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Sex and the Cinema: What *American Pie* Teaches the Young

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This paper focuses upon the wildly successful blockbuster *American Pie* teenpics, especially *American Pie 3 – the Wedding*. I argue that these films, which are sited so securely within the visual and pedagogical machinery of Hollywood culture, are specifically designed to appeal to teenage male audiences, and to provide lessons in sex and romance. Movies like this are especially important as they are experienced by far more teenagers than, for example, instructional films or other classroom materials; indeed, as Henry Giroux has observed, “teens and youth learn how to define themselves outside of the traditional sites of instruction, such as the home and the school... Learning in the postmodern age is located elsewhere – in popular spheres that shape their identities, through forms of knowledge and desires that appear absent from what is taught in schools” (Giroux, 1997, p.49). In this paper I discuss whether the *American Pie* series is actually a “new age” effort which, via insubordinate performances of gender, contests the hegemonic field of signification which regulates the production of sex, gender and desire, or whether it is more accurately described as a retrogressive hetero-conservative opus with a veneer of sexual radicalism. In short, I intend to probe whether this filmic vector for sex education is all about the shaping of responsible, caring, vulnerable men, or is it guiding them to become just like their heterosexual, middle-class fathers? And whether, despite its riotous and raunchy advertising, *American Pie* really dishes up something spicy or something terribly wholesome instead.

Introduction

A couple of years ago I described the first *American Pie* movie as a new millennium sex manual geared for new age boys, cunningly using 1980s gross-out comedy (then as now the staple fare of adolescents) to teach them the new, egalitarian, touchy-feely mores of the twenty first century, and most particularly to redefine masculinity so that desire is not dependent on oppression, and nor does it resort to aggression and misogyny to maintain its sense of coherence (Pearce, 2003). My point of view differed markedly from that of *Rolling Stone* which, like virtually all the other commentators on that film, argued that the sweet, sloppy, sentimental parts were included as a cynical exercise so that the “really important stuff”, identified by *Rolling Stone* as “the oral sex, the pie-screwing and so on”, could be filmed (Hedegaard, 1999, p.6). In fact these gross-out elements were deemed excessive even for teenage fare, and *American Pie* had some significant tussles with the U.S. Ratings Board: according to its producer, Warren Zide, “We went back 4 times before we got an R ... we had to get rid of a few thrusts when he’s having sex with the apple pie.

The MPAA was like ‘Can he thrust two times instead of four?’ (Cited in Lewis, 2001, p.31). But largely, I suspect, because of scenes like this, *American Pie* was an unexpectedly huge hit, going on to make over \$100 million at the U.S. Box Office, and it spawned two even more lucrative sequels.

In this paper I want to reappraise my earlier comments in the light of the franchise as a whole, while concentrating upon *American Pie 3 – the Wedding*, and to discover whether what I described earlier as a revolutionary sex manual for remodelling and renegotiating masculinities is still reinforcing its subversive messages (by stealth, as it were) or whether it has -sadly- reverted to type. And I am treating sex education here not as an official program but I am using Kenneth Kidd’s definition of “a largely unexamined set of beliefs, practices and texts that tend to endorse a narrow vision of adolescence and maturation” (Kidd, 2004, p.96), and I am concurring with Claudia Nelson and Michelle Martin’s argument that “sex education is not a stable identity, but something which responds quickly to national crises or to changes in social ethos. It reflects evolving ideas about gender, race, social class, and childhood, as well as about sexuality” (Nelson & Martin, 2004, p.2). I’m mindful too of Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson’s argument that most teen texts are created “to educate and inform while entertaining; to set certain agendas in this delicate time just prior to the onset of a more prominent citizenship; and/or to raise crucial issues (of *adult* choosing) in a ‘responsible manner’ that is entirely hegemonically negotiated” (Davis & Dickinson, 2004, p.3).

Commentators as diverse as Henry Giroux (1989; 1994; 1997; 2002), David Buckingham (2002), Roger Simon (1989), Cameron McCarthy (1998; 1999), Anne Haas Dyson (2002) and Peter McLaren (1994; 1995), among many others, have contributed to the understanding of how popular cultural texts shape young people’s identities, and how they exist as pedagogical sites where youth learn about the world. The respected ethnographer and cultural theorist Paul Willis, for example, argues that popular culture is a more significant, penetrating pedagogical force in young people’s lives than schooling:

The field of education ... will be further marginalised in most young people’s experience by common culture. In so far as educational practitioners are still predicated on traditional liberal humanist lines and on the assumed superiority of high art, they will become almost totally

irrelevant to the real energies and interests of most young people and have no part in their identity formation. Common culture will, increasingly, undertake, in its own ways, the roles that education has vacated. (Willis, 1990, p.147)

More recently Nadine Dolby has addressed the reasons as to why educators and educational researchers should pay particular attention to popular culture as a cultural practice that has its own power to create social change, “to alter social conditions and the very foundations of people’s lives” (Dolby, 2003, p.259). Dolby claims that popular culture is not simply fluff that can be dismissed as irrelevant and insignificant; on the contrary, “it has the capacity to intervene in the most critical issues and to shape public opinion” (Dolby, date, p.259). What remains clear from this engaging and ongoing scholarly debate is that the popular is a site where youth are invested, where things happen, where identities are worked out, performed and negotiated, and where new futures are written, for better or for worse.

Films, Youth and the *Pie* Franchise

Critics generally agree upon the thoroughgoing juvenalisation of film content and film audiences. According to Thomas Doherty, “In the nineteenth century young people had fuelled the Industrial Revolution with their labour; in the twentieth, they would fulfil a more enviable economic function as consumers whose leisure vicariously validated their parents’ affluence” (Doherty, 2000, p.91). Wheeler Winston Dixon declares that because “they are affluent, without responsibilities, and with plenty of time to kill”, teens make up half the movie-going population, and “teen presence” is essential in the enterprise of selling a motion picture (Dixon, 2000, p.126-7), while Graeme Turner declares that the film industry “now depends upon pleasing the 12-24 age group” (Turner, 1999, p.26). Meanwhile Jon Lewis argues in *The End Of Cinema As We Know It* that “it doesn’t matter which genre. All films are calculated to appeal to a teenage audience above and beyond any other considerations. Substance, depth and characterisation are ruthlessly stripped down in favour of a succession of instantly readable icons” (Lewis, 2001, p.357). And so from its beginnings in the 1950s the teenpic, with its preoccupation with the rites of passage for white, college-bound boys, has become in many ways the operative reality of the film business. Given that they generally have lower production costs with less expensive stars, teen movies are ideal commodities for the market-place, and a Hollywood teen movie demonstrably not only produces texts for mass consumption, but ideology for mass consumption as

well. As Toby Miller notes in *Global Hollywood*, the cinema is a “twentieth century cultural addition ... that sits aside such traditional topics as territory, language, history and schooling” (Miller, 2001, p.15), and it is “an instrument of instruction and response that varies with place, time, genre and audience” (Miller, 2001, p.177). Some experts, however, warn of the need to be careful about overt didacticism directed at the citizen/consumer; for example Dixon cautions that young people generally “want escapism without risk, and when it gets too close, they lose interest” (Dixon, 2000, p.130). To express this in a slightly different way, messages need to be sugar-coated to become palatable – which is precisely my earlier argument about *American Pie I* and its discourse on an alternative masculinity (Pearce, 2003).

It is generally accepted that from the beginning of the twentieth century the concept of adolescence has been entangled with concerns about and attempts to manage or at least regulate the sexuality of youth (Moran, 2000; Kidd, 2004). For example, in recent years the Religious Right in the United States has shifted from vehemently opposing all forms of sex education to strongly influencing the sex education students receive in schools and promoting “abstinence education” (where no sex until marriage is presented as the only insurance against pregnancy and AIDS, and the only moral choice as well). Now while school programs have had little impact upon adolescent sexuality, and researchers have found virtually no evidence that sex education causes students to change their behaviour in one direction or another (Moran, 2000, p.219), mainstream films designed to appeal to mainstream audiences might just prove a more effective conduit for American youth than the classroom experience, especially given that teen film is the principal mass-mediated discourse of youth. After all, as Henry Giroux has observed, film is a compelling mode and form of public pedagogy, a visual technology which functions as a powerful teaching machine that intentionally tries to influence the production of meaning, subject positions, identities and experience. Because it offers a deeper pedagogical register for producing particular narratives, subject positions and ideologies than, for example, a popular song or television sitcom, it carries more pedagogical weight than other media. According to Giroux, it offers a uniquely powerful and persuasive mobilisation of shared and public space, using spectatorial pleasure and symbolic meaning to shape young people’s identities outside of school (Giroux, 2002, p.6).

And now, more particularly, to the *American Pie* franchise. By the third movie, the formula is set – if somewhat over-tired by now. The squeaky clean wussy boy protagonist, Jim, who spent the first two movies worrying about the inadequacy of his (pretty well non-existent) sexual performance is now a new age man about to be married, and the gross-out comedy, used as always to cushion the moralising, here exceeds even the raunchy good spirits of the first movie. At first *American Pie 3* seems outrageous sexually; for example, the film opens with Jim about to propose marriage to Michelle in a crowded restaurant, but she misunderstands him and thinks he is asking her to fellate him under the table. Nonetheless, although the film is coated with a thick sheen of permissive sex gags and gross humour, in actual fact it heavily promotes traditional family values. For example, it endorses monogamy; Jim has always been a “one-girl-guy” associated with male innocence and naivete, and Michelle is the only girl that he has ever really slept with. Moreover, although the film could never be called prim, there is a distinct lack of sex and sexiness generally; there are no soft-focus close-ups, or sex scenes, and even the gay club scene is sanitised into wholesome, non-confrontational, inoffensive fun. There is little nudity, no penises, and hardly any breasts (apart from the hookers at Jim’s stag night, and I guess that that’s par for the erotic course for the privileged heterosexual male gaze). In short, this film is not at all squeamish about grossness, but it is about sex. In its own way it’s oddly reminiscent of the sex manuals of the 1950s (see, for example, Dorian, 1959; Griffith, 1948; Kenny, 1957) which pretty much avoided sex altogether. While these postwar sex booklets were preoccupied with dire warnings and cautionary advice instead of jokey grossness, in both instances actual information about sex is very murky indeed. More pertinently, perhaps, there is no sense in any of the *Pie* movies of sexual freedom, or sexual protest, which is surely something of a cliché in movies about young people. By the third in the series Jim has apparently found his sexual identity, and is happy with that. Instead this particular film appears to be about growing up, and in particular illustrating that after graduating and getting a good job, what a young man does is to settle down to marry and start a family of his own. While it doesn’t exactly herald a return to the idealised values of the 1950s and its rigidly defined gender roles – like the earlier two *Pie* movies men and women are on absolutely equal terms here – it certainly offers a noughties’ reprising of those 1950s movies’ accepted romantic paradigm of repartee, love and marriage. The only difference is that now the repartee has been replaced by poo jokes.

Indeed, in *American Pie – the Wedding*, the humour is even grosser than in the two previous films. For example, in keeping with the gratuitous over-abundance of bodily fluids and excessive ingestion and emission situations, Stifler, the reactionary dimwitted jock and the embodiment of crass crudity and boorishness who is the butt of all the jokes in the earlier two movies (and also incidentally a clear favourite with film audiences), finds a dog turd containing a lost wedding ring and has to pretend that it's a chocolate truffle and eat it, describing the flavour as he does so. Later he has sex in a dark linen cupboard with the bridegroom's grandmother in the belief that she is the bride's attractive younger sister. This results in the old woman being reconciled to her grandson's marriage to a Gentile, while Stifler comments defensively, "Hey pussy's pussy, isn't it?" And so the movie recycles the same franchised formula of disgusting gags, but I would argue strongly that this additional grossness and humiliation now has to compensate for the increasingly reactionary "take" on married life and neo-conservative values that the film seems to be espousing.

Teen Movies and Masculine Models

The standard teen movie convention is that the action takes place in a world pretty much uninhabited by parents. In keeping with Philip Larkin's comment that "they fuck you up, your mum and dad/ they may not mean to but they do", adults, according to Jonathan Bernstein in *Pretty in Pink: The Golden Age of Teenage Movies*, are customarily described as "cringing, vindictive, foul-smelling, prehistoric, bewildered, spiritually undernourished and pathetic in their attempts to acclimatise themselves to the new age" (Bernstein, 1997, p.53). Think, for example of teen classics such as *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, where the adults are caricatures, played for laughs, or *The Breakfast Club's* lament, "When you grow up, your heart dies". Familial relations are often treated only nominally in the teen movie genre because the real focus is of course the self-contained world of the teenager, where adults are sometimes inconvenient but more often peripheral. I'm aware, however, that this last statement can seem rather too simplistic, and Kenneth Kidd makes the interesting point that the teen *film* assumes the role of surrogate parent (Kidd, 2004, p.97) and that simply by not having parents there – or not as the protagonists - doesn't mean that adult authority is actually being usurped (it's often anything but). And as Jon Lewis argues

elsewhere, in much the same vein, “the films stand in with authoritative and authoritarian morality lessons of their own” (Lewis, 1992, p.66), and “the teen film presides over the eventual discovery of viable and often traditional forms of authority... the restoration of the adult world informed rather than radicalised by youth” (Lewis, 1992, p.3).

It seems evident too, that in some teen movies young men are not striving to escape parental authority, but to become just like Dad. This appears to be the case in this movie as it is clear that Jim doesn’t rebel against the system, or more particularly the father, but rather evolves into him, becoming a repository of his values. Indeed, the father-son bond is an important element in all the *Pie* movies, particularly in terms of the ubiquitous father-son sex talks. Jim’s father is always patient with and understanding about Jim’s sexual debacles (his arrival consistently has a *coitus interruptus* effect upon his son’s sex life, regardless of whether it is conducted with a handy warm apple pie or an obliging fellow freshman). Jim’s Dad is never disciplinarian, and instead he dispenses excruciatingly embarrassing and totally unsolicited man-to-man talks about masturbation and sexual performance: “Your uncle constantly slammed the salami – he was never into baked goods though”, or “Your mother, God bless her, can still make me squeal like a pig – and I mean that in the very best way”. As the series moves on, Jim seems to resemble more and more a chip off the old block, sharing the same bumbling, hapless ineptitude and goofiness but also the same endearing sweetness and decency. It’s important to note too that the mother barely registers as a presence here; clearly she knows her place in the gendered generational scheme of things. The father, on the other hand, is on screen for a good deal of *American Pie 3* (amazingly, he even shares in the first fellatio scene with the two principals). And so, I would contend, the film guides boys to become like their heterosexual, middle-class fathers.

The *American Pie* series as a whole can consistently be “read” as a contemporary sex education manual, where such manuals almost always inscribe and endorse the approved sexual conduct of the day. Traditionally, too, sex instruction manuals have been concerned at least as much with moral as with sexual education, and arguably that’s the case here too. And *American Pie 1* is, in part, a deliberately tongue-in-cheek parody of man-to-man sex talks, of secret men’s business generally. I’ve already

mentioned Jim's father, whose well-meaning advice is a clever lampooning of the sitcom situation of a liberal father and his wayward yet lovable son. Meanwhile Kevin, another of Jim's friends, is told by his brother of a book, an instructional "Bible" of sex techniques handed down from one group of high school boys to the next (and this book is influential in enabling the naive Kevin to perform expert cunnilingus upon his clearly overjoyed partner). In keeping with Davis and Dickinson's earlier hypothesis, this scene is both very amusing and very instructive, reinforcing the message that female desire matters and that sex is not merely for personal gratification. Incidentally, sex in the *American Pie* movies is seen very much as a family affair (advice is given by fathers, brothers and so on), not for the classroom (surely the Right would approve of that). In fact the series is peppered with sexual advice and homilies, all of which is bandied around the focal group of needy boys, with some advisors more reliable than others (Stifler, for example, is always spectacularly wrong in his ruthless approach to sex and girls, whereas in *American Pie 2* Michelle more usefully instructs Jim not to be too uptight, and to be comfortable in every situation). Yet whereas in *American Pie 1* the film operates as one gigantic modern sex manual designed to subvert patriarchal domination via gross-out comedy, and offers advice about non-hegemonic masculinity and female desire, I would argue that by the end of the trilogy the sex manuals move from spoof to very serious indeed. Despite its spectacularly outrageous cinematic moments the final *Pie* film is firmly rooted in the heteronormative institution of marriage, and hence family and responsibility chart its celluloid terrain.

This makeover, or sea change, is clearly seen in *American Pie 3* when, in a fit of extra-flabby moralising Stifler, that carnivalesque character hitherto associated with misrule, undergoes a redemption. Stifler proves what a good friend he is by actually saving the wedding when the flowers get ruined the night before, and he gets the girl in the end (and also the grandmother, but it's best not to go there). He sees that Jim really loves Michelle, and concludes that there might actually be something in it. Another wedding is a distinct possibility, and the movie seems to be saying that everyone grows up to be part of a heterosexual couple – there's just no escaping it. And as Kenneth Kidd has observed, adolescent male vulnerability-turned-triumph is the standard theme of teen films, where the horny, awkward boy stumbles through close encounters with the opposite sex (Kidd, 2004, p.101). This "heterosexual

stumbling” (Kidd, 2004, p.101) often gets ritualised as dancing (the most famous instance of this is surely Tom Cruise’s ballet of unbridled liberation in *Risky Business*). Now in this movie dirty dancing is no longer a code for social rebellion, but instead dancing becomes a stately induction into the grown-up world where youthful excesses are left behind. Jim is taught to dance by Stifler, who also demonstrates his journeying into maturity, responsibility and cooperation at the same time as the movie scores sniggering laughs when the two men dance clumsily together; this is yet another instance, of course, of the conflation of pedagogy and entertainment, the coexistence of the gross humour and the serious intent. The mannered wedding waltz where Jim and Michelle enter the world of their parents appropriately ends the film (and this dance stands in eloquent contrast to the gloriously bizarre striptease of *American Pie 1*, where Jim “performs” for the female gaze, the lovely Nadia, and also for the huge enjoyment of those watching on the Internet, spoofing, whether consciously or not, the popular notion that when male bodies are seen, the focus is on action [see Dyer, 1986; Neale, 1983]). In that instance a space is constructed for resistance, opposition and change, and for an alternative audience positioning, but dancing is a serious business here, and subversive messages are seemingly no longer appropriate. It should be noted too that while the third movie focuses upon the hilarious things that go wrong in the lead-up to Jim’s nuptials, the importance of that institution is never in doubt. While what we clearly see is a marriage of equals, described by one film critic as “one big fat geek wedding” (Wilmington, 2003, p.21), Jim also tries to ensure that Michelle has the marriage of her dreams with the most expensive trousseau, the mountains of flowers, the ceremony at the country club. The rites of passage that induct the American man into all-American family life now appear to involve a socialisation into consumer and corporate culture. So the movie doesn’t just shape adolescent behaviour and consolidate teenage identity via the acquisition of romantic and sexual knowledge, but it presents marriage as a goal as well – interestingly at a time when large numbers of Americans and others don’t marry at all, and there are exceptionally high divorce rates.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the *American Pie* series, while by no means a programmatic sex education manual, plays an important part in providing lessons in

sex and romance to young male audiences, and in shaping them as responsible, caring partners. It also contends that this series, with its boosting of what a man should be, serves to make kids wholesome, and to regulate sexual behaviour, similar to, for example, the 1950s guides. Like postwar sex manuals movies such as these are concerned with the proper management of human sexuality, and about sexual morals. They provide a moral education by stressing the primacy of the family and the importance of marriage, and they also promote the status quo. Of course the 1950s emphasis upon celibacy, masturbation and homosexuality (usually associated with paedophilia), is missing (*American Pie* is an updated manual, after all) but the messages are, as I hope I've demonstrated, nonetheless highly traditional (they also include, for example, warnings about choosing the wrong sort of woman) and the series is overwhelmingly sanitised – like a traditional sex manual – with no drugs, and very little accurate information about sex.

And so finally, once more, to the notion of film and its role in channelling adolescent sexual behaviour into approved routes. According to Toby Miller (2001, p.172) Hollywood films may be seen as potential forums for moral uplift, as vehicles for provoking social responsibility as audiences participate in probably the most global, communal and time-consuming practice of making meaning in world history. Meanwhile Henry Giroux is less sanguine, arguing that because movies are deeply imbricated within the material and symbolic relations of power, they tend to produce and incorporate ideologies that represent the outcomes of struggles marked by the historical realities of power and the deep anxieties of the times (Giroux, 2002, p.30). Furthermore, according to Susan Jeffords, in the 1980s Reaganite cinema was a regeneration of the interests, values and projects of the patriarchy, embodying the renewed battle of the masculine to reconsolidate its control over the feminine and to recover the family order, restoring an idealised past, with authority vested in white, male, middle-class Americans (Jeffords, 1989). Judging by this analysis of the *American Pie* series it appears likely that a similar patriarchal response is occurring in recent popular Hollywood movies of the twenty first century (and if the Rambo superman of the 1980s can be seen as an embodiment of the gung-ho former President – who after all liked to be seen as the Father of the Nation - then it's perhaps wise not to go into the comparisons between Jim's father and George W. Bush).

Films undeniably fulfil an important function by narrativising and giving order to the otherwise chaotic and contradictory experience of youth by historicising, contextualising, re-presenting it. And according to Jeffrey Moran in *Teaching Sex*, twentieth century sex education in America even at the beginning of the new millennium is about aiding youths in “remaining chaste until the time of their monogamous, heterosexual marriage” (Moran, 2000, p.197). Like the classroom sexual manuals *American Pie 3* continues to idealise the heterosexual, nuclear family. According to Kidd, popular teen films teach adolescents about options in love and life, steering them towards sexual and cultural heterodoxy and emphasising the pleasure and profit of normative desire. What results is often a conservative film with a veneer of sexual radicalism (Kidd, 2004, p.98). Such films have perhaps capitalised on and compensated for the failure of sex education programs in schools. The men in the *American Pie* films might be SNAGS (nominally at least), but they’re certainly not rebels. And in the end cinema might successfully propagandise what the school clearly can’t. By the end of the *American Pie* series there is no longer a reinforcement of subversive messages, and no more insubordinate performances of gender. Reluctantly, but to my mind undeniably *American Pie* is best read *in toto* as an endorsement of a patriarchal social order rather than interpreted oppositionally as a subversive “take” on gender dynamics and contemporary teen identity. As a sex manual, then, it’s perfectly in keeping with the new conservatism on that side of the world.

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