend’s mom for money. The credits played over a magnified fertilization of the egg, an image that disgusted my friend. When her mom picked us up, I remember that my friend remarked about the grossness of these laboratory images. Her mom made a comment about us, maybe, not being mature enough for the film. We were caught. But her mom was wrong. I didn’t come away from *For Keeps* with any romantic notions of childbirth and
motherhood and I wasn’t disgusted either. What I did gain was a piece of autonomy. I knew that whatever situation I was faced with, I’d be able to handle. The movies gave me this perhaps naive notion, but it is the strength, not the “message” that stuck with me.

In many ways, this shows why the mall may not be the best place for a girl to remake herself. Chantel buys things to try to avoid the circumstances of her life, but the mall is not substitute for the problems she faces. But Chantel’s problems are the problems of “just another girl” and the easy solutions that the mall offers won’t do any girl justice.

As the two practice for Lo’s dream of becoming a flight attendant (which involves her holding a tray and balancing on Manny’s back to experience the effects of turbulence), Manny is afraid to tell Lo why she doesn’t want to participate anymore. Of course Lo gets angry and tries to deny that her weight gain is anything to be alarmed about.

Lo drives the car throughout the movie, but when Lo goes into labor, Manny has to take the wheel in order to get help for Lo and to get back to Elaine. When Elaine takes her place at the wheel, it is clear that Lo has let Elaine into her life in a more important role than hostage.

Dedee’s brother did have a satisfactory relationship, but his lover, Tom, dies of a sexually transmitted disease—AIDS, which leaves Lucia hurt and angry (especially since she doesn’t understand sex) and leaves Bill afraid to enjoy sex.

Lo cannot because she doesn’t narrate and Chantel cannot because her narration is a commentary on the narrative and not a construction of it.

At the end of the film, Dedee’s brother has custody of her baby and he has found a new lover—Dedee’s parole officer. (She serves six months for fleeing the scene of a crime.)

Heathers is another film where the protagonist, Veronica, uses her journal to express feelings that she cannot express in life.

In Fast Times at Ridgemont High, when Damone flakes out on Stacy, Linda writes “prick” on his car and “little prick” on his locker. Again, this is the only kind of effective revenge readily available to adolescent girls.

Some of the other girls at school give Emma a hard time about trashing Josh’s car. They tell her they know she did it, but they cannot understand why she did it.

What Emma writes on the bathroom stall, among other things.

When Emma, Angela, and Patti encounter these two girls in the bathroom, they say “oh it’s Heather, and her friend Heather.” This is an immediate reference to what kind of girls these two “Heathers” are. The way they treat Nikki, Emma, and Patti only goes on to prove who they are. They say, “just because your friend is dead,” and this is all they need to say to spark the emotions of three girls who have not been allowed to grieve for their friend.
Bibliography


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