

Werewolves, Mothers and Femmes Fatales:
Girl Power Movies

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy in American Studies
in the
University of Canterbury
by
Bianca Nielsen

University of Canterbury
2004

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Acknowledgements

My primary supervisor, Ken Harris, has given me many hours of his time and helpful guidance and encouragement. The department of American Studies has provided me with a space to work, resources and financial support— thank you to the staff members from the department who have given me academic and administrative assistance. I also wish to acknowledge my secondary supervisor, Kevin Fisher, at the University of Otago. The University of Canterbury provided me with scholarship funding throughout the duration of my postgraduate studies.

I am endlessly grateful to the friends and family members who have proofread the dissertation and/or “managed” the personal aspect of my academic growth. Judi and Steve Brown, Kristin Nielsen, Anar Kahn, Phillip Wardell, Andrew Schulte, Simon Owers, Michelle Lorier, Catherine Dale, Gregory Adamson, Vicki Evans and Vijay Devadas deserve a special mention for their invaluable support. Finally, I will always be indebted to my partner, Greg, who has encouraged me enthusiastically throughout this research project.

This dissertation is dedicated to Brian and Pauline.

Abstract

This dissertation analyses a collection of contemporary girl power movies and places these texts within an historical generic context. In “Pleasures and Problems of the ‘Angry Girl,’” Kimberley Roberts defines the phenomenon of girl power as “a structure of beliefs and a set of consumer practices that centre on the individual teenage girl’s power to effect change in her universe” (217-8). Roberts outlines that the “heroines of the girl power era of the 1990s are ‘pissed off and ready to do something about it’” and that “they are fighters who combat the forces against them, unapologetically and often violently” (217). Since Roberts’s analysis of girl power in *Freeway*, there has been little academic discussion on the phenomenon in Hollywood products. While the idea that “women’s films” exhibit the potential for social criticism is not new, there is yet to be a substantial project that explores female characters and their “combat” with the “forces against them” in recently released film products. Roberts’s definition of girl power can be applied to a series of films produced during the mid to late nineties and first few years of the new millennium. Many films produced during this timeframe depict strong female protagonists who fight the forces of patriarchal culture “unapologetically and often violently.”

I carry out this research in order to foreground three key aspects to girl power movies. Firstly, most “women’s films” reveal the fact that gender and sexuality are still often constructed in repressive binaries in media products. Secondly, the extent to which girl power movies demonstrate progressive potential is dependent on the degree to which they facilitate *group* spectatorship. Thirdly, girl power movies that contrast the corruption of an institutional (patriarchal) law with what I will call feminist justice imply that Hollywood films might provide a tenable arena for the expression of feminist group dynamics. Girl power movies that continue to depict communities of active and powerful female protagonists provide a space for the re-assessment of cultural assumptions about women and girls as consumers and subjects.

Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One The <i>Scream</i> Movies: Gender, Sexuality, Authorship	34
Chapter Two Monstrous Deviance and Repressive Disciplines: Bodies, Sexuality and Girl Power in Horror “Teenpics”	57
Chapter Three The “Sexploitational” Pleasures of Noir: “Filles Fatales” in <i>Wild Things</i> and <i>Cruel Intentions</i>	101
Chapter Four “Violent Revenge”: Gender and the Serial Killer Film	123
Chapter Five Women, Friendships, Knowledge and Power in Occult Films: <i>The Craft</i> , <i>What Lies Beneath</i> and <i>The Gift</i>	144
Chapter Six Lesbian Sexuality in Girl Power Movies: <i>Single White Female</i> and <i>Bound</i>	180
Chapter Seven The Mother-Child Relationship: <i>The Others</i> , <i>Panic Room</i> and <i>The Deep End</i>	204
Conclusion	230
Bibliography	244
Filmography	255
Appendix	259

INTRODUCTION

Cinema is a public fantasy that engages spectators' particular, private scripts of desire and identification. Equally at stake in spectatorship are the ways organized images and sounds psychically imprint us and the way they mediate social identities and histories.

Patricia White, *Uninvited*. (xv)

Systems of domination (economic, sexual, racial, representational) shared within particular groups (like feminists) generate specific patterns of hope, anxiety and desires. Social actors may experience these patterns initially as private, idiosyncratic, even isolated responses to cultural forms like films. But through material practices like consciousness raising groups, women's studies courses, and feminist film reviewing, feminist communities collectively develop interpretive strategies for making sense of those structures of feelings, moving them into the sphere of public discourse by giving social, semantic form to anxieties and desires.

Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Illicit Pleasures: Feminist Spectators and *Personal Best*." (183)

This dissertation analyses a collection of contemporary girl power movies and places these texts within an historical generic context. In "Pleasures and Problems of the 'Angry Girl,'" Kimberley Roberts defines the phenomenon of girl power as "a structure of beliefs and a set of consumer practices that centre on the individual teenage girl's power to effect change in her universe" (217-8). Roberts outlines that the "heroines of the girl power era of the 1990s are 'pissed off and ready to do something about it'" and that "they are fighters who combat the forces against them, unapologetically and often violently" (217). Since

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I carry out this research in order to foreground three key aspects to girl power movies. Firstly, most "women's films" reveal the fact that gender and sexuality are still frequently constructed in repressive binaries in media products. Secondly, the extent to which girl power movies demonstrate progressive potential is dependent on the degree to which they facilitate *group* spectatorship. Many girl power movies portray communities of women and girls for the pleasure of groups of female viewers and therefore potentially facilitate progressive identificatory processes. Thirdly, girl power movies that contrast the corruption of an institutional (patriarchal) law with what I will describe as a feminist justice imply that Hollywood films might provide a tenable arena for the expression of group dynamics. By utilizing feminist scholarship's frequent acknowledgement that "women's films" provide a space for active female protagonists, I argue that women identify actively with communities of women on screen in girl power movies.

Feminist scholarship also acknowledges that during the late sixties and the seventies independently produced "slasher" films—predecessors of many girl power movies—challenged social mores by confrontationally satirizing Western culture. Films that unexpectedly thrived at the box office during this era, such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1973), *Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1968) and *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972) sub-textually express dissatisfaction with the homogeneity of capitalist societies.

Allegories for contemporary issues in these scary movies— which communicate discontent with homogeneous middle-American values— have often been paralleled with the politics of protest movements from the same historical period. Because they are similarly self-conscious, more recently produced horror and thriller films, such as the *Scream* trilogy (Wes Craven, 1996-2001) and *Freeway* (Matthew Bright, 1996), demonstrate a comparable aptitude for social parody. As John Fiske writes, parody, which is articulated in popular culture through exaggeration, mocking and excess, “can be an effective device for interrogating the dominant ideology” (*Reading the Popular* 105). Media commentators and critics have utilized such terminology as “exaggerated” and “excessive” to describe horror and thriller films since the silent period. While characterisations of teenagers in horror and thriller films often idealise youth rebellion, girl power movies from these genres, such as *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996), *The Faculty* (Robert Rodriguez, 1998), *Disturbing Behaviour* (David Nutter, 1998), and *Ginger Snaps* (John Fawcett, 2001), also critique institutional disciplines and parody normative gender roles. Powerful women who refuse to conform to the “rules” of normative femininity are frequently represented in horror and thriller films, therefore most of the girl power movies chosen for this study are derived from the scary movie genre.

Other contemporary girl power movies interrogate normative gender roles in a slightly different manner. *Wild Things* (John Mc Naughton, 1998), *What Lies Beneath* (Robert Zemekis, 2000), *The Cell* (Tarsem Singh, 2000), *The Gift* (Sam Raimi, 2000), *Bound* (Larry and Andy Wachowski, 1996) and *Freeway* feature female protagonists with considerable narrative agency. The rebellious knowledge of female protagonists is powerful and important in these films. Cultural shifts in gender roles are also expressed in the depiction of mothers in *The Others* (Alejandro Amenebar, 2001), *Panic Room* (David Fincher, 2002) and *The Deep End* (Scott Mc Gehee and David Siegel, 2001). Biological mothers in all three films are resourcefully and competently raising their families without the help of men. In this case, depictions of self-sufficient female characters in each film imply the extent to which parenting roles are

rapidly transforming in contemporary society. Moreover, *The Others*, *Panic Room* and *The Deep End* refute the notion that “maternal instincts” are gender specific in their establishment of reciprocal mother-child relationships. These portraits of maternity suggest that the gendering of parenting responsibilities is problematic because the boundaries between mother and child, and mother and father are becoming increasingly permeable.

Cruel Intentions (Roger Kumble, 1999), *The Hole* (Nick Hamm, 2001), *Single White Female* (Barbet Schroeder, 1992) and *The Craft* (Andrew Fleming, 1996), which are all films with strong female protagonists, depict a hierarchical patriarchy in operation. A female antagonist is punished for her lack of sexual discretion in *Cruel Intentions*, and it is revealed that adolescent feminine sexuality is to be feared in *The Hole*. Discriminatory and contradictory portraits of feminine intimacy and lesbian desire are proven profitable in the case of *Single White Female*. The importance of female friendships is also disavowed in *The Craft*, where a coven of young witches disband after having cultivated rebellious supernatural powers together. Each teenaged protagonist is stripped of her magical abilities as a punishment for insubordinate behaviour in this portrait of female jealousy. *Cruel Intentions*, *The Hole*, *Single White Female* and *The Craft* conservatively imply that the empowerment women experience in relationships with one another is transitory and destructive. Resistance to patriarchal culture is proven to be dangerous for female characters by the end of each of these films.

While the films I have chosen to analyse in this dissertation reflect the prevalence of normative patriarchal values, they also point towards certain cultural conflicts. The most obvious tension expressed in girl power movies is that between the need to create strong female characters and to depict these women as sexualised objects in accordance with cinematic conventions. I will focus on the former feature of girl power movies, not because I consider it to be more important, but because these films are still most popularly believed to be simplistic dramatisations of women as passive victims. That is, despite the

pioneering work of many feminist academics, girl power films are still at the centre of popular panics over the role of the media in the victimization of women. Academic inquiry into an enduring and influential Hollywood genre, therefore, is continually ignored in popular discourses.

Subjectivity, Spectatorship, Ideology

Why is film pleasurable? . . . The production of spectatorial pleasure is a complex process, but the link between cinematic pleasure and sexuality is obvious. . . . If the cinema's pleasures are sexually charged, they cannot be magically insulated from the power relations inscribed in patriarchal culture's definition of sexuality and sexual difference.

Gaylyn Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic*.

(1)

The very fact that certain types of films and stars attract gender-specific audiences suggests that gender cannot be ignored in an evaluation of a film's appeal to its viewers. Certainly, in a film cycle . . . where the address is specifically to a female audience, the issue of gendered spectatorship seems unquestionably pertinent. In fact, a female-oriented genre would appear to be a privileged site for the interrogation and application of such a concept.

Karen Hollinger, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films*. (21)

Gaylyn Studlar and Karen Hollinger hit on one of the most important reasons for examining female subjectivity in cinema: the fact that many of the films viewed as extensions of a patriarchal culture by feminist academics produce pleasure for female spectators, if, that is, one is to assume this due to the

popularity of such movies at the box office. Though girl power movies follow mainstream cinema's conventions by portraying women and other marginalized groups stereotypically, we must still consider why women enjoy such films. Moreover, where women engage with girl power heroines on screen, there is a possibility that these active subjectivities might influence women's everyday attitudes to the realities of patriarchal culture. At the least, girl power movies in this study provide a space for spectator positions that explore and even expose the contradictions of Hollywood's patriarchal conventions.

Carol Clover has notoriously maintained that many female viewers take pleasure in identifying with horror's female protagonists. Clover argues that with films from the seventies and eighties, horror spectatorship is mediated by a resourceful "final girl":

There are in fact some remarkable developments in the sex-gender system of horror since the mid-1970s. Chief among these is the emergence of the girl hero . . . the sole survivor of *Halloween's* rampaging psychotic, for example, or of *Alien's* salivating monstrosity . . . forcefully played by Jamie Lee Curtis and Sigourney Weaver respectively. (*Men, Women and Chain Saws* 17)

According to Clover, these autonomous female protagonists are "afforded a degree of effective participation in the action all but unheard of prior to the seventies," and "combine the functions of suffering victim and avenging hero" (17). Women may experience pleasure identifying with a female hero who refuses to become a passive victim and fights back intelligently. Girl power movies invite viewers to partake in complicated and potentially progressive spectatorship processes— as Clover would have it, men might also identify with victimized final girls.

Rather than simply dismiss representations of female characters as re-articulations of patriarchal culture, feminist film critics should also examine the potential of such films for what Stuart Hall describes as negotiated readings. The discipline of cultural studies is indebted to Hall's "Encoding, Decoding," which

argues that popular texts can be read in diverse and sometimes oppositional ways by viewers. Hall's argument suggests that spectators find popular products pleasurable because they may "determine" their own meanings in texts. I must at this stage acknowledge that readings of every film included in this dissertation inherently reflect my position as an author and "decoder," a position through which each of my analyses must invariably be "negotiated."

Hall defines three possible ideological positions that spectators might assume while enjoying popular entertainment: a dominant hegemonic position, a negotiated position, or a globally contrary position. Hall's comparison of dominant and negotiated positions seems the most pertinent for an analysis of female cinematic audiences in this case. Hall argues that "majority audiences probably understand quite adequately what has been dominantly defined and professionally signified" in popular texts (516). A negotiated decoding of a text "contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements" which at once acknowledge "hegemonic definitions" and establish oppositional "ground rules" (516). A negotiated reading of a text is therefore "shot through with contradictions" (Hall 516). The contradictions apparent in girl power movies for the feminist spectator involve negotiations between patriarchal (dominant) and feminist (oppositional) representations of female subjectivity. As Studlar proposes, cinema is at once pleasurable for women and infused with the dominant ideologies of patriarchal culture.

Hall's description of the dominant ideological positions offered in popular texts goes a long way to explaining exactly how the existence of a patriarchal order is almost always present in texts in which spectators find negotiated or globally contrary identificatory positions:

We say *dominant*, not 'determined,' because it is always possible to order, classify, assign and decode an event within more than one 'mapping.' But we say 'dominant' because there exists a pattern of 'preferred readings'; and these both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become

institutionalised. The domains of 'preferred readings' have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures, of 'how things work for all practical purposes in this culture'. (513)

Hall uses the term "preferred reading" in order to suggest that spectators do not simply identify with the dominant positions endorsed by texts. Jacqueline Bobo's analysis of African American women as spectators comes close to Hall's definition for a "globally contrary" position: "Out of habit, as readers of mainstream texts, we have learned to ferret out the beneficial and put up blinders against the rest. . . . From this wary viewing standpoint, a subversive reading of a text can occur" ("*The Colour Purple*: Black Women as Cultural Readers" 16).

Christine Gledhill develops Hall's term "negotiation" as an "analytical concept" for film spectatorship that "allows space to the subjectivities, identities and pleasures of audiences" (72):

The term 'negotiation' implies the holding together of opposite sides in an ongoing process of give-and-take. As a model of meaning-production, negotiation conceives cultural exchange as the intersection of processes of production and reception, in which overlapping but non-matching determinations operate. Meaning is neither imposed, nor passively imbibed, but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience. This can be analysed at three different levels: institutions, texts and audiences—although distinctions between levels are ones of emphasis, rather than of rigid separation ("Pleasurable Negotiations" 67).

Gledhill also offers that viewers may "shift subject positions as they interact with the text" (73). With "negotiation," audiences' readings of texts are not so much subversive as "animations of possibilities arising from the negotiations into which the text enters" (Gledhill 87). Gledhill's concept of negotiation comes from and continues to contribute to feminist film criticism on "women's films." The idea that "women's films" allow female spectators an opportunity to see the

contradictory nature of contemporary society's gender constructs is in line with Gledhill's theory of spectatorship in "Pleasurable Negotiations."

Mary Ann Doane's "Subjectivity and Desire: An (Other) Way of Looking" explains how Hollywood cinema has reflected the social structures of patriarchal culture. The "preferred readings" suggested by "women's films," Doane argues, circulate the "institutional/ political/ideological" order of patriarchal culture by representing female characters that conform to dominant notions of "femininity." However, "women's films" also offer negotiated readings that female viewers take pleasure in. For Doane, the progressive aspect of "women's films" lies in their ability to represent female subjectivities that allow women to interrogate their position in patriarchal society:

The woman's film is in many respects formally no different from other instances of the classical Hollywood cinema; its narrative structure and conventions reiterate many of the factors which have contributed to a theorization of the cinema spectator largely in terms of masculine psychical mechanisms. Nevertheless, because the woman's film insistently and sometimes obsessively attempts to trace the contours of female subjectivity and desire within the traditional forms and conventions of Hollywood narrative— forms which cannot sustain such an exploration— certain contradictions within patriarchal ideology become more apparent. This makes the films particularly valuable for the way in which the 'woman's story' is told. The formal resistances to the elaboration of female subjectivity produce perturbations and contradictions within the narrative economy. (175)

Like Hall, who conceptualizes a negotiated identificatory position as one that highlights the contradictions of a culture's dominant ideologies, politics and institutions, Doane proposes that "women's films" portray female subjectivities in a manner that allows women to interrogate the contradictions in patriarchal culture's ideologies. Though "women's films" might not necessarily reveal these contradictions lucidly, they are apparent to spectators who relate their everyday

subjective experiences in patriarchal culture to contradictory textual representations of feminine subjectivity.

Karen Hollinger's *In the Company of Women* builds on Doane's study of classical Hollywood's "women's films" by analysing the portrayal of female friendships in contemporary cinema. Hollinger explains that many feminist critics "welcome the new woman's films cautiously, but with a certain amount of enthusiasm, as progressive forms of popular culture" because they "see the films as expressing a distinctly female sensibility stemming from the recent influx of women into the production aspect of the industry" (4). While I must acknowledge that not one of the movies included in this thesis is directed by a woman, the input of female stars into many of filmic products I analyse is significant, as Chapter One proposes. Moreover, as Hollinger argues, new forms of "women's films" represent "heroines" that "provide images of alternative lifestyles for women based on meaningful social relationships with other women" (4). Hollinger proposes that this approach to the female friendship film might lead us to the conclusion that "even in mainstream cinema, which seems dominated by patriarchal notions, spaces can be found in certain female-oriented film genres where dominant ideas are challenged and shifts in representation of women do occur" (4).

Hollinger goes on to espouse in more detail the progressive potential of the female friendship films that portray the bonds between women favourably:

Women coming together in groups for fun, companionship, and shared enjoyment can be seen as socially challenging in a number of ways: such friendships undermine the ideology of romantic love by showing that women can enjoy themselves without male companionship; challenge men's control of public social meeting places; undermine the 'equation of femininity with maternity, domesticity, and the private area'; dispute 'the culturally legitimated tendency for women to base their identities on such 'caring' relationships'; and subvert the exclusivity of the marriage bond by allowing for the public

demonstration of solidarity among women. (25)

Films in this dissertation that depict women who realize strong bonds with one another while fighting the forces that trap them— films such as *The Gift*, *What Lies Beneath*, *Panic Room*, *The Others*, *Bound* and the *Scream* movies— subvert the dominance of the heterosexual couple in mainstream Hollywood cinema.

For Hollinger, however, contemporary female friendship films are contradictory texts that provide for many readings: “female friendship films might be best approached neither as progressive challenges to the status quo nor as reactionary props of dominant patriarchal ideology, but rather as complex products of an intricate process of negotiation” (6). This process of “negotiation” for Hollinger involves “the intersection of competing ideological frameworks held by producers and consumers alike” (6). The representations of female protagonists in this dissertation have much in common with the portrayals of female friendship that Hollinger analyses: while contemporary girl power films indeed re-inscribe many of the dominant values of patriarchal culture, these products might also offer a space for female viewers to negotiate a communal feminist identity.

Further problems with simply viewing “women’s films” as a space offering female spectators subversive pleasures have been identified by feminist film critics. Pam Cook believes early academic feminism’s tendency to claim “women’s films” as an uncontested arena for the airing of women’s concerns might in itself re-articulate the binaries of patriarchal culture:

One question insists: why does the women’s picture exist? There is no such thing as ‘the men’s picture,’ specifically addressed to men; there is only ‘cinema,’ and ‘the women’s picture,’ a subgroup or category especially for women, excluding men, a separate, private space designed for more than half the population, relegating them to the margins of cinema proper. By constructing this different space for women (Haskell’s ‘wet, wasted afternoons’) it performs a vital function

in society's ordering of sexual difference. ("Melodrama and the Women's Picture" 17)

Claudette Charbonneau and Lucy Winer propose that "women's films" exhibit a more sinister flaw. Charbonneau and Winer argue that many "women's films" "seem to present women in a new way, as valuable in their own right rather than merely as accessories to men" but still "end by suggesting that women should discount and distrust their relationships with other women and look to men as their true allies" (qtd. in *In the Company of Women* 5).

bell hooks also suggests that the resistance hinted at in a negotiated reading of a film might be transitory. Unlike Jacqueline Bobo, who sees possibilities for resistance in African American women's "against the grain" readings of films, hooks contends that a "distinction must be made between the power of viewers to interpret a film in ways that make it palatable for the everyday world they live in and the particular persuasive strategies films deploy to impress a particular vision on our psyches" (3). hooks explains this as follows:

While audiences are clearly not passive and are able to pick and choose, it is simultaneously true that there are certain 'received' messages that are rarely mediated by the will of the audience. Concurrently, if an individual watches a film with a profoundly political reactionary message but is somehow able to impose on the visual narrative an interpretation that is progressive, this act of mediation does not change the terms of the film. (*Reel to Reel: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* 3)

hooks outlines the problems with over-valuing the notion of negotiation, and therefore also points to problems with the possibilities this thesis sees in girl power movies. While the films included in this thesis imply that the representation of girls and women in Hollywood cinema might allow for expressions of populist feminist philosophies and a sense of feminist community, these are only textual representations. A feminist reading of film, then, has obvious limitations, and at worst, as hooks suggests, might not "change the terms of the film" subject to analysis.

This relates to my utilization of the term “ideology” in this work. Philip Green’s conceptualization of the term ideology sheds light on hooks’s contention that resistant readings of popular culture are ineffectual unless they actually come to change the politics of representation. For Green, an ideology is “a (partially) fictitious sense of community among the members of any organized human group” (*Cracks in the Pedestal: Ideology and Gender in Hollywood* 15). Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology is also compelling for Green. Althusser theorizes ideology as “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Green 15). The power of Hollywood films to assert ideological communal values, values that are grounded in the norms of patriarchal culture, is, as hooks would argue, in many respects unavoidable. As *The Faculty* and *Disturbing Behaviour* demonstrate, many representations of powerful female protagonists are particularly dangerous for women in that they seductively construct active female protagonists only to disavow their significance as characters in concluding scenes. *Ginger Snaps* and *The Hole* also reveal the relationship between resistant readings of popular texts and ideological or dominant representations of femininity. Both films initially revel in the rebelliousness of teenage girls but assert patriarchal ideologies in the fates accorded to these teenaged protagonists. While it is possible to read the girls’ behaviour as subversive in *Ginger Snaps* and *The Hole*, their rebellion is severely punished. As hooks might argue, any reading of resistance in these films does not change the ideological terms of female protagonists’ fates.

Cook and Hollinger’s summary of the dominant ideologies apparent in “women’s films,” however, implies yet another positive consequence of feminist film criticism’s fascination with these movies. The delineation of a genre of “women’s films” played an important role in establishing theorizations of female subjectivity and spectatorship that began to depart from limited psychoanalytic paradigms. While early feminist film critics, such as Laura Mulvey, struggled to conceptualise female spectatorship outside the bounds of a passive-masochistic model, the examination of “women’s films,” where female spectatorship is

assumed and female subjectivity is the focus of narrative and *mise en scène*, has played an important role in establishing models that theorize women as active characters and spectators. Doane sums up film criticism's fascination with psychoanalytic identificatory models that re-inscribe patriarchal binaries:

Men will be more likely to occupy the positions delineated as masculine, women those specified as feminine. What is interesting, from this point of view, is that masculinity is consistently theorized as a *pure*, unified, and self-sufficient position. The male spectator, assuming the psychical positions of the voyeur and the fetishist, can easily and comfortably identify with his like on the screen. But theories of female spectatorship constantly have recourse, at some level, to the notions of *bisexuality*—Mulvey's transvestism or de Lauretis's double identification. It is as though masculinity were required to effectively conceptualize access to activity or agency (whether illusory or not).
(170, author's own emphasis)

Doane suggests that feminists “must continue to investigate the representation of female subjectivity in a variety of discourses— film, psychoanalysis, literature, law” in order to expose the repressive binaries of patriarchal culture (171). This thesis endeavours to contribute to film theory's investigation of female spectatorship and subjectivity in its analysis of the potential for negotiated readings of female protagonists in girl power movies.

Genre

If, as is generally agreed, the American Cinema has been largely a conservative cinema, functioning to subdue those conflicts capable of generating dissent, what would a genuinely radical cinema look like?

Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (362-3)

In his analysis of the Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), Robert Ray attempts to answer the question he proposes above, a question that many genre theorists have pondered: what constitutes a radical movie? Central to Ray's thesis is the notion that films can present subversive ideologies by utilizing the stylistic techniques and themes of mainstream Hollywood cinema. The films in this dissertation that allow for negotiated spectator positions do so because they are texts that offer many readings using the most conventional generic formats. At this stage I must clarify that I do not undertake this study with the intention of defining a rigid genre of "radical" films. Establishing an adaptable category of girl power movies has allowed me to define a loose grouping of films that deal with similar themes, locations and situations in their representation of female protagonists.

Historical genre issues need to be tackled in order to for this topic to be more carefully defined. Barbara Klinger and Judith Hess Wright propose two different approaches to genre films. While Klinger suggests in "'Cinema/Ideology/ Criticism' Revisited" that horror films possess the potential to exhibit what society normally represses, in "Genre Films and the Status Quo," Wright is adamant that popular films only address conflicts so as to conclude by affirming dominant ideologies. Wright proposes that genre films "came into being and were financially successful because they temporarily relieved the fears aroused by a recognition of social and political conflicts" (41). Wright further suggests that films which allow for multiple readings and unresolved conflicts cannot in fact be described as genre films. This, however, is a problematic line of reasoning: many films do in fact work within generic conventions in order to express discontent, as Ray proposes. The horror genre has become renowned for producing films that embrace generic customs while providing a space for social criticism. Of late, girl power movies frequently assert horror's generic heritage in order to challenge the validity of accepted social institutions.

Countless horror predecessors to girl power movies produced since the sixties provide evidence to contest Wright's argument that genre films present

“absurd solutions to economic and social conflicts” (41). Many contemporary horror and thriller films indicate that there are, at present, no resolutions for the kinds of patriarchal violence represented in media fiction. To clarify, though the denial of conflict resolution in scary movies is a marketing tactic designed to pave the way for numerous sequels, it must also be recognised that this is still a generic convention worthy of more in-depth analysis. Klinger argues that horror films nearly always end with the threat of the monstrous figure remaining because popular movies are not obliged to propose resolutions or social reform (78-9). Scary movies, according to Klinger, therefore refrain from asserting any dominant ideological premises: “Horror films seem to have a special pipeline to the unconscious. They possess the potential, that is, to exhibit as explicit content what most other films soundly repress (the repressiveness of the family vs. the insistent celebration or sentimentalization of family solidarity)” (78). Klinger argues that this gives scary movies a “revelatory rather than a complacent relation to ideology” (78-9). In contrast, works with conscious political intent must admit that social systems, once “mended,” might eventually serve the public productively (Klinger 78-9). As a consequence, Klinger argues, politically conscious films always present the possibility for social restructuring. Recent decades have seen the many girl power movies that utilize horror formats (films that are often assumed to have no political intent) reject the employment of cinematic closure in order to critique social institutions, such as the police force, the family and the legal system.¹ By denying audiences a comfortable ending, such films draw attention to the harshness of the world that their characters inhabit. Horror and thriller movies with powerful female protagonists frequently imply there is no “easy comfort and solace” to be found in a society that manufactures successful films where responsible white men restore the “safety” of hegemonic heterosexuality.

Many girl power movies endeavour to rework historical generic conventions and themes. Thomas Sobchack proposes that successful films

¹ *Halloween* is a good example of this.

reinvent genre tools to capture viewers' attention. Sobchack's "anti-genre film" mirrors Ray's definition for radical movies:

It has become the fashion for some directors to use the elements of the genre— the plots, characters, and iconographies— to create an anti-genre film . . . they will use everything according to the normal pattern, but simply change the ending so as not to satisfy the audience's expectations of a conventional group-oriented conclusion. ("Genre Films: A Classical Experience" 111-2)

Sobchack offers that a deviation from a group-oriented conclusion has the effect of "increasing the distance between [the protagonist's] values and the values of the group." For Sobchack, this "violates the basic principle of the genre film: the restoration of the social order" (112). Sobchack remarks that "instead of justifying the status quo," anti-genre films "intend the opposite," in that "they suggest that individuals can succeed in individual schemes, that separation from the group can be had without consequences" (112). Sobchack's definition for the "anti-genre" film here aptly describes the seventies "slasher" film model that contemporary horror films sometimes utilize or parody. Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) was one of the first horror films to significantly disrupt its audience's expectations (by dispensing with star Janet Leigh in a famously unsettling manner only a half hour into its narrative).

Contemporary girl power movies are often "anti-genre" in another respect; they reject the notion that genre films must represent "the restoration of the social order" as something best achieved by an entire community. Social order in many girl power movies is reinstated largely through the work of a teenaged girl, a woman or a group of women. The tradition of a "conventional group-oriented conclusion" (which usually involves the triumph of "rational," "masculine" science in Hollywood products) is abandoned in films such as *Scream*, *Freeway*, *Bound* and *The Gift*, where women or communities of women are the only persons capable of subduing violence. In these films, female protagonists restore social order by using methods that are in opposition to a flawed institutional law. The fact that a collective identity in these films is

accomplished through female companionship also asserts a feminist premise. Many girl power movies imply that women must respect each other's differences in order to restore a form of justice that is in opposition to the patriarchy.

Lucy Fischer chronicles a different type of “anti-genre” film in *Cinematernity*. For Fischer, films that subvert genre conventions in order to foreground the role of mothers are “anti-genre.” Fischer contends that while mothers in genre films have been ignored by genre theorists, the word genre has evoked maternal metaphors in the work of genre theorists:

A submerged association between genre reception and motherhood is found in a critical discourse that positions the film consumer as an anxious, insecure child. First there is the way that scholars connect genre to “the familiar”, configuring it as the comforting aesthetic “home”. . . . Second, many critics have linked genre works to modes of storytelling performed by mother for child. . . . Finally, critics like Braudy have employed the word *infantile* to describe the response of the gullible genre audience. . . . If the genre audience is childlike, the genre author is procreative. . . . Hence while genre works and their critics have favoured masculine perspectives (obscuring issues of womanhood and maternity), the concept of genre has been feminized in its theorization— and subject to a series of maternal/familial metaphors. (9-10)

The masculine perspectives that Fischer critiques early genre theorists for assuming have in turn contributed to the binaries that have dominated psychoanalytic spectatorship theory.

Fischer offers that genre theorists' reliance on these maternal metaphors is ironic, given that the role of mothers in genre films has been ignored. While film theory utilizes maternal metaphors to conceptualize the genre audience, film critics often avoid analysing maternal characters in certain genres:

One finds a rather rigid view of genre and gender implicit in traditional film scholarship... Schatz links particular genres to either masculine or feminine poles. Western, gangster, and detective films are characterised

by a male hero and a “macho” ethic of violence and isolation. By contrast, musicals, melodramas and screwball comedies are “female dominant.” They are marked by a couple-hero and by a “maternal-familial” code valorising emotion, domestication, civilization and community. . . . [this] schema may encourage the critic to ignore the role of the mother in the crime film, or to miss a maternal subtext in the masculine “thriller.” (7, author’s own emphasis)

Theorizing the significance of maternal protagonists in the girl power genre is of importance because the mother-daughter relationship is central to many “women’s films.”

The contradictory nature of the films included in this study is consistent with genre theory’s frequent assertion that Hollywood films are at once unadventurous and potentially subversive. Thomas Schatz explains this “dual” nature of genre films in “The Structural Influence.” Schatz proposes that genre films are products of a “commercial, highly conventionalised popular art form” that is “subject to certain demands imposed by both the audience and the cinematic system itself” (99). Schatz argues that such films represent a society’s “desire to confront elemental conflicts inherent in modern culture while at the same time participating in the projection of an idealized collective self-image” (99). The films discussed in the following chapters fulfil certain requirements imposed according to what viewers expect from particular genres. Audience demands supposedly dictate that our most valuable and costly cultural products project an “idealized collective self-image.” The voyeuristic spectator positions that girl power movies invite viewers to partake in are one consequence of the need for genre films to reflect gendered norms. However, the fact that around fifty percent of the cinematic audience is comprised of women has led to a progressive focus in certain genres on powerful female protagonists.

“The image of an angry woman”

The women’s movement has given many things to popular culture, some more savoury than others. One of its main donations to the horror genre . . . is the image of . . . a woman so angry that she can be imagined as a credible perpetrator (I stress ‘credible’) of the kind of violence on which, in the low-mythic universe, the status of full protagonist rests.

Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*. (17)

From the final girls and monstrous women of the horror film, through the female avengers of rape-revenge, to the deadly dolls of the erotic thriller or neo-noir, the 1990s have witnessed a burgeoning interest among feminist film theorists in representations of violent and vengeful women. In their tendency to confine their analyses of these representations to specific genres, however, what these studies have failed to recognize are the continuities between these various representations and thus the way in which this apparent proliferation of deadly and dangerous women might be historically rather than generically specific.

Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers*. (22)

Because many of the movies analysed in this thesis attempt to attract female audiences by depicting strong female protagonists and their significant relationships with other women, I will continue to work with many ideas postulated by Hollinger in her study of female friendship films. Hollinger’s analysis of this genre, however, includes only the following sub-categories of films: the Sentimental Female Friendship Film; Women’s Development in the Female Friendship Film; the Political Female Friendship Film; the Erotic Female Friendship Film; Women of Colour in the Female Friendship Film; and the Anti-Female Friendship Film. Though she analyses briefly the representation of

violence and gender in *Thelma and Louise*, Hollinger does not consider in detail the representation of bonds between female characters that use violence against the men who have committed crimes against women.

“The image of an angry woman” has become an historical cinematic phenomenon, as both Read and Clover argue. In her account of women as “credible perpetrators” of violence in horror and science fiction films, Clover particularly cites the performances of Sigourney Weaver as Ripley in *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and Jamie Lee Curtis as Laurie Strode in *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) as exemplary of the feminist potential of expressions of anger in popular film. Kimberley Roberts, writing almost a decade later than Clover, cites some of the most influential media texts of the nineties as crucial to the establishment of anger as a culturally acceptable form of expression for young girls (“Pleasures and Problems of the ‘Angry Girl’”). According to Roberts, *Scream*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Sabrina the Teenaged Witch* have inspired the representation of female protagonists in many contemporary media products.

While Clover argues that the horror genre’s “angry woman” has been donated by the feminist movement, Roberts charts the reciprocal influence of nineties popular feminist movements on cinematic depictions of girlhood. Like Clover, Roberts argues that the image of the angry woman is central to Hollywood’s contemporary interpretations of feminism. Going one step further than Clover, Roberts proposes that during the late eighties and nineties an “angry girl” genre emerged, placing the rage of an adolescent girl at its heart (217). Roberts further suggests that these films reference the gender politics of the seventies sub-genre of rape revenge films. For Roberts, eighties cinema protagonists, such as Veronica Sawyer in *Heathers* (Michael Lehmann, 1989), provide the link between angry heroines in girl power movies from the seventies and a nineties popular feminist groundswell (217). According to Roberts, Winona Ryder’s performance as Veronica Sawyer in *Heathers* influences and predicts the “angry girl” genre of the nineties, where a teenage girl’s rage is expressed as a weapon against gender crimes (217). Roberts’s account of young

girls' anger has the aim of assessing "how accepting our culture has become about female power" (218). Roberts undertakes an analysis of the film *Freeway* in order to gain "a better sense of how powerful . . . a feminist youth movement can be" (218). In *Freeway*, for instance, a teenaged girl Vanessa Lutz (Reese Witherspoon) defeats a serial killer who is victimizing an underclass of prostitutes. This is a clear indication for Roberts that expressions of anger are finding an outlet in contemporary films made for and about young women. *Freeway* indicates the importance of feminism to contemporary horror and thriller narratives because Vanessa takes revenge for a serial killer's gender crimes by specifically articulating the feminist vocabularies of girl power.

Roberts additionally insists that we must not over-evaluate the impact such films might have on real teenage girls. According to Roberts, most girls learn early that Western culture expects them to suppress their rage and express themselves through more acceptable forms of femininity (219). That is, the taboo image of the angry girl violates cultural traditions to do with girlhood (Roberts 218). Within the frameworks of Roberts's argument, girls who behave aggressively transgress their expected gender behaviour and by doing so challenge the patriarchal logic of normative femininities. While *Freeway* is an excellent example of the potential the girl power genre might offer in its conventional dependence on female characters, *The Craft*, *The Hole*, *Cruel Intentions*, *The Faculty* and *Disturbing Behaviour* all demonstrate exactly how a young woman's expression of rage can be marginalized in a Hollywood film. Even *Ginger Snaps*—a fascinating werewolf film that tackles the taboo topic of menstruation—relegates its heroine's aggressively sexual behaviour to the sphere of the abject by its concluding scenes. Many girl power movies suggest other problems with the representation of young girls' anger. Roberts, for instance, offers that images of girls' rage have a voyeuristic appeal (226-7).

There is yet another complicated aspect of anger as a form of expression: the fact that violence and aggression, which are often implied by angered behaviour, have conventionally masculine attributes. Experiencing revenge

through identifying with angry women is problematic because violent activities have gendered associations. R. W. Cornell proposes that members of privileged groups use violence to maintain the status quo, and that aggression is used as a means of drawing boundaries and making exclusions in gender politics among men (*Masculinities* 84). For Cornell, violence is significant in gender politics because most episodes of brutality are “transactions among men,” such as military combat, homicide, rape and armed assault, all of which impact on women in oppressive ways (84). When women express anger in girl power movies they are utilizing the tools of patriarchal aggression: guns, knives and battery. That women must use these tools in order to express dissent is extremely problematic, as Hollinger points out:

Some filmic portrayals of female killers actually expose the prevalence of male violence against women by having their female killers act in response to male abuse. Others are merely sensationalist portrayals of female violence that contribute to the conservative backlash against women’s achievements by converting female self-assertion into an unruly spectacle of female aggression. (115-6)

However, Roberts’s point that there is something empowering in these cultural artefacts because they impress such a large number of young girls is crucial.

There is more to these girl power products than a marketing scheme designed by large corporations to cash in on girls’ economic power and the voyeuristic appeal of images of angry women. Girls’ expressions of anger in cinema convey that contemporary women are re-working feminist ideas. Roberts contends that girls today are well aware that their concerns are frequently overlooked in the academic discourses of feminism, and that older women have often ignored them as subjects (220). Though teenage girls today may conceptualise their identities differently from older feminists, one of the most important principles of early feminism— group solidarity— is expressed in many contemporary portrayals of angry women and girls (Roberts 220).² It is the representation of group solidarity that characterizes the progressive tendencies of

² I will discuss the concept of “solidarity” again later in this chapter.

many films in this study— in particular, *The Gift*, *The Cell*, *What Lies Beneath*, *Josie and the Pussycats* (Harry Elfont and Deborah Kaplan, 2001) and *Legally Blonde* (Robert Luketic, 2001). Roberts, therefore, identifies the two contradictory aspects of filmic angry women:

As with most media-hyped phrases . . . girl power is multivalent. It has absorbed everything from girls' friendships to their fashion sense. In fact, its commercial capital has so defined it that the intersection between philosophy and consumerism is very blurred indeed. In terms of its relationship to actual teenage girls, girl power . . . signals their emergence as a powerful economic force. (220)

Images of angry women play a part within a feminist movement that is continually reinventing itself but also have a place in commercialised culture.

“The Teenpic”

Motion pictures today are not a mass medium . . . movies cater primarily to one segment of the entertainment audience: teenagers. Without the support of the teenage audience, few theatrical movies break even, fewer still become hits, and none become blockbusters. In America, movies reflect teenage, not mass— and definitely not adult— tastes.

Thomas Doherty, *The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*. (1)

Academic and popular texts have debated the significance of various articulations of teenage subjectivity in cinema since the term was coined during the post-war era. Throughout the late nineteen-fifties it was apparent that Hollywood needed to market products that would appeal to teenagers because they had the leisure time and disposable income to attend films more frequently than adults or children. Hollywood had all but recovered from its most serious recession since the Great Depression by the late sixties, due to an expanding youth audience. From the nineteen-sixties onwards, marketing strategies initiated

what Doherty has described as a “progressive ‘juvenilization’ of film content and film audience” (3). Doherty contends that “prior to the mid-1950s, movies were the mass medium of choice for a heterogeneous, multi-generational audience” (1). The “juvenilization” of the Hollywood industry has come to dictate the market’s economics. As a matter of sheer fiscal necessity, filmmakers during the fifties and sixties coveted the one demographic that would travel to movie theatres for entertainment (Doherty 3). Teenagers were therefore enticed to drive-ins and new suburban multiplexes to watch films made specifically for them. According to Doherty, youth audiences shaped the content of most mainstream movies during the sixties and seventies, and in part the Hollywood “renaissance” of the late sixties and seventies was due to a new reliance on teenagers (13-14).

The emergence of the low-budget exploitation film, which paralleled and influenced the formation of today’s “teenpic” genre, allowed rebellious philosophies to flourish in popular culture. By the sixties, the term “exploitation” had come to signify movies with controversial or bizarre subject matter that might be open to promotion (Doherty 8-10). Exploitation films thrived with substandard budgets and came to be renowned for attracting a teenage audience of “uncontrolled” juveniles and “undesirables” (Doherty 8-10). These films were soon prominently associated with youth audiences and the term “exploitation” was quickly attached to any controversial film that targeted young viewers. Today the term is also used to describe films that emphasize explicitly sexual content at the expense of narrative depth. Four films discussed in this thesis that have been described as exploitative, according to both definitions, are *Cruel Intentions*, *Wild Things*, *Single White Female* and *Bound*.

The increasing prominence of “teenpics” has also been connected to developments in the horror and thriller genres during the fifties, sixties and seventies. The popularity of Britain’s Hammer Horror Films, according to Doherty, “fathered the most prolific and durable of all ‘50s exploitation cycles—the horror teenpic” (142). While the popularity of horror “teenpics” highlighted

the importance of teenaged audiences to the Hollywood industry as a whole and the horror genre in particular, it additionally signalled the economic success of hybrid genres. For instance, during the late fifties, American International Pictures released classic horror films, science fiction horror films, comedic horror films, musical horror films and Western horror films (Doherty 146). Low budget “weirdie” films further demonstrated the economic efficacy of the hybrid genre. Doherty’s explanation for the popularity of “weirdies” with teenagers succinctly conveys the appeal of films that combined horror themes with a subject matter that references the experiences of adolescents:

Having better reason than most to feel kinship with malformed and hyperthyroidic humans, teenagers were faithful followers of and sympathetic to the plight of the hormonally disadvantaged; their own biological state must have seemed equivalently capricious and uncontrollable. (146)

Sexual undercurrents in “weirdies” influenced depictions of teenagers in many “hormonal” horror films— for example, *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (Gene Fowler, 1957).

Horror “teenpics” and “weirdies” from the forties, fifties and sixties in turn contributed to later representations of teenaged protagonists in “scary movies,” particularly in the babysitter “slasher” films of the seventies and eighties. As Miriam Brunell notes in “Maternity, Murder, and Monsters: Legends of Babysitter Horror,” many “slasher” films signalled cultural anxieties about the growing economic and social powers of young female consumers. “Slasher” films are themselves given satirical treatment in nineties girl power films, such as the *Scream* movies, *Disturbing Behaviour*, *The Faculty* and *Freeway*. These films all self-consciously convey cultural concerns about disciplining hormonal, rebellious teenagers. Fictional accounts of the unruly behaviours of the “baby-boom” generation have markedly influenced today’s portrayals of youth culture in film. However, recently produced girl power movies which reinvent attributes of the films Doherty labels as “teenpics” are not simply about teenagers rebelling against adult discipline and the homogeneity of small-town America. Rather,

many contemporary “teenpics,” such as *The Faculty*, *Disturbing Behaviour* and *Cruel Intentions*, affirm dominant ideologies beneath a veneer of rebellion.

Just as the late fifties was a key point at which the horror genre became associated with exploitation films aimed at a youth market, the eighties has been widely acknowledged as another zenith in the popularity of “teenpics.” The box-office success of John Hughes’s films, particularly those starring Molly Ringwald, lends credence to this fact. *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Pretty in Pink* (1986) portray teenaged girls as protagonists but also, according to Anne De Vaney’s “Pretty in Pink,” “reinscribe patriarchal values” and “the “rule of the father” (201-2). Like De Vaney, Roberts argues that the “girl power” movement of the nineties is a “manifestation of a decade-long fascination with teenage girls and girlish things,” a fascination that perhaps was at its most momentous during the cycle of Hughes-penned films that captured the allure of Ringwald (218). Ringwald’s popularity during the eighties is indicative of the increasing commercial appeal of images of girlhood.

The fact that young women are being catered to so significantly in Hollywood films today attests to the necessity of an in-depth study of recent portrayals of female protagonists in popular culture. While this dissertation focuses on one loosely defined film genre, the feminist aspect of youth culture that Roberts, Clover and Read outline can be evidenced in all forms of media. Girl bands, contemporary “teenpics” and television programmes about teenage girls all suggest that there are pervasive connections between teenaged and feminist subjectivities. The kinds of teen identities that the popular media have been fascinated with over the last decade endow adolescent girls with powers (often supernatural) and the ability to protect themselves from all kinds of monsters. *Scream*, *Freeway*, *Legally Blonde* and *Josie and the Pussycats* demonstrate the profitability of products that target young women as consumers but also draw attention to our shifting definitions for gender roles.

What is at stake then?

Instead of simply reformulating the question, “Who or what is responsible for conflicts within feminism?” we might consider a new one: “To what extent do homosocial group formations like ‘feminism’ *rely* on antagonism and its associated images, metaphors, and paradigms of aggression.

Sianne Ngai, “Rethinking Gender and Envy.” (186, author’s own emphasis)

I have relied thus far on an argument that places “group solidarity” at the forefront of feminism, an idea I have in part inherited from Roberts’s analysis of “girl power” in the media. However, I believe that Roberts’s line of reasoning here is somewhat problematic because she refers to contemporary feminist theory’s acknowledgement of the diversity of women only in passing. An argument that wholly relies on the premise of feminist solidarity could contribute to an effacement of these developments in feminist theory. In ongoing research, feminists such as Robyn Wiegman, Gayatri Spivak and bell hooks have affirmed the importance of sexual preferences and socio-economic, ethnic, racial, regional and national differences to feminist scholarship. Because this dissertation relies on a feminist account of contemporary films, it is consequently inappropriate to begin without acknowledging the differences and as Ngai would have it, antagonisms, within feminism.

Ngai explains the importance of recognizing the conflicts and inequalities within feminism in her analysis of *Single White Female*:

With its hyperbolic use of violence in depicting conflicts between women, perhaps *Single White Female* does have something to offer . . . particularly since this violence becomes most concentrated in the film’s main narrative events: the uneasy transition from ‘single’ femaleness to a dual or compounded version of gendered identity. It is precisely this transition— one motivated and facilitated by aggression— that the film

is ultimately 'about,' the site and stake of the female-female struggle on which its plot depends. (186)

As Ngai maintains here, feminist scholarship has much to learn from examining aggression as it is expressed in media products. Though few films analysed in this dissertation convincingly depict any real intersections of "difference," they still deal with the difficult relationships that exist between women. Such films are crucial to popular feminism's struggle to admit to the "compoundedness" of gender identity. Any study of girl power, therefore, must necessarily consider to what extent cultural artefacts contribute to developments, contradictions and conflicts in popular and academic feminism. However, though contemporary feminist thought theorizes the multiple subjectivities of contemporary women, much of feminist theory still asserts that women have much to learn from understanding each other's experiences.

bell hooks, for example, proposes that the feminist movement "cannot effectively resist patriarchal domination" without "solidarity." Women, she contends, remain "estranged and alienated from one another" if they do not attempt to understand that the feminist struggle is fought by women from many different backgrounds ("Feminism: A Transformational Politic" 436):

Working collectively to confront difference, to expand our awareness of sex, race, and class as interlocking systems of domination, of the ways we reinforce and perpetuate these structures, is the context in which we learn the true meaning of solidarity. It is this work that must be the foundation of the feminist movement. (436)

For hooks, solidarity involves "critical encounters," and she suggests that the feminist movement should allow women to open themselves up to "the unknown and unfamiliar" (436). Using hook's concept of solidarity, this thesis attempts to read expressions of feminism in women's filmic encounters with one another and in their struggles with patriarchal forces.

* * *

Chapters One and Two in the dissertation analyse the extent to which contemporary “slasher” films re-work the idea of the “slasher” final girl. In Chapter One, I outline how Wes Craven’s *Scream* movies focus on a dualistic feminist identity via the characters Gale Weathers (Courteney Cox) and Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell). The *Scream* movies reference their horror genre predecessors and demonstrate the importance of scary movies within the girl power genre. The *Scream* trilogy testifies to the fact that the horror genre, with its ability to produce sequels, may just as easily concentrate its attention on female heroes as a male villain. Sidney and Gale’s angry destruction of their male stalkers is crucial to the pleasures that viewers of the *Scream* films experience. This lends force to the argument that many contemporary girl power movies encourage identification with groups of women rather than with individuals, as Clover maintains.

Chapter Two assesses contemporary horror “teenpics” *The Faculty*, *Disturbing Behaviour*, *Ginger Snaps* and *The Hole*. The celebration of youthful resistance to discipline in *The Faculty* and *Disturbing Behaviour* is not simply expressed in depictions of teenagers defying adult authority, but also in the (temporary) agency given to female protagonists Stokely (Clea Du Vall) and Rachel (Katie Holmes). Both characters, however, abandon their initial resistance to normative “femininity” by the end of each film. Stokely and Rachel can be read as strong female protagonists but not as comments on the disciplines that women must subject their bodies to. *The Hole* and *Ginger Snaps* tackle similar themes in the portrayal of monstrous girls. Both films depict adolescents’ experiences of sexual maturation and the familial, educational and cultural disciplines that contemporary youth are subjected to. Teenaged protagonists in the two independent productions struggle to reign in their pubescent desires and in each narrative the active sexuality of an adolescent girl is portrayed as deviant. *The Hole* and *Ginger Snaps* demonstrate what might come to pass when the lust of a teenaged girl escapes the appropriate disciplines.

Wild Things and *Cruel Intentions* also document the repressive social rules and disciplines that teenage girls must negotiate in their everyday lives. Chapter Three considers what feminist scholarship has to gain by examining the role of teenage tricksters in neo-noir and the erotic thriller. *Wild Things* and *Cruel Intentions* represent teenage girls who are seeking revenge for gender crimes in a manner that might be compared to Vanessa Lutz's vengeance in *Freeway* and Sidney and Gale's defiant self-defence in the *Scream* trilogy. While *Cruel Intentions* portrays two perspectives on the paths that teenage girls might follow in the search for power and social acceptance, it only condones one route: that of obedience and sexual abstinence. A girl's transgressive behaviour in *Cruel Intentions* is openly exposed by the film's conclusion and she is rigorously rebuked and publicly humiliated for seeking vengeance. However, Suzie Toller (Neve Campbell) in *Wild Things* is granted ample revenge for the gender crimes committed in her community and the film concludes as she escapes with a veritable fortune embezzled from a rich heiress.

Chapter Four proposes that Vanessa in *Freeway* and Catherine (Jennifer Lopez) in *The Cell* can be read as progressive avenging protagonists. Vanessa and Catherine punish the men who attempt to victimize them, men who have also raped and murdered many other women. Vanessa's revenge in *Freeway* does not stop with serial rapist and murderer Bob Wolverton (Keifer Sutherland). Just as she avenges Bob's violence against women, Vanessa shows prejudiced detectives their errors and punishes a man who attempts to solicit sex from her with no intention of paying the agreed price. Catherine in *The Cell* similarly encounters the rigid worldviews of men who represent institutional power; in this case, the attitudes exhibited by an investigative team tracking a prolific serial killer (Vincent D'Onofrio). Catherine murders this killer, Stargher, to prevent him from harming more women when she deduces that he is beyond curing of his predilection for killing young women and that institutional methods for punishing him are ineffective. Catherine and Vanessa are strong women who are unwilling to stand for patriarchal violence, and both work outside institutional law in order to avenge the crimes of men against women.

Chapter Five examines the representation of feminine spirituality in *The Craft* (Andrew Flemming, 1996), *What Lies Beneath* (Robert Zemeckis, 2000) and *The Gift* (Sam Raimi, 2000). Alternative spiritualities are empowering and enlightening for communities of women in all three films. Young girls in *The Craft*, however, are castigated for not seeking the guidance of an authority when negotiating their newfound magical abilities. Moreover, ideological religious vocabulary is eventually used to articulate the morals of a wiccan spirituality in *The Craft*. In contrast, *The Gift* and *What Lies Beneath* portray a kind of feminist justice in opposition to institutional law. The protagonist's terror is derived from within the family institution in *What Lies Beneath* and communal institutions are represented as corrupt and ineffectual in *The Gift*. While women are convinced to be mistrustful of institutional ideologies in *The Gift* and *What Lies Beneath*, *The Craft*'s conclusion affirms patriarchal power.

In Chapter Six I argue that the thrillers *Single White Female* and *Bound* share lesbian themes but are quite dissimilar in their representations of lesbian sexuality. *Bound* sympathetically depicts the lesbian relationship of two women, Corky and Violet (Gina Gershon and Jennifer Tilly), as they concoct a scam to double-cross Violet's mafia boyfriend, Caesar (Joe Pantoliano). *Single White Female* contrastingly treats lesbian desire as deviant in order to develop its "slasher" plot. *Single White Female* affirms its conservative estimation of lesbian desire in its suggestion that forgiveness and compromises may be acceptable within the bounds of a heterosexual relationship but not in a close friendship between women. With *Bound*, however, the assumption that a scam performed by a lesbian couple is doomed to failure is eventually proven questionable. Contrary to expectations, Corky and Violet succeed in their scheme to outwit the mob. Just as Suzie Toller's revenge is celebrated in *Wild Things*, Violet and Corky's vengeance is fulfilled in *Bound* and their transgressions go unpunished.

Chapter Seven examines the representation of mother-child relationships in *The Others*, *Panic Room* and *The Deep End*. Like their horror and thriller

predecessors, these films reinvent many stereotypes about the female-victim. All three films depict single-parent families led by strong mothers: these women eventually perform proficiently in extreme circumstances and without the assistance of their husbands. Fathers in *The Others*, *Panic Room* and *The Deep End* all somehow fail their families and this contributes to the strengthening of mother-child relationships. In these films, women take measures to protect their families and by doing so gain the respect of their children. Though protagonists Grace, Meg and Margaret are not perfect women, audiences are specifically encouraged to understand the tasks that they must perform to protect their children from the evils of the world. Their male counterparts, however, are lost in an environment where their families are threatened and prove to be helpless just as their wives are capable. I contend in this final chapter that the gendered binaries that have characterised parenthood in film are becoming increasingly permeable and fluid in many girl power movies.

Maternal protagonists in *The Deep End*, *The Others* and *Panic Room* demonstrate what is “at stake” in this thesis: that the portrayal of feminine subjectivity in Hollywood films reflects the extent to which girl power movies are re-working the premises of academic feminism. *The Others* and *Panic Room*, for instance, conclude only when intimate mother-daughter relationships are re-established. Both films assert the feminist tenet that women of different generations have much to learn from accepting and respecting each other’s worldviews. Mother-daughter relationships in *The Others* and *Panic Room* convey that while generational conflicts exist within feminism, the potential for a strong counter-cultural feminist movement is still real. While the expression of communal feminist ideologies in contemporary film undoubtedly has its limitations, academic scholarship to date rarely acknowledges that today’s girl power movies might provide a space where individualist politics are transcended. Girl power movies that continue to depict communities of active and powerful female protagonists provide an arena for women and girls to re-assess cultural assumptions about them as consumers and subjects.

CHAPTER 1

The *Scream* Movies: Gender, Sexuality, and Authorship

RANDY. This is where the supposedly dead killer comes
back to life for one last scare.

SIDNEY. Not in my movie.

Scream.

This is Gale Weathers with an exclusive eyewitness account of this amazing breaking story. Several more teens are dead, bringing to an end the harrowing mystery of the mass killing that has terrified this peaceful community like the plot of some scary movie. It all began with a Scream over 911 and ended in a bloodbath that has rocked the Woodsboro world, all played out in this peaceful farmhouse, far from the crimes and sirens of the larger cities that its residents fled.

Gale Weathers, *Scream.*

Carol Clover has famously maintained that horror films invite identification across gender lines. The *Scream* movies (Wes Craven, 1996, 1997, 2000) testify to the fact that the horror genre, with its ability to produce sequels, may just as easily focus its attention on female heroes as a male villain. *Scream* is narrated by Gale Weathers (Courteney Cox) and Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell) and “belongs” to these two women. Spectatorship is mediated by the presence of two strong female protagonists in *Scream*, *Scream 2* and *Scream 3*. Sidney and Gale triumph over their stalkers in *Scream* and continue to drive narrative development in the two sequels. Both women struggle to live through repeated attacks from stalker-killers in all three films and their paths continually cross. Though they at first dislike each other, Sidney and Gale learn to work together to survive. This lends force to the argument that many contemporary

girl power movies encourage identification with groups of women rather than with individuals. The purpose of this chapter is to build on theories of spectatorship, and to discuss the identificatory positions that the *Scream* films offer.

Early spectatorship theorists argue that cinematic images leave female viewers with no option other than identifying with the plight of a terrorised, passive female victim. For instance, Laura Mulvey argues that cinema is structured around a three-tiered male gaze—the active and masculine gaze of the male character, the camera and the male spectator (1975). Mulvey therefore proposes that women are passive and masochistic spectators. Mulvey contends that cinematic identification with “the camera” and “the character of empathic choice” is structured around a relationship between masochistic and sadistic viewing. According to Mulvey, the cinematic look is organized around defending against a woman’s “castration.” Here, Mulvey divides the masculine cinematic gaze into two “looks”: “a sadistic-voyeuristic look, whereby the gazer salves his unpleasure at female lack by seeing the woman punished, and a fetishistic-scopophilic look, whereby the gazer salves his unpleasure by fetishizing the female body in whole or in part” (Clover 7-8). As Clover outlines, contemporary films have less to do with these basic viewing categories than does classical Hollywood cinema. That women may gain pleasure from viewing horror films invites a closer examination of the spectatorship processes offered by violent films.

Clover argues that the horror genre (especially the seventies and eighties horror sub-category of “slasher” films) is dependent on the resourcefulness of its female protagonists—“final girls.” Against those cultural commentators who condemn horror films for the victimisation of women, Clover demonstrates that these female protagonists are also “heroes.” Opponents of scary movies often argue that horror protagonists need to be rescued because of their inability to adequately defend themselves. While there is a fetishistic pleasure derived from viewing the female victim in today’s horror films, a

fetishization of the female body is less important to the narrative of horror's girl power movies than the destruction of male killers. Sidney and Gale's triumph over their male stalkers is crucial to the pleasures available to viewers of the *Scream* films.

Clover proposes that viewers of "slasher" films experience more complicated identificatory processes than those outlined by Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Clover contends that "slasher" spectators experience pleasure via identification with the heroic female protagonist whose final act is to destroy the killer. This contradicts Mulvey's theory of the three-tiered "male gaze." Clover suggests that although horror films do "spend a lot of time looking at women" in ways that "seem well described by Mulvey's 'sadistic-voyeuristic' gaze," scary movies are popular with female audiences (8). In answer to this dilemma Clover argues that women are attracted to viewing scary movies because female protagonists in these films are not helpless victims but instead active heroes with whom all spectators might identify (8-9). For Clover, this "raises questions about film theory's original assumption that the cinematic apparatus is organized around the experience of a mastering, voyeuristic gaze" (8-9). Male viewers, according to Clover, watch large parts of slasher films through the eyes of a female "victim" and are therefore viewing "in drag."

Mary Ann Doane argues in "Subjectivity and Desire" that spectatorship theories following from Mulvey's paradigm remain embedded in the repressive gendered binaries that feminist film criticism has endeavoured to combat:

There seems to be general agreement, however, that the terms *femininity* and *masculinity*, *female spectatorship* and *male spectatorship*, do not refer to actual members of cinema audiences or do so in a highly mediated fashion. Women spectators oscillate or alternate between masculine and feminine positions (as de Lauretis points out, identification is a process not a state), and men are capable of this alternation as well. This is simply to emphasize once again that

feminine and masculine positions are not fully coincident with actual men and women. Nevertheless, men and women enter the movie theatre as social subjects who have been compelled to align themselves in some way with respect to one of the reigning binary oppositions (that of sexual difference) which order the social field. (162, author's own emphasis).

Clover thesis attempts to blur the binary oppositions of Mulvey's identificatory model—the binaries which Doane critiques here—in that it theorizes horror spectatorship as a fluid oscillation between identifications with variously gendered characters.

Clover suggests that the fluid identificatory processes experienced by horror spectators who identify with strong female protagonists blur the boundaries that have characterised binary historical constructs for masculinity and femininity. For instance, the “two-flesh model,” Clover argues, “construes male and female as ‘opposite’” (13). Clover also elaborates on our “prefabricated and predictable” categories for “monster,” “victim” and “hero”:

The functions of monster and hero are far more frequently represented by males and the function of victim far more garishly by females. The fact that female monsters and female heroes, when they do appear, are masculine in dress and behaviour (and often even in name), and that male victims are shown in feminine postures at the moment of their extremity, would seem to suggest that gender inheres in the function itself—that there is something about the victim function that wants expression in a female. (12-13)

The *Scream* movies provide many examples of a gendered construction of victim and monster, particularly in the characterisation of Randy (Jamie Kennedy), Mr. Prescott (Lawrence Hecht) and Dewey (David Arquette) as victims, and Mrs Loomis (Laurie Metcalf) as killer. These characters demonstrate that Hollywood products represent male victims as feminine and female killers as masculine. The characters Gale, Sidney and, to a lesser degree, Tatum (Rose Mc Gowan), however, allow for a different kind of transgendered spectatorship.

Sidney and Gale are represented as independent heroes who save others and survive all three films. “Final girl” Sidney in *Scream* fights capably in order to save her father and then to eventually rescue Randy and Dewey. By doing so, Sidney emphasizes the “femininity” of all three men: Randy, Dewey and Mr. Prescott are helpless victims and need to be rescued. As *Scream*’s sequels reveal, Dewey, Randy and Mr. Prescott are characters that are also incapable of “getting the girl,” as is usually expected of men who survive violence in Hollywood products. Unlike the franchise horror films that Clover analyses, such as *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980), *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), where continuity throughout sequels is represented by a monstrous male killer, the *Scream* movies have their constant in active female protagonists Sidney and Gale (and to an extent the feminized character Dewey). The *Scream* films depict killers as mortal and incapable, which departs from the “slasher” tradition of the undying killer. In direct contrast, Sidney and Gale are resourceful and survive in all three films.

The pleasure spectators experience in identifying with Gale and Sidney is heightened because both women are isolated from institutional support in their battles to survive. Clover identifies many historical films from the “slasher” genre in which leading women overcome their male predators without the help of social institutions, such as the family, the judicial system, or the police force.¹ *Scream* pays tribute to these “slasher” films by staging a “party scene” alongside a visual and aural commentary on seventies “slasher” films. *Halloween* is playing on video while the killers, Billy and Stuart, stalk their victims and are in turn stalked themselves.² Laurie has moments of resourcefulness in *Halloween* as she faces her would-be killer without the assistance of the local police force. Sidney, however, is consistently capable as she turns the tables on her male predators in *Scream*. Sidney takes vengeance on her stalkers during *Scream*’s

¹ These “slashers” include *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978), *The Stepfather* (Joseph Ruben, 1986), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) and *Halloween*.

² A further intertextual reference in *Scream* that revises slasher traditions is the naming of Sidney’s boyfriend as Billy Loomis. This of course references Michael Myers’s nemesis Dr. Loomis (Donald Pleasence) in *Halloween*.

party scene by calling them on a mobile phone and using their voice-altering mechanism to inform them that she has just called the police. She then takes up the role of stalker herself, dons the killers' mask and cape and clutches a sharply pointed umbrella as a weapon. At the same time, we are presented with contrasting images of Laurie in *Halloween*, cowering in a closet, hiding from her own stalker. Although Laurie does manage to fend off Michael Myers (Tony Moran) in *Halloween* this becomes a temporary resolution: her stalker survives his bullet wounds and runs away into the night, only to return in the sequel and kill again, this time more prodigiously. Furthermore, Laurie needs help from Dr Loomis, who shoots Michael as he rises unexpectedly to have another go at claiming her as his victim. In contrast, Sidney needs no vigilante doctor or police force to overcome her stalkers; she kills them herself (with a little help from Gale Weathers) and she kills them for good.

While *Halloween* concludes with a point-of-view shot from Michael Myers's perspective as he watches Laurie, *Scream* concludes with Gale's media report of the Woodsboro murders. This places the narrative resolution within Sidney and Gale's perspectives. The camera soars upwards and the film concludes with a bird's eye view of the Woodsboro community as Gale completes the report; however, her voiceover ties the narrative threads together and finishes the film. The high angle view of Woodsboro does suggest a kind of insecurity (by implying that an omnipotent force looks down upon Gale's world) but this closing image is distinct from the uncertainty insinuated in *Halloween*'s concluding shot. The generic tradition of open endings is emphasized in *Halloween* via the perspective of a sadistic killer. Myers remains behind a bush, gazing at his victim as she is carted off by Haddonfield's institutional agencies. While *Halloween* accentuates the voyeuristic power of its male murderer in order to imply uncertainty, Gale and Sidney's agency is verified in *Scream*'s final moments as they are depicted as successful in defending themselves and helping each other to survive.

References to “slasher” themes also serve to problematise conventional cinematic gender roles in *Scream*. Andrew Tudor discusses contemporary “slasher” protagonists:

Female protagonists are more significant in the modern genre, and . . . are permitted more autonomy and resourcefulness than were the ‘heroines’ of earlier films. . . . Jamie Lee Curtis and Sigourney Weaver respectively, are afforded a degree of effective participation in the action all but unheard of prior to the seventies. (qtd. in *Men, Women and Chainsaws* 127)

While Sigourney Weaver and Jamie Lee Curtis play aggressive and capable protagonists in *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and *Halloween*, their characters still reflect the nature of gender as it is played out in Hollywood productions. The characters Laurie and Ripley survive male aggression and are not powerless victims; however, both fall victim to Hollywood conventions that dictate the fetishization of women’s bodies. As characters, Laurie and Ripley are vigorously subjected to voyeuristic camera techniques (for example, during *Alien*’s final scene Ripley unnecessarily strips to her underwear). The characters Sidney and Gale, though subject to many of the same cinematic conventions that place women in the role of victims, are more active, autonomous and resourceful. Moreover, we frequently view things from Gale and Sidney’s perspectives.

Isabel Cristina Pineda sums up the importance of the protagonists’ abilities to fight with “courage, resourcefulness, intelligence and competence” in *Scream*, while maintaining control over camera perspectives:

The surviving female’s appropriation of the gaze enables her to use violence to defend herself effectively and to drive the narrative forward. We see *him* from *her* point of view. Indeed, the transition from the killer’s point of view to the surviving female’s point of view, which increases progressively in the second part of the film, is a pivotal shift that motivates audience identification with the surviving female. This shift in perspective culminates in the protracted struggle between the surviving female and the killer. (*Recreational Terror* 76)

The *Scream* films motivate “audience identification with the surviving female” by representing Gale and Sidney as characters that maintain “the power of a cinematic gaze.” There are few moments where the camera digresses from Gale and Sidney’s viewpoints as they are stalked by their would-be killers. The killer’s gaze in *Halloween*— accompanied by heavy breathing and frenetic movement— is emphasized; in *Scream*, point-of-view shots are dominated by Sidney and Gale’s steady perspectives as they creatively think through survival tactics.

One scene in *Scream* specifically demonstrates that Sidney is capable of disempowering her would-be killers. During this scene, Sidney uses her satirical knowledge of scary movies to belittle the killer. Sidney receives a phone-call while she is waiting for her friend Tatum to arrive at her remote home and it is soon apparent that her stalker is on the other end of the line. When the killer asks her if she “likes scary movies,” Sidney assumes it is another of her friends, Randy, and mocks her stalker’s attempts to intimidate her: “you know I don’t watch that shit. They’re all the same. It’s always some stupid killer stalking some big-breasted girl— who can’t act— who always runs up the stairs when she should be running out the front door. It’s insulting.” As the scene progresses, Sidney enacts all of the classic behaviours of the horror protagonists she despises: she continues to talk to the killer instead of calling the police, she goes outside rather than lock the front door and she runs upstairs when she cannot open the front door in her panic. However, Sidney still outwits the killer by jamming her bedroom door against a closet so that that the killer may not enter and when she finds the phone disconnected she contacts “9-1-1” on the net. Sidney reacts intelligently and her stalker is forced to flee. Here Sidney’s role is somewhat dualistic: she is at once impractical victim and capable hero. Though Sidney is a resourceful final girl, she is also a generic stereotype.

The concluding scenes of *Scream* (where Sidney’s survival techniques are contrasted with Laurie’s in *Halloween*) indicate that, as Clover proposes,

horror filmmakers might indeed read Freud.³ Sidney's retaliation when faced with the violence of her stalkers is specifically sexual. Sidney hints at the sexual nature of violence by calling the "thing" the killer is doing with his voice "sexy" when he calls her for the first time. Sidney's stalker also runs the blade of his knife across her breasts in an erotic manner during this scene. Moreover, the parallels that are drawn between the movie's "obligatory" sex scene, where Sidney loses her virginity to Billy, and his two deaths (one staged, and the other for real) are striking. While *Scream*'s sex scene allows the audience no opportunity to witness a "climax," the scenes depicting Billy's death employ phallic imagery. Billy and Sidney's intercourse is edited so that we see very little nudity and although we are promised the "obligatory tit shot" via Randy's parallel commentary on *Halloween*, this promise is not fulfilled. The absence of nudity in *Scream*'s "sex scene" accentuates the sexualized methods Sidney ultimately uses to defeat her stalkers.

Sidney is a powerful opponent to her stalkers during the film's concluding scenes. Each time the killer assaults her or attempts to strangle, strike, or stab her, she bites, strikes and kicks back at him, as the amplified noises on the soundtrack indicate. However, it is when Sidney discovers the identity of her stalkers that her self-defence becomes expressly sexual and phallic. When Billy explains how he faked his own murder, he outlines the sexual aspect to his attempt to kill Sidney. Billy mentions the fact that he used corn syrup for blood, the "same stuff they used for pig's blood in *Carrie*." In *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976), there are connections between pig's blood and menstruation and between menstruation and Carrie's telekinetic powers. Just as Carrie's telekinetic powers are derived from the onset of her menses and the development of her pubescent sexuality, Sidney's powerful retaliation against her would-be murderers is connected to her first experience of heterosexual

³ Clover writes, "to judge from their interviews, people like Romero and Craven are acutely aware that they are trafficking in the "repressed" and by their own account have plumbed their best movies from their own worst nightmares and fantasies . . . at least some directors read Freud" (232). And then in her footnotes: "[horror directors] read film criticism and theory. I am told of three instances in which the directors of slasher films made adjustments in their work in response to reading the separately published version of chapter 1 of this book" (232).

intercourse. The parallels between Carrie's sexual maturation and Sidney's introduction to (hetero)sexual intercourse are emphasized by Billy's references to *Carrie*.

Billy refers to the fetishization of blood in *Carrie* when he connects his own faked death to the staging of Carrie's final humiliation at the school prom. Stephen King (the writer of the novel from which the film version of *Carrie* is adapted) summarizes the role of blood in the identificatory processes that viewers of the "slasher" genre partake in. As Clover points out, King implies that adolescent boys link Carrie's pain to their own experience of sexualized humiliation:

Carrie is largely about how women find their own channels of power, and what men fear about women and women's sexuality. . . . Carrie White is a sadly misused teenager, an example of the sort of person whose spirit is so often broken for good in that pit of man-and-woman-eaters that is your normal suburban high school. But she's also Woman, feeling her powers for the first time. (qtd. in *Men, Women and Chain Saws* 4)

When Carrie is sloshed with pig's blood during her high school prom, her anguish is experienced by adolescent spectators who empathize with her. In Clover's work, male viewers who identify with Carrie's humiliations participate in the discovery of a feminine sexuality. Carrie's developing sexual maturity, which brings her new "powers," is comparable to Laurie's experience of empowerment in *Halloween* and Sidney's resourcefulness in *Scream*. In all three narratives violent action takes place on a night where female protagonists experience a sexual coming-of-age.

When Billy uses *Psycho*'s key line, "we all go a little mad sometimes," he further outlines the sexual undercurrent to his blood references. Billy hints at the relationship between his own overwhelming sexuality and the women in his life by aligning himself with Norman Bates in *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960). Norman Bates's split identity incorporates the personality of his late mother and

this triggers murderous urges directed at the women he is sexually attracted to. Billy, like Norman Bates, has homicidal tendencies that are derived from his relationship with his mother. Billy's sexual subjectivity is expressed through his loathing of his mother's sexual relationships. The following passage from *Scream* reveals Billy's maternal "issues":

BILLY. We did your Mom a favour, Sid. The woman was a slut bag whore who flashed her shit all over town like she was Sharon Stone or something.

STU. So we put her out of her misery. I mean, let's face it, your Mom was no Sharon Stone.

BILLY. Is that motive enough for you? Or how about this? Did you know your slut mother was sleeping with my dad and she's the reason my Mom moved out and deserted me.

SIDNEY. What?

BILLY. Think about it. On the off chance I get caught, a motive like that could divide a jury for years, don't you think? You took my mother, so I took yours. Big sympathy factor. Maternal abandonment causes serious deviant behaviour. It certainly fucked you up. It made you have sex with a psychopath.

STU. That's right, and now that you're no longer a virgin you gotta die— those are the rules.

Billy is disgusted by women that behave "like Sharon Stone" and we may assume here that he is referring to Stone as the type of sexually aggressive woman she plays in *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992). Billy cannot bear his knowledge of his parents' sexual activity, especially the fact that his father is obviously attracted to Mrs. Prescott's supposedly deviant, promiscuous conduct. Billy's violent behaviour, which is related to his relationship with his parents and his sexual attraction to Sidney, could be fruitfully analysed within the frameworks of Freud's studies of psychosexual development.

Psychoanalytic concepts such as "fixation" and the "Oedipus complex" endow the scenes where Billy and Stuart outline their murderous plans to Sidney

with excessive meaning. “Fixation”— an investment in a phase in Freudian psychosexual development which prevents the subject from developing further— occurs when a child’s developmental experience has been traumatic.⁴ A common characteristic of “fixation” for Freud is an “unnatural” obsession with a parent. Fixation might also be related to the phallus: “A phallically fixated boy may grow into a man who proudly and aggressively uses his penis to penetrate and dominate rather than make love. In all aspects of his life he may use his personality in the same way he uses his penis. He is apt to devalue women and take pride in his masculine superiority” (Kahn 50). “The Oedipus Complex” describes a child’s longing for an intimate connection with the parent of the opposite sex. Freud argues that our mental health depends on an ability to relinquish these feelings but that they remain in part in our unconscious minds (Kahn 57). Freud alleges that the “well-adjusted” heterosexual adolescent boy comes to identify with his father and abandons his incestuous desire for his mother by unconsciously determining to find himself a girl (Kahn 77).⁵

Billy and Stuart’s plan to implicate Sidney’s father (by stabbing each other so as to appear to have been victims) develops these Freudian themes. The way that Billy and Stuart stab each other is homoerotic. They each hold a knife at groin level and aim just above the crotch. Though the representation of a knife penetrating flesh and creating a wound is in itself phallic, Billy and Stuart’s use of knives holds further significance. Prior to this scene the sexual nature of the phallic weapon is outlined when Sidney is first attacked— Billy seductively drags the knife across her chest and face, highlighting the erotic aspect of the attack. The sexualised language that Billy and Stuart use while they stab each other is also noteworthy: while Stuart is waiting for Billy to stab him he shouts,

⁴ My Freudian analysis here is informed by Michael Kahn’s *Basic Freud: Psychoanalytic Thought for the 21st Century* (40-77).

⁵ In *The New Avengers*, Jacinda Read argues that spectatorship theory has relied too heavily on these psychoanalytic frameworks while attempting to account for sexual violence in horror films: “Clover’s work on the horror film, for example, is concerned to account for the pleasures such films afford their male viewers and, while this project involves challenging psychoanalytic film criticism’s assumption of the sadism of the male spectatorial position, Clover’s alternative account of male spectatorial pleasure remains firmly rooted in psychoanalytic paradigms” (22). While Freudian concepts explain Billy’s relationship with his mother in *Scream*, psychoanalysis should not dominate any study of girl power movies.

“I’m ready baby” and once it is his turn with the knife he is warned, “stay to the side and don’t go too deep.” Freud’s rationalization for “the negative resolution” of the “Oedipus Complex” is apposite here. Freud argues that the “genital period” of psychosexual development can have a “negative resolution,” where a boy cannot renounce competition with his father. In this case a boy will compensate for this developmental malfunction by “adopting the homosexual position” (Kahn 78). In so far as Billy and Stuart’s repressed homosexual relationship is considered deviant in their small town they express their desires for one another through their disgust at other transgressive behaviours— namely Mrs. Prescott’s promiscuity.

Scream links violence to society’s rigid and gendered sexual norms. The small town of Woodsboro represses deviant expressions of sexuality and re-articulates norms through nasty systems of gossip. The role of gossip in Woodsboro is emphasized when Sidney overhears a conversation between two cheerleaders who suggest that she may be “a slut just like her mom.” Sidney and Tatum later discuss the function of gossip in the maintenance of sexual norms:

TATUM. Maybe Cotton Weary is telling the truth. Maybe he was having an affair with your mom.

SIDNEY. So you think my mom was a slut too?

TATUM. I didn’t say that, Sid. But you know there were rumours.

Your dad was always out of town on business. Maybe your mom was a very unhappy woman.

SIDNEY. If they were having an affair how come they couldn’t prove it in court?

TATUM. You can’t prove a rumour. That’s why it’s a rumour.

SIDNEY. Created by that little tabloid twit Gale Weathers.

TATUM. It goes further back, Sid. There’s been talk about other men.

SIDNEY. And you believe it?

TATUM. Well, you can only hear that Richard Gere-gerbil story so many times before you have to start believing it.

Sidney's mother's promiscuity is linked to Richard Gere's alleged sexual deviance and, however ridiculous the comparison, the message is clear: Woodsboro condemns promiscuity when practised by a woman.

Scream depicts the sexual double-binds that women in Woodsboro face in other scenes. Billy constantly pressures Sidney about having sex but he also explains that women who have sex are promiscuous and deviant, "like Sharon Stone." Billy forces his way into Sidney's bedroom at one point and explains that watching the edited-for-television version of *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) reminded him of her reluctance to resume the sexual relationship they had shared before her mother's murder. When Sidney agrees to do some "on top of the clothes stuff" Billy repeatedly forces his hand up under her feminine white nightgown and she continually pushes his hand away. However, despite refusing sex here, Sidney is not sexually submissive: she later agrees to have intercourse with Billy when she feels ready and abandons her naïve interpretation of her mother's sexual life. Here, the slasher genre's traditional use of virginal female protagonists is parodied. In the *Scream* trilogy it is powerful—not virginal—women who survive. This is clearly portrayed in the staging of Sidney's final battle with Stuart and Billy.

Sidney is cool-headed and capable in the film's final scenes and we therefore might suppose that premarital sex is not a transgression that deserves punishment in *Scream's* world. Sidney fights aggressively to save her life after she loses her virginity to Billy and her defence is explicitly phallic. She knees her attackers in the groin, jabs her finger in Billy's knife wound and even drops a television on Stuart's head. Though this would appear to end Stuart's obsession with violent movies, it is not actually suggested that, "movies create psychopaths" in *Scream*. Eventually even Billy's motive of "maternal abandonment" is ridiculed. In *Scream*, psychopaths are created by society's gender-based "rules" against pre-marital sex and infidelity—not by movies.

* * *

Scream's Gale Weathers is another female endowed with agency and power. Gale is an ambitious businesswoman, yet she is not murdered (as ruthless characters often are in "slasher" films).⁶ Instead, we are encouraged to identify with Gale and she speaks *Scream*'s concluding words. Gale is additionally given many opportunities to create meaning during the film's final scenes. At one point during Sidney's struggle with Stuart and Billy Gale regains consciousness, attempts to save Sidney's life and asserts that the movie will end how she wishes it to: "I've got an ending for you. The reporter left for dead in the news van comes to, stumbles upon you two dip-shits, finds the gun, fumbles your plan and saves the day." When Sidney responds "I like that ending" it is as if *Scream*'s conclusion is a collaboration between the two women.

However, not all strong females in *Scream* live to tell the tale. Tatum is an example of a female victim who despite her capabilities is killed in a deliberately brutal and voyeuristic manner. The opening moments of *Scream* give the generically expected "hints" that Tatum will most surely become a victim. Tatum talks openly and explicitly about sex and unlike Sidney she is not portrayed as an innocent virgin.⁷ More than just open about sex, Tatum behaves vulgarly in her interactions with her boyfriend, Stuart. It could be argued that she is killed because she does not fit into Randy's model of a "slasher" survivor: she is not a virgin and she is not appreciative of her heterosexual relationship with Stuart. Tatum is murdered to fulfil a generic stereotype; that is, a well-proportioned young teen being graphically murdered. However, she is also murdered because she does as she is told: despite complaining to Stuart that she is not his "beer wench," she still goes to the garage to get his beverage, an act of compliance that ensures she meets the killer.

⁶ Virtually any "slasher" film confirms this "rule": the *Friday the 13th* franchise perhaps delivers the most voluminous instances of this tradition.

⁷ Tatum convinces Sidney to watch a Tom Cruise movie with her by commenting, "I was thinking Tom Cruise in *All the Right Moves*, you know if you pause it just right you can see his penis." Tatum also suggests her sexual experience by providing Stuart's alibi for the night of the first Woodsboro murders: "Stu was with *me* last night."

Violence and Gender

The influence fictional violence has over real life action is debated incessantly in *Scream 2* and *Scream 3*. For instance, characters in *Scream 3* compare fictional violence with the institutionalized and normalized violence that is sanctioned within our judicial and political systems (such as the death penalty and war). Stephen Prince suggests that some violent films deliberately elicit “intense audience reactions” through combining a graphic aesthetic with narratives that imply the effects of aggressive behaviour (*Savage Cinema* 2-3). Prince argues that these films allow audiences an opportunity to approach what is often considered a taboo topic.⁸ Clover chronicles the significance of horror films in the provocation of feminist debate on the representation of violence in popular culture (*Men, Women and Chain Saws*).

Scream, *Scream 2* and *Scream 3* posit on several occasions that violence is a product of a repressive, gendered culture. The characters Mrs. Loomis and Mickey (Timothy Olyphant) debate the effects of media violence in *Scream 2*. Mickey contends that the murders at his college are “life imitating art”; that the movie-within-a-movie, *Stab*, is “responsible” for the killings in his community. However, Mickey is revealed to be the killer and his rants about violence in the media are presented as the concoction of a perverse mind in

⁸ If we were to take an auteur-based approach here, Craven’s views on violence in cinema are pertinent. Craven has always been a prominent campaigner for the right to portray taboo issues—like violence—in film. Many of his earlier films were met with intense disapproval; *Last House on the Left* (1972) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) are notorious examples. Craven was not, however, the first director to fight the battle for the right to “honestly” portray violence in cinema, as Prince usefully points out: “by 1969, graphic movie violence was an already established fact of life and a very profitable one for the industry . . . because such violence connected with the energies of destruction coursing through American society” (16). Violent media allegories for volatile contemporary issues have been persistently critiqued for being “inappropriate.” Craven defends the films he directs by suggesting that the widespread backlash against them indicates that society is unable to face the way that violence functions in the development of sexual mores, politics and institutions. *Scream 2* portrays many deliberations over the nature of violence in society’s institutions, most importantly the media. For example, during one scene a college film class debate the relationship between media violence and a real life murder. Later, Gale is hounded by a reporter who asks her if she is getting any “flack” because of the role of her book in *Scream 2*’s fictional film *Stab*.

Scream 2's closing scenes.⁹ Mrs. Loomis replicates Mickey's contention that his trial will reveal the devastating effects of media violence but when she kills him she ridicules his defence by explaining the "sanity" of her own motive. Mrs. Loomis suggests that rather than "blaming" media violence, we ought to "blame" Sidney's mother and her promiscuous behaviour, which, she mistakenly argues, broke up the Loomis family.¹⁰ However, as *Scream 3* demonstrates, Sidney's lonely mother is not to blame; it is society's institutionalized misogyny which has produced unrealistic standards for women to live by. These sexual double-binds result in Sidney's mother's behaviour being labelled "deviant."

The institutional element of misogyny is further discussed in *Scream 3* when Gale gives advice to an audience of journalism students. Gale explains that in journalism professional women must behave in a certain way to succeed:

As future journalists of America, there is one thing to remember. Being the best means being willing to do what the others would not. Break the rules, stop at nothing. Be willing to have the world hate you because that is the only way that you'll get the story, the facts and the fame.

As Gale points out, a woman who is successful in her career but not in her ability to establish a small-town hetero-normative life (as Dewey desires) is frequently "hated" in our society. By refusing to kill Gale— an ambitious and ruthless woman— the *Scream* films refuse to punish women's "un-feminine" behaviour.

Hollywood is aligned in *Scream 3* with the corruption of the world of journalism that Gale describes. John Milton (Lance Henriksen), the producer of fictional film *Stab 3*, explains to his film's director Roman that, "Hollywood is full of criminals whose careers are flourishing." Milton is in fact one of these

⁹ Mickey explains his defence strategy as follows: "I have my whole defence planned out. I'm gonna blame the movies. It's pretty cool, huh? It's never been done before. And wait till the trial, 'cause these days it's all about the trial! Can you see it, Sid, the effects of cinema violence on society . . . The Christian Coalition will pay my legal fees."

¹⁰ Mrs. Loomis comments, "People love a good trial, it's like theatre, they're dying for it and I've worked hard to give the audience what they want." She explains her motive as follows, "Mine is just good old fashioned revenge— you killed my son and now I kill you and I can't think of anything more rational . . . I was a good mother . . . I'm sick to death of people saying it's all the parents, it all starts with the family. If you wanna blame someone, why don't you blame your mother, she's the one who stole my husband and broke up my family."

criminals: he raped Sidney's mother and is remorseless. Milton knew Mrs. Prescott in the seventies when she was a horror movie actress using the name Rina Reynolds. As Milton relates the story of the rape incident *Scream 3* proposes that aspiring actresses were powerless within Hollywood's sexist and cruel business of making and breaking the careers of young female stars:

Nothing happened to her that she didn't invite, in one way or another, no matter what she said afterwards . . . things got out of hand. Maybe they did take advantage of her. . . . Rina Reynolds wouldn't play by the rules. You wanna get ahead in Hollywood, you gotta play the game.

Following the idea that Sidney's mother did not invite rape, the overall message in *Scream 3* is that society's patriarchal institutions and ideologies endorse and even encourage the victimization of women. However, in this film misogyny is severely punished: Milton has his throat slit by Roman Bridger (Scott Foley), who we soon discover is Sidney's brother, born after the rape.

Conclusion

The tendency to fetishize authorship is . . . overwhelming. In film there is the added factor that, more so than in perhaps any art form, it is collectively produced. In our society, this means produced according to the division of labour: rarely have women been able to become film directors, except as independents . . . the proportion of women directors in Hollywood remains abysmally low. To insist upon authorship as a model for women's cinema, then, is to virtually ignore the major ways in which women *have* been involved in the cinema: as actresses, as screenplay writers, as editors and cutters . . . I am suggesting that we expand our definition of "production" so as to include other influences than that of the director. Consider, for example, the role of the actress.

Judith Mayne, "The Woman at the Keyhole." (60)

It's a dumb ass white movie about some dumb ass white girls getting their white asses cut the fuck up . . . the horror genre is historical for excluding the African American element.

Maureen (Jada Pinkett-Smith), *Scream 2*.

Rick Altman explains in *Film/Genre* that genre films may be predictable and the *Scream* trilogy is no exception to this premise. Altman argues that such names as Boris Karloff, Errol Flynn, Jeanette MacDonald, John Wayne, Gene Kelly, Sylvester Stallone, Goldie Hawn and Arnold Schwarzenegger “guarantee a particular style, a particular atmosphere and a well-known set of attitudes” (209). The *Scream* films use familiar stars in order to parody the formulaic and “predictable” qualities of genre sequels. For example, in *Scream 2* college students discuss the merits of and problems with sequels. Randy returns as a video image in *Scream 3* to remind viewers that the film is a self-reflexive sequel. Randy attempts to inform spectators that the *Scream* movies have been a well-planned trilogy with a “super human” killer. However, Randy’s proposition does not fit with the overall narrative of the trilogy, which focuses on the lives of Sidney and Gale.¹¹

An aspect of the films’ focus on Sidney and Gale is their postmodern play on the audience’s knowledge of Neve Campbell and Courtney Cox’s lives as well-known actors. While Wes Craven and Kevin Williamson have been celebrated as the authors behind the success of the *Scream* movies, the central roles held by Cox and Campbell can also be regarded in terms of film as a more collaborative process. In other words, Cox and Campbell’s presence in all the *Scream* productions, as well as their on-screen attention, implies that filmmaking is a collaborative process. Not only do *Scream*’s closing scenes suggest that the

¹¹ In *Scream 3* this notion is supported when Sarah (Jenny Mc Carthy) expresses her disgust at her role in the fictional movie *Stab 3*. Sarah’s complaints about her character in *Stab 3* are interwoven with an astute criticism of the slasher genre: “I’m not happy that I have to die naked. . . . I don’t understand why I have to start in the shower. The whole shower thing’s been done, *Vertigo*, hello! And I mean, my boyfriend just died, why am I showering?” Sarah’s concern about the “slasher” genre and its tendency to generate cheaply produced and thinly narrated sequels is underlined by her confusion between the shower scene from Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) and his earlier film *Vertigo* (1958).

film “belongs” to Gale and Sidney, but they are also the most permanent characters in the next two films. While Cox and Campbell’s television characters are normative representations of femininity, their well-known public and fictional images are re-invented in the *Scream* movies, where they are portrayed as “angry women.” Many of the comedic and inter-textual devices in the *Scream* films revolve around contemporary viewers’ awareness of the star gossip that surrounds Campbell and Cox’s public images, especially by the time *Scream 3* was released. For instance, rumours of a developing relationship between Cox and David Arquette became popular tabloid gossip during the period in which all three movies were released. Cox and Campbell’s public personas are utilized in the *Scream* movies so as to facilitate an accentuated identification with Sidney and Gale for contemporary viewers.

All three *Scream* films refer to Cox and Campbell’s roles outside of the trilogy and the two stars therefore contribute as much meaning for contemporary spectators as the input of director and screenwriter. Cox’s role in television’s *Friends* and her relationship with other female stars from the series are persistently referred to in *Scream*, *Scream 2* and *Scream 3*. For example, the competitiveness that supposedly exists between *Friends*’ female co-stars is referenced in *Scream 2* and *Scream 3*.¹² Comparisons may also be drawn between Cox’s character Monica from *Friends* and *Scream*’s Gale Weathers. Though both Monica and Gale are ambitious and “angry,” Monica’s relationships are an inversion of Gale’s. Monica desires a family and marriage from her relationship with Chandler (Matthew Perry) in *Friends* but Gale places her work as a priority ahead of relationships and “family life.” It is Dewey who desires marriage and “small town life,” as their debates over career and marriage in *Scream 3* reveal. Unlike Monica in *Friends*, Gale aspires to fame and

¹² Dewey asks when Gale started smoking and Randy replies “ever since those nude pictures on the internet.” Gale overhears this comment and shouts, “It was just my head— it was Jennifer Anniston’s body.” Viewers are again reminded of Hollywood gossip about the female stars of *Friends* when Gale makes a snide comment in *Scream 3* about the character Jennifer (Parker Posey) and her relationship with Brad Pitt. Audience members who are familiar with this gossip would realize that news stories about Jennifer Anniston’s “secret marriage” to Brad Pitt were very popular during the making of *Scream 3*.

professional success rather than marriage and a “happy ever after” time. While the development of Gale as a career woman is upset when at the end of *Scream 3* she decides to marry Dewey, the potential for their relationship continues to be unstable. Dewey and Gale’s romance has failed in the past due to her attachment to her career and inability to adapt to small-town life: the suggestion is that marriage and domesticity may fail to satisfy in the future.

Just as the *Scream* movies signalled Cox’s success in Hollywood, Campbell— previously a “soap queen” on the popular television drama series *Party of Five*— became a star with the films’ releases. Campbell’s *Party of Five* character Julia Sallinger suffers the tragedy of losing both her parents in a car crash. The series focuses on how Julia and her siblings come to terms with the death of their parents, while struggling with unpleasant discoveries about their family’s past (for example, one parent’s alcoholism). Knowledge of the melodrama that surrounds Julia Sallinger in *Party of Five* plays a role in the inter-textual meanings available to contemporary viewers of the *Scream* trilogy. Melodramatic music accompanies Sidney’s grief in *Scream* and long, brooding shots of her staring at her mother’s photo indicate that her life is similar to Julia Sallinger’s. *Scream 2* also refers directly to the mythological figure of Cassandra, a symbol for the fall of Troy, which implies that Sidney too will experience tragedy. Sidney plays the part of Cassandra in Woodsboro Drama School’s performance of *The Fall of Troy* and the set for this play becomes the stage for *Scream 2*’s final act. The rehearsal that depicts Cassandra’s fate involves the heroine witnessing the destruction of friends and family, just as Sidney must do. *Scream 2* parallels the “hideous visions” Cassandra sees before the fall of Troy and Sidney’s “hideous visions” of violence and destruction. Like the mythological character Cassandra, television’s Soap Opera heroines and “slasher” protagonists, Sidney’s life is typified by the misfortune she foresees.

The *Scream* trilogy demonstrates that female stars can contribute complex meanings to movies. Cox and Campbell’s “real life” personas are

utilized in the *Scream* films to add layers of self-reflexive meaning to the narrative and *mise en scène*. It would be a stretch to suggest that the *Scream* movies present new possibilities for overcoming traditional film theory's "tendency to fetishize authorship"—as Mayne proposes studies of female stars might allow for, yet it is also inappropriate to endow directors and screenwriters with absolute authorship in a genre so influenced by female actors and viewers. Contemporary spectators aware of Cox and Campbell's television performance would no doubt have an accentuated identification with Gale and Sidney in the *Scream* movies.

Nevertheless, reading the *Scream* films simply as a social critique of American social mores seen through the eyes of two middle-class white women would allow some audience members little pleasure. As Rick Altman puts it in *Film/Genre*, films are read differently by diverse spectators: "Instead of utilizing a single master language, as most previous genre theoreticians would have it, a genre may appropriately be considered multi-coded" (209). Altman argues that films correspond to "multiple groups" who help to define genres, and who "may be said to 'speak' the genre" (209). There are therefore limits to an analysis of the *Scream* movies as Sidney and Gale's narratives. Maureen in *Scream 2*, for instance, suggests that "the African American element" has been excluded from the horror genre. Though Maureen's remarks imply that difference is portrayed self-consciously in the *Scream* movies, she has a point about the racial exclusivity of many horror films. *Scream* is a parody of homogeneous middle-class life; however it does not reasonably represent the ethnic diversity that would typify a small town in California.¹³

Pineda argues that the contemporary horror genre is characterized by these contradictory elements. For Pineda, scary movies at once criticize and endorse "hierarchical relations of power" by combining "feminist and

¹³ Karen Alexander outlines in "Fatal Beauties" that roles for black actors which depart from filmic stereotypes or parts in all-black casts are scarce. This is reinforced in *Scream 3* where a black actor, Tyson Fox (Deon Richard), comments on Hollywood's marginalization of black actors: "You think serious black actors my age can just throw away jobs?"

antifeminist” ideologies and “racist and antiracist elements” (135). Pineda specifically links the “contradictory tendencies” of the horror genre to *Scream*: “The conclusion of *Scream* capitalizes, both critically and commercially, on the feminist potential of the slasher film, the pre-eminent Hollywood genre that shows women using self-defence effectively despite harrowing circumstances” (135). As Pineda points out, the *Scream* films are primarily a “product,” a commercial enterprise. However, the satirical employment of “slasher” and “teenpic” motifs in the *Scream* movies implies that Hollywood products might self-reflexively critique the industry’s prejudices. By assessing the impact that such films *might* have on spectators, we can identify the development of certain trends in the representation of female protagonists. A key development in horror films that sit within the girl power genre is that female viewers are invited to identify with several women and their interrelated struggle to survive, rather than with an individual woman.

CHAPTER 2

Monstrous Deviance and Repressive Disciplines: Bodies, Sexuality and Girl Power in Horror “Teenpics”

Social agency . . . is put to work on the body, for the body . . . is where social life is turned into lived experience. To understand the body we have to know who controls it as it moves through the spaces and times of our daily routines, who shapes its most sensuous experiences, its sexualities, its pleasures in eating and exercise, who controls its performance at work, its behaviour at home or school and also influences most how it is dressed and made to appear in its function of presenting us to others.

John Fiske, *Power Plays, Power Works*. (57)

Youth represents an inescapable intersection of the personal, social, political, and pedagogical. Beneath the abstract codifying of youth around the discourses of law, medicine, psychology, employment, education, and marketing statistics, there is the lived experience of being young . . . a world held together by . . . regulations and restrictions . . . more oppressive than liberating.

Henry A. Giroux, *Fugitive Cultures*. (3)

Acelebration of youthful resistance to discipline and small-town homogeneity is expressed in depictions of teenagers defying adult authority in *The Faculty* (Robert Rodriguez, 1998) and *Disturbing Behaviour* (David Nutter, 1998). However, the representation of girlhood in both “teenpics” demonstrates that popular cultural representations of “angry women” can reassert dominant interests. Although protagonists Stokely (Clea Du Vall) and Rachel (Katie

Holmes) can be read as strong female protagonists, *The Faculty* and *Disturbing Behaviour* do not throw light on the bodily disciplines that women are subjected to. This is significant because each narrative hinges on a critique of the disciplines of adolescence. *The Faculty* and *Disturbing Behaviour* rely on the audience's acceptance of what Giroux terms the assumed "inherent oppositionality" of youth culture; however, girls' bodies are noticeably presented in order to cater to a "male gaze" in both films.¹ Stokely and Rachel abandon their initial active resistance to normative femininity and succumb to the supposed inevitability of heterosexual subservience. Each film's celebration of youthful deviance conceals the disciplinary processes that entrap young women in repressive gender roles.

Two recently produced horror "teenpics" that portray monstrous women—*The Hole* (Nick Hamm, 2001) and *Ginger Snaps* (John Fawcett, 2000)—tackle similar themes. *The Hole* and *Ginger Snaps* depict the familial, educational and cultural disciplines to which contemporary youth are subjected and reflect the experiences of young women who are coming to terms with their burgeoning sexuality within repressive bourgeois environments. Both independent productions construct the active sexuality of an adolescent girl as deviant. *Ginger Snaps* centres its story on a lycanthropic transformation that takes place alongside the development of complicated bonds between two sisters, Ginger and Brigitte Fitzgerald (Katharine Isabelle and Emily Perkins). At the start of the film neither of the sisters has begun menstruating: perhaps because of this, both are outsiders at their suburban high school. However, when the elder of the sisters, Ginger, gets her "curse" for the first time, she attracts the attention of her male classmates. The interest that Ginger arouses in her male classmates disgusts her younger sister Brigitte because it represents her entry into a world of

¹ Giroux proposes that teenagers' experiences, though not "inherently oppositional," constitute "fugitive cultures" because they deviate from the adult mainstream: "The construction of youth is no longer limited to the primary areas of schooling and the family. Diverse in its desires, marked by a continuum of lifestyles, and negotiated within and across a range of class, racial, gender, and sexual orientations, youth formations inhabit many fronts . . . where sex is traded, drugs exchanged, politics created, and sexuality expressed" (*Fugitive Cultures* 10-11). As Giroux conveys, the experience of youth is not simply a homogeneous "event" that can be defined through activities accomplished within the disciplines of family and school.

heterosexual social rituals that they had vowed to avoid in a pact to never be “average.” Brigitte is disgusted by Ginger’s deviant behaviour and eventually kills her in the film’s final scene because she feels that she has taken her transgressions “too far.” *The Hole* focuses on a teenaged girl’s understanding of the misogynist social hierarchies that exist at her posh private school. *The Hole*’s protagonist Liz (Thora Birch) shares with Ginger an insatiable urge to become sexually involved with a boy, Mike (Desmond Harrington), from her high school. Liz eventually locks three of her peers into a bomb shelter, where they slowly die without food or water, because her crush on Mike goes unchecked. *The Hole* and *Ginger Snaps* depict what comes to pass when the lust of a teenaged girl escapes the appropriate disciplines.

Cultural theorists interested in discipline, such as Fiske, Foucault and Giroux, have been influenced by Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and the State.” Althusser’s analysis of discipline involves “ideological state apparatuses” and “repressive state apparatuses” (categories he in part derives from Marxist theory). While “repressive state apparatuses” include institutional forces such as government, administration, the army, police, courts and prisons— branches of the state which function through violence, or at least by physical means— “ideological state apparatuses,” according to Althusser, present themselves as “realities” in the form of “distinct and specialized institutions” (136-7). Aside from the two “ideological state apparatuses” that Althusser professes to be key to modern capitalism— education and family— other “distinct and specialized institutions” that shape modern existence are religion, politics, trade-union, communications (press, radio, television, film) and the cultural (literature, the arts, sports). “Ideological state apparatuses,” Althusser argues, “drum” into youth, using “old and new” methods a “certain amount of ‘know-how’ wrapped in the ruling ideology” (155). This, he purports, prepares “a huge mass of children” for a role in “production.”

Althusser’s opinion of the modern youthful experience of education and family becomes increasingly pessimistic as his thesis continues:

The ideological state apparatus which has been installed in the *dominant* position in mature capitalist social formations as a result of a violent political and ideological class struggle . . . is the *educational ideological apparatus*. . . . One might even add: the School-Family couple has replaced the Church-Family. (144-5, author's own emphasis).

According to Althusser, as schools function to educate youth for their immersion in the capitalist structures of the state, parents perform their ideological role by preparing the next generation for their "determinant part in the reproduction of the relations of production" (149). By Althusser's reasoning, teenagers experience life as a series of physical disciplines, enforced by repressive state apparatuses and ideological social laws, which are insinuated by modern capitalism's political, educational, cultural and familial institutions.

Fiske's Foucauldian analysis of power in postmodern media culture parallels Althusser's account of the contemporary institutions that exert "social agency." For Fiske, the body and its requisite pleasures is the focus of institutional disciplines. Fiske is particularly in alignment with Althusser's grim perspective on the modern experience of youth in that he contends that teenagers are perhaps one of the most rigorously disciplined groups in Western society. Teenagers, by Fiske's account, might only resist disciplinary power by being invisible because their sexual impulses, leisure pursuits, gustatory sensations and bodily adornments are contained by ideological authority,: "in the age of the insidious monitor, being *unseen* is a survival tactic that should not be undervalued" (141). However, as all four films in this chapter demonstrate, teenaged girls cannot escape becoming the object of disciplinary gazes which define active expressions of feminine sexuality as deviant. *The Faculty*, *Disturbing Behaviour*, *Ginger Snaps* and *The Hole* represent young girls' expressions of resistance as ultimately ineffective, and are therefore films that conclude as "anti" girl power films.²

² I borrow here the idea of an "anti" girl power film from Hollinger's concept of the "anti-female friendship film."

“They’re just turning us into mindless slaves they can control!”

The mechanisms which produce . . . [a] vital result for the capitalist regime are naturally covered up and concealed by a universally reigning ideology of the School, universally reigning because it is one of the essential forms of the ruling bourgeois ideology.

Louis Althusser, “Ideology and the State.” (148)

Youth as a self and social construction has become indeterminate, alien, and sometimes hazardous in the public eye. A source of repeated moral panics and the object of social regulation, youth cannot be contained and controlled within a limited number of social spheres.

Henry A. Giroux, *Fugitive Cultures*. (11)

While *The Faculty* represents many youthful resistances to adult authority, its politics are essentially conservative.³ As a parody of the paranoias expressed in many contemporary “conspiracy theories,” *The Faculty* pays tribute to *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956). Much dialogue in *The Faculty* confirms that its sympathies lie with its “oppressed” teenagers, who are being converted into “mindless slaves” by an alien population. The homogenizing values that alien invaders assert in *The Faculty* are depicted as uncannily similar to the types of “oppression” enacted by American educational and familial institutions. Giroux suggests that contemporary society’s marginalization and institutionalization of teenagers is comparable to a kind of

³ Giroux explains that activities that youth partake in to resist adult control are frequently given the unwarranted label of unsafe and self-destructive: “Youth cultures are often viewed in the popular press as aberrant, unpredictable, and dangerous in terms of the investments they produce, social relations they affirm, and the anti-politics they sometimes legitimate. Contemporary youth, especially from the inner city, increasingly signify for the mainstream public an unwarranted rejection of an idealized past” (11). A good example of an everyday practice that is depicted in *The Faculty* as a type of resistance to adult control is the language the teenagers at Herrington High employ. As William Paul outlines in *Laughing Screaming*, “teenpics” often reject the principles of an idealized past by employing language that is considered rude in polite culture. Protagonists in *The Faculty* reject the “proper” speech considered appropriate for use by youth.

alienation. A faculty invaded by alien parasites is therefore an apt analogy for the gap in power that exists between adults and excessively disciplined teenagers.

Opening scenes in *The Faculty* maintain that the financial frameworks of the American education system are biased towards the needs of a greedy majority, obsessed with violent sporting pursuits.⁴ Before opening credits roll in *The Faculty*, audience members are made privy to a meeting of the faculty of Herrington High School. Herrington is a small town in Ohio, largely populated with students from comfortably well-off middle-class families. As teachers discuss the school's financial troubles, the school's principal, Ms. Drake (Bebe Neuwirth), outlines that they will not be able to afford new computers, art field trips to New York, or even a musical production, but that instead the football team will get new equipment. Principal Drake justifies this as follows: "This is a football town, let me remind you. And, yes, the team will get new jerseys, new knee pads, new jock straps, and everything else they want in the name of education because that is what the school board wants, as well as what the parents in this town want."⁵ There is no mention during conversations between parents and teachers about what the students at Herrington High need academically and the school board seems to make decisions about what teenagers may or may not learn at the expense of the interests of students involved in activities that exist outside of a violent and misogynist sporting culture. Teachers interested in the arts and technology express genuine disappointment that the needs of their pupils will not be fulfilled; however, what the students have "their hearts set on" is no competition for the local hope invested in sporting successes in *The Faculty*.

This meeting occurs before the town is besieged by alien invasions, which implies that Herrington's residents were already "mindless slaves" to an

⁴ The film's allegation seems particularly pertinent given that Althusser considers sport to be an element of the state's cultural ideological apparatus.

⁵ Later in *The Faculty* the importance of violent sports within Herrington's social structures is confirmed when viewers are shown a football match at Herrington High. The team's Coach (Robert Patrick) shouts "get in there and take his fucking head off" and spectators in the crowd hold up signs encouraging violence (one sign reads, "Kill-Kill").

education system that generously supports its sport-obsessed majority and represses its minority groups. Fiske outlines in *Power Plays, Power Works* that devotion to sporting conquests can conceal existing systems of subordination. Fiske admits that regional sports may at times provide men with an arena for the articulation of “an intimacy that their masculinity often prevents them from expressing directly”; however, sporting pursuits are not portrayed as a positive outlet for “masculine” expression in *The Faculty* (90). Fiske’s description of national sporting events best explains the role of sport in *The Faculty*. For Fiske, national sporting events erase “the differences of interest” that exist “between the powerbloc and the people” (90). *The Faculty* depicts Herrington High’s sporting conquests as activities that mask the “differences of interest” that exist in schools, where many students and teachers experience disproportionate amounts of power. Within these power balances it is female students who are most conspicuously subordinated due to their exclusion from many sporting pursuits.

Early scenes in *The Faculty* begin to explain these workings of power at Herrington High by introducing a handful of pupils who fit into stereotypical “teenpic” demographics. Casey (Elijah Wood), the narrator, is the school “geek” and an avid photographer for his school newspaper. Stokely, his female counterpart, is also a candidate for audience identification: she has the most knowledge of science fiction, which is the only type of knowledge that may assist in an understanding of the events that unfold in *The Faculty*. Stan (Shawn Hatosy) and Delilah (Jordana Brewster) are the school’s most celebrated couple: the captain of the football team and head cheerleader. Delilah’s first line, about the fragile nature of her “Esteé Lauder lips,” positions her as a typical Hollywood prom queen. However, appearances deceive in *The Faculty* and Delilah’s shallow exterior is a front for the intelligence that got her the job of “editor in chief” of the school newspaper.⁶ Just as Delilah defies the “prom

⁶ While audiences are invited to identify with Stokely, *The Faculty* does not necessarily encourage identification with Delilah because she relates to other students in a prejudiced manner. Delilah bullies Stokely relentlessly, encouraging other students to do so, and labelling her a “violent lesbian.” Though Stokely responds using equally defamatory language her challenges do little to diminish the effects of victimization by one of the school’s most powerful students.

queen” stereotype, Stan is no typical high school football star. Stan is at a point of change in his adolescent existence: he is about to quit the team to concentrate on studying, rather than relying on a football scholarship to get him into college.⁷ The characters Zeke (Josh Harnett) and Mary Beth (Laura Harris) also appear to be “teenpic” stereotypes. Mary Beth is a new pupil who has recently moved to Herrington from Atlanta and she seems at once outspoken and naïve. Zeke is the school “bad boy” who sells drugs (a white powder he calls scat), false ID cards and pornography from the school bathrooms and the boot of his car.

The systems of marginalization and subordination that exist at Herrington High are outlined in *The Faculty* alongside protagonists’ suspicions about faculty members and pupils who are not behaving as their “usual selves.”⁸ Coach Willis and Mrs. Olson (Piper Laurie) assault Principal Drake and later certain teachers appear obsessed with consuming large quantities of water. Those teachers who are obviously still “themselves” are noticeably defiant.⁹ As Glen and Krin Gabbard outline in *Psychiatry and the Cinema*, the fear that loved ones are not who they “seem” is typically evoked in many horror and thriller films. The Gabbards argue that the “evocation of infantile” or “repressed anxieties about nurturing figures that can turn against us” was perhaps first used as a suspense technique in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, which painted a picture of America’s fear of communism during the fifties. (277). The Gabbards suggest

⁷ After insisting he’d rather go to college based on his “intellect” than on his reputation as an athlete, Stan is faced with the corruption involved with Herrington High’s grading processes. He explains to Stokely that many teachers have been reluctant to fail him due to his profile as captain of the football team. Stan’s decision to quit the football team violates Herrington High’s established gender roles and social rules, because, as Delilah points out, “the expected social order is that head cheerleader dates star quarterbacks, not academic wannabes.”

⁸ Stokely is victimized for her sexual indeterminacy and Casey is persecuted at school in a sexualised manner. Casey’s lack of athleticism makes him even more vulnerable to victimization (he believes that a person shouldn’t run “unless he’s being chased”). Moreover, the types of cruelty that occur at Herrington High are not simply a result of brutalities that occur at school, but also within family structures. Perhaps because Casey is unable to live up to his father’s standards of physical masculinity, he is subjected to further humiliating regulations and restrictions at home. The nature of Casey’s parents’ violation of his personal space is also sexualised when his mother suggests they should confiscate his pornography. This highlights how Casey’s room must be frequently invaded for his parents to have any idea where he keeps his secret reading material. This intrusion into Casey’s private space violates his “survival tactics” by undermining his ability to have hidden secrets his parents cannot discipline.

⁹ Nurse Harper (Salma Hayek), for instance, insists that she will stay at school, despite the fact that she has a cold. “I’m saving my sick leave for when I feel better,” she defiantly asserts.

that these same tensions are played upon in horror films as diverse as *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), *Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1968) and John Carpenter's remake of *The Thing* (1982): "The protagonists in all of these films contend with a similar dilemma: they cannot be sure if their family members, colleagues, and loved ones are who they say they are" (279).

Teenagers fear that parents and teachers might not be their usual selves in *the Faculty*, which parodies typical adolescent anxieties about figures of institutional authority.

Each teenaged protagonist rebels against the established "rules" at Herrington High as *The Faculty* develops, and also against their "teenpic" stereotype. During an English literature class, Zeke is revealed to be more than what he "seems" when his analysis of *Robinson Crusoe* demonstrates that his lack of academic success is not due to ignorance, but more likely boredom.¹⁰ While this implies that Herrington High does not have a very effective system for encouraging intellectual development in its promising students, it also reveals the centrality of literary inter-textuality in "teenpic" horrors. Like *The Faculty*, *Robinson Crusoe* metaphorically depicts the imperialistic conquering and colonizing of an alien territory, as Angus Ross details:

The imaginative interest of the reader, therefore, in the castaway's adaptability, his ingenuity in improvising, is like the interest of a reader in certain kinds of science fiction. How do human beings adapt their normal habits, ideas, standards and equipment to a Martian society, or a Venusian atmosphere? (17)

Invasion of the Body Snatchers and *The Faculty* depict the reverse of this: how human beings adapt and improvise their ideas, standards and equipment to combat a Martian society that is invading earth. *The Faculty* focuses on the adaptability and ingenuity of teenaged protagonists faced with monsters in the midst of their world's adult population.

¹⁰ Zeke's teacher is surprised by the sophistication of his analysis of *Robinson Crusoe*. Zeke also surprises his biology teacher by providing the definition "sea-dwelling organism" for Pelagic.

Casey and Delilah join forces with other central protagonists in the film's concluding sequences when they all agree that something beyond their everyday victimization is occurring in Herrington.¹¹ As the teenagers consider what is making Herrington residents behave like "strangers," Stokely explains that aliens are attempting to turn them into "mindless slaves they can control."¹² To relieve their suspicions about each other, the teenagers decide that they must all snort Zeke's "scat" (a drug that has proven to be fatal for the aliens) to verify that they are still "themselves." The teenagers shift their anxieties towards Principal Drake once they are convinced that they may trust one another at least temporarily. The teenagers rearticulate horror conventions by turning their suspicions towards Drake. Drake is a powerful woman, and powerful women in horror films are often monstrous, as Creed outlines in *The Monstrous Feminine*. The teenagers are proven wrong to have suspected Drake when Mary Beth is revealed to be the Queen alien, but not wrong to have suspected a woman.

Mary-Beth's monstrosity is interwoven with her sexuality and corporeality in *The Faculty*—as Creed contends in much of her writing, women's bodies are often abject in horror films. Zeke only realizes Mary Beth is "alien" when he notices that she is unashamedly naked: her lack of modesty indicates her "otherness." This construction of Mary Beth's sexuality is further developed as she outlines her alien population's mission. Mary Beth explains that she wants to allow humans to experience her world "without anger, without fear, without attitude," where the "underachiever goes home at night to parents who care," "the jock can be smart," "the ugly duckling beautiful," the class "geek" doesn't have to live in "terror" and the new girl can "fit right in with anybody." This homogeneous world where nobody is an "underachiever," "ugly" or an "outcast" is a world that assumes heterosexuality as the "norm." Mary Beth offers Casey and Stokely a world that does not allow for their perceived sexual difference, and though they dislike the idea of her world, by the end of *The*

¹¹ For example, a timid English teacher (Famke Jansen) dresses "provocatively" and mocks Zeke.

¹² When Stan ridicules this theory he outlines how teachers may actually appear "alien" to their pupils in many high schools. After Stan is accused of being one of the "alien" students himself, he replies, "I'm not an alien. I'm discontent." Attempts to construct a homogenized community in Herrington have instilled feelings of alienation and "discontent" in many youth.

Faculty they are integrated into their own homogeneous heterosexual world. Their sexual indeterminacies— for which they were victimized at the start of the film— are forgotten as the action concludes with their safe placement within heterosexual relationships. While *The Faculty* appears to champion a youthful resistance to middle-class America, it actually reinstates dominant values in its celebration of hetero-normativity.

The Faculty initially allows us to identify with female protagonist Stokely but she is a character that experiences little empowerment in the film's conclusion. Stokely is a powerful character at the start of *The Faculty*: she explains the inter-textual aspect to events that transpire at Herrington High, and her rationalization for the behaviour of her peers and teachers— that they have been taken over by “aliens” like characters in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956)— is eventually revealed to be “true.” Stokely also has knowledge of the literature from which Hollywood's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is derived and helps to generate the ending of *The Faculty* by predicting that citizens will return to their former selves if the Queen parasite is killed. Though Casey is the film's “official” hero, whose prowess is acclaimed in newspapers and magazines in *The Faculty*, Stokely's ideas keep the narrative in motion. However, by the final scenes of the film, Stokely is transformed from a gothic “outsider” to a tidily made-up “insider,” dressed in soft pastels. By the end of *The Faculty* Stokely no longer utilizes clothing in order to rebel against gender stereotypes and has accepted her place within her school's social hierarchies.¹³ While Stokely initially appears to be character reminiscent of girl power heroines, in that she resists her society's norms, she is stripped of narrative agency by the end of the film, where identification with Casey is proven to have been the most tenable option for spectators.

¹³ Stokely's garb at the start of *The Faculty*, which is gothic and to an extent “masculine,” initially aligns her with the slasher tradition of the androgynous or tomboyish “final girl.”

“Sluts may not apply”

The constant division between the normal and the abnormal, to which every individual is subjected, brings us back to . . . the binary branding and exile of the leper. . . . The existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring and supervising and correcting the abnormal brings into play the disciplinary mechanisms to which the fear of the plague gave rise. All the mechanisms of power which, even today, are disposed around the abnormal individual, to brand him and alter him, are composed of those two forms from which they distantly derive.

Michel Foucault, “Panopticism.” (62)

Looking is an exercise of power, and to be looked at is therefore to become the object of power. For Foucault surveillance . . . is the application of social power, for Freud voyeurism was its sexual and individual equivalent. In both theories the power not to be seen is the crucial condition for the power to look.

John Fiske, *Power Plays, Power Works*. (46)

Like *The Faculty*, *Disturbing Behaviour* claims to celebrate youthful resistance to adult rules and restrictions. Rather than falling prey to an alien invasion, however, characters in *Disturbing Behaviour* experience the effects of “correctional” medical disciplines. *Disturbing Behaviour* represents contemporary society’s obsession with disciplining the teenaged body. Althusser proposes that physical and ideological oppression function cohesively in contemporary society in order to “punish” and “discipline” (145). Educational and medical procedures combine in *Disturbing Behaviour* to assert a discipline that is at once ideological and physical. “Deviant” teenagers in a small island town, Cradle Bay, are subjected to an experimental psychiatric treatment that

turns them into homogenized simulations of idealised media representations. The institution of the family, the local school and even the police force have all become corrupt in their endeavours to normalize the teenage population in Cradle Bay. Educational and psychiatric institutions in *Disturbing Behaviour* incorporate the qualities of Bentham's penal institution, the Panopticon, where, according to Foucault, "permanent visibility . . . assures the automatic functioning of power" (65).¹⁴ Just as the Panopticon assures the permanent visibility of its subjects, pupils at Cradle Bay High, especially girls, are disempowered by the disciplinary surveillance of faculty members and parents.

Like *The Faculty*, *Disturbing Behaviour* is an inter-textual film. *Disturbing Behaviour* quotes both literary critiques of discipline and historical horror conventions. The film opens with a scene that parodies "slasher rules": through the eyes of a teenager overlooking a lovers' lane, the camera depicts two teenagers "making out" in their car. Ominous music plays as a police car approaches, suggesting that this will not be a routine surveillance of a lovers' lane. Upon searching the car and discovering a young girl's body, one of the officers shoots his partner to defend the young murderer. At this point the film's opening sequence shifts to a scene depicting a family approaching an island on a ferry. As a port official tells the family, "I'm sure you're gonna like it, never wanna leave," a close-up reveals a sign reading, "Welcome to Cradle Bay, Crescent Island." These opening scenes alert viewers to "slasher" signifiers: a brutal murder, a witness, a corrupt local police force and a family arriving at a remote and isolated setting. The threat in *Disturbing Behaviour*, however, is not a perverse serial killer but cruelty that is sanctioned by the entire adult community. Whereas adults are often revealed to be untrustworthy in "slasher" films, teachers, parents and other authority figures are worse than ineffectual in *Disturbing Behaviour*: they are brutal disciplinarians. That this discipline is both corporeal and psychological confirms in part Althusser's allegation that the family and the school are contemporary society's most powerful, dominant and as Foucault would have it, "normalizing," "state apparatuses."

¹⁴ Foucault describes the "normalizing" tendencies of educational institutions, proposing that "prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons" (70).

The ensuing scenes in *Disturbing Behaviour* introduce us to protagonist Steve (James Marsden), his younger sister Lindsey (Katharine Isabelle) and their parents.¹⁵ The normalizing disciplines of teachers at Steve's school, Cradle Bay High, however, are the real focus of *Disturbing Behaviour*. These disciplines are initially depicted during a scene in Steve's English literature class, where the students are studying Dickens's Victorian novel *David Copperfield*.¹⁶ The teacher of this lesson berates a student who arrives late to class and refers to his status as a "motorhead." This contrast between the unruly behaviour of certain students and the disciplined behaviour of Cradle Bay's "Blue Ribbon" group is continued in *Disturbing Behaviour*. In the school cafeteria, Steve directs viewers' gazes towards tables crowded with diversely attired students sitting in distinct groups. Two "outsiders," UV (Chad Donella) and Gavin (Nick Stahl), eventually introduce themselves to Steve. It is apparent that they define their identities in resistance to the mainstream at Cradle Bay High. They ensure that Steve knows they smoke marijuana, an activity that is depicted as a deviant refusal of adult control. Gavin appears proud of his defiant leisure pursuits and also his definitions for the various "cliques" at Cradle Bay High: the "motorheads," who drink beer, listen to loud rock music and smoke cigarettes; the "skaters," who wear baggy pants, take ecstasy and play excessively on their skateboards; the "nerds," who are obsessed with computers and avoid social activities; and the Blue Ribbons, a community group that runs car washes and bake sales. Unlike the other teenagers at Cradle Bay High, who do their best to rebel against the values of their parents and teachers, the Blue Ribbons are well disciplined and embody the adult population's "ideal" teenager: youths who "kiss a lot of adults" and are into "life" and "the pursuit of clean living." We soon learn that this well-disciplined clique is far more sinister than it "seems."

¹⁵ It is proposed that things probably won't be "better" at Cradle Bay for this family because they experience extreme difficulties in communicating: Steve has awkward interactions with his father (Ethan Embry) and mealtimes are uncomfortable occasions. The primary cause of these fractured relationships is the death of Steve's brother, Allan, and conversation about his death is forbidden in the family. Steve comments, "around here people go crazy if you talk about my dead brother." It is obvious that indulging in conversation about Allan makes Steve's mother (Susan Hogan) "emotional." This reinforces the stereotype that it is the "excessive emotions" of women that need disciplining.

¹⁶ *David Copperfield* contrasts the purity of a child with the corruption of adults.

The sinister practices of this group of immaculate teens are eventually revealed in a series of scenes that depict the recruitment of its members. The adult spokesperson for the Blue Ribbons and school counsellor, Dr. Caldicott (Bruce Greenwood), is gradually exposed as a tyrant who is experimenting with surgical psychiatric treatments on unwilling students. Protagonists Steve, UV, Gavin and his friend, Rachel, become apprehensive about Dr. Caldicott's disciplinary tactics after they witness a Blue Ribbon member assault a fellow student in a convenience store. It is implied that the aggressor, Chug (A.J. Buckley), is responding to the frustration he feels when Rachel sexually arouses him. Gavin explains to Steve that the Blue Ribbon members have suddenly relinquished their preference for drugs and excessive partying. This, Gavin argues, indicates that adults in Cradle Bay have dubious methods for disciplining youth.¹⁷ Gavin believes that "some sinister force is taking over the Cradle Bay meat heads" and laments the fact that no authorities will pay attention to his consequent misgivings about his peers' unusual behaviour. "Nobody listens to me," he complains to Steve.¹⁸ Gavin is correct to have been suspicious of adults in his community. Caldicott's contention that "youth is wholly experimental" is taken seriously by parents and teachers in *Disturbing Behaviour*, who have been "experimenting" with "normalizing" surgical psychiatry on teenagers.¹⁹ Despite

¹⁷ Gavin shows Steve pictures of the first Blue Ribbons snorting cocaine just a few months ago.

¹⁸ Fiske's ideas about the empowerment in being unseen are contradicted here: invisibility can also amount to powerlessness. A character that is linked to this theme is Mr. Newbury (William Sadler), the eccentric school janitor and town "rat collector." The character Mr. Newbury intertextually refers to "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," a story about a community that is robbed of its children. Gavin calls him a "Boo Radley, Village Idiot" type, who has a "Quasimodo thing going on," which references parables about societies' alienation of those who do not conform to established ideals— *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Later Steve learns that Mr. Newbury is reading Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, an anti-war novel with the extended title "The Children's Crusade." *Slaughterhouse-Five* alleges that institutionalized violence corrupts societies and this allows mental illnesses to flourish. This inter-textuality demonstrates that Mr. Newbury's madness is just "an act." Mr. Newbury gives a further indication that things are not quite right when he comments, "You'd be surprised how interesting people become when they think you're really stupid." This contradicts Gavin's assertion that being unseen is equivalent to powerlessness.

¹⁹ The final confirmation of the adults' conspiracy to "brainwash" the youth of Cradle Bay is depicted when Gavin takes Steve to spy on a Blue Ribbon parents' meeting. Although parents complain that their Blue Ribbon children seem "different" and "unkind" to everyone outside their "club," Dr. Caldicott defends their behaviour: "Kids . . . have the tendency to over-react and we found that they go through a brief period of being . . . snobby, but what it really is . . . is pride. They've improved. When you soar with the eagles the pigeons below tend to look pedestrian."

his criticisms and caution, Gavin mysteriously becomes a Blue Ribbon member himself after this meeting and Steve's parents also enlist the "help" of Dr. Caldicott in "disciplining" their son. Though he tries to resist attempts to "normalize" his behaviour, Steve is taken to Caldicott's clinic. With Rachel's help Steve escapes the clinic and they leave the island in search of a new home.

While the institutional endeavour to efface diversity through discipline is satirized in *Disturbing Behaviour*, this critique often lapses into voyeurism which itself perpetuates another institution: the patriarchy. Throughout *Disturbing Behaviour* Gavin and Steve's gazes at Cradle Bay High's female pupils reveal exactly how "looking is an exercise of power." Viewers are also encouraged to take pleasure in looking at fetishized images of Cradle Bay's female pupils. Perhaps the most prominent instance of this is the representation of the Blue Ribbon group member, Lorna. Gavin describes Lorna's allure in a manner that celebrates the appeal of the female body: "The entire female gender is separated into two groups— Lorna comprises one group; all of womankind comprises the other. . . . Alas, Lorna is largely untouchable for someone of my social standing." Gavin's objectifying suggestion that "the entire female gender is separated into two groups," one to be looked at and the other not worth looking at, reveals exactly how a film that values resistance to discipline might rearticulate another power structure's mechanisms. Though Gavin's description of Lorna astutely defines Cradle Bay High's cruel "class-system" it is also inherently misogynistic.

Later in *Disturbing Behaviour* the voyeuristic pleasure to be had in looking at Lorna is again suggested when she reacts to her sexual desires after being treated by Caldicott. Lorna is aroused by Steve during one particular scene and tears open her shirt, presumably for the audience's pleasure. While male Blue Ribbon members respond aggressively by harming the girls who arouse them, Lorna's violence is self-inflicted and masochistic: she breaks a mirror with her head, calls herself "bad" and collapses into convulsions. Male Blue Ribbon members punish the women who sexually arouse them; Lorna punishes herself.

Dr. Caldicott reacts to Lorna's sexual deviancy by explaining that she'll be "missing cheerleader practice this week." By implying that the core of her existence is cheerleading, Caldicott proposes that an ideally disciplined adolescent girl should focus her energies on activities that encourage masculine sporting prowess through the display of the female body.

There are moments in *Disturbing Behaviour* where protagonist Rachel is given agency and power but for the most part she is a character with very little real narrative significance.²⁰ Like Lorna, Rachel is objectified, especially when she is the focus of Steve's gaze. Steve first sees Rachel dancing in the back of her pick-up and as he watches her, the camera moves in to a closer shot that reflects his desire. These close-ups fetishize Rachel's compartmentalized body as she runs her hands through her hair. The lyrics of a song that plays on her truck's radio combine with the image of Rachel we are presented with to suggest that she is a mindless object to be looked at. The only audible lines from the song that plays during this scene are, "I am stupid but I am cool, I am kind but I am weak." Gavin confirms this by calling Rachel "bonafide jitterbug" and introducing her as "Cook's Ridge Trash." This suggests that Rachel suffers the stigma of being labelled the school "slut," a reputation that seems largely inflicted on her because of her family's working class background. Gavin also calls Rachel a "dancing queen," which again invites viewers to take pleasure in looking at her body.

Though Rachel's struggle to resist her social status as a "slut" is portrayed in *Disturbing Behaviour*, her resistance is revealed to be ineffectual. Rachel often attempts to undermine her objectification through her detached attitude. This is indicated, for example, when she stops dancing once she realizes Gavin has been watching her. Though she attempts to repudiate her reputation as "Cook's Ridge trash," the misogynistic tone of the label persists. Rachel is frequently harassed and often needs the assistance of her male friends to avoid these assaults.²¹ At one point a Blue Ribbon member warns Rachel to stay away

²⁰ Rachel's "toughness" is specifically suggested by the fact that she drives a "masculine" pickup.

²¹ For instance, during a scene in the school basement she is nearly raped by a Chug (who refuses to believe that she is not appreciative of his sexual advances) and is "rescued" by Mr. Newbury.

from his table at the school cafeteria by commenting “this is verified turf, sluts may not apply.” The invisibility that Gavin complains about experiencing may not be isolating, but instead crucial in terms of the power he may experience when not subjected to others’ gazes. Until Lorna and Rachel cease to be the focus of patriarchal surveillance they may not experience the autonomy of their male peers. Rachel has some agency in *Disturbing Behaviour* but she is no “final girl.” Protagonists Steve and Gavin perpetuate most of the action in the film and voice its final words. While the disciplines that contemporary teenagers are subjected to are parodied in *Disturbing Behaviour*, the misogynistic conventions of Hollywood cinema prevail in the film’s representation of its female protagonists.

“Something’s Wrong, Like More Than You Being Female”

BRIGITTE. Ging, what’s going on? Something’s wrong, like more than you being just female. Can you say something please?

GINGER. I can’t have a hairy chest, B, that’s fucked.

BRIGITTE. Bitten on a full moon, now you’re hairy.

GINGER. Well, thank you for taking my total fucking nightmare so seriously . . . what if I’m dying or something?

Ginger Snaps.

Since the 1970s, many horror films have focused on the body as the site of violent transformation. Comments on such films as *Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1968), *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and the entire subgenre of the slasher movie make clear the connections between violent invasions of the body and the role of the body in society.

Ernest Mathijs, "AIDS References in the Critical Reception of David Cronenberg." (29)

Ginger Snaps portrays the experiences of young women coming to terms with their sexuality by (re)-articulating and modifying horror conventions. *Ginger Snaps* asserts itself as a twenty-first century interpretation of the "body" sub-genre in its references to canonical horror texts such as *Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, 1942), *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), *The Exorcist* and *The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1986). Mark Jankovich (2002) associates "body horror" with a "supposedly postmodern collapse of distinctions and boundaries" (6). In "body horror" films "the monstrous threat is not simply external but erupts from within the human body, and so challenges the distinction between self and other, inside and outside" (Jankovich 6). The film's portrayal of Ginger's bodily transformation highlights the cultural practices that designate menstruation as taboo.

Once Ginger begins menstruating a parallel process that transforms her into a werewolf is triggered in her body. This "event" revises early hormonal teen-horrors— such as *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (Gene Fowler, 1957)— which depict teenagers' sexual experiences as resembling a metamorphosis into a monster. Ginger's experiences also approximate those of the eponymous protagonist in *Carrie*, who, according to several interpretations, becomes monstrous after she first experiences her "curse" and discovers her telekinetic powers.²² Shelley Stamp Lindsey emphasizes that the monstrosity of *Carrie*'s supernatural angst is accentuated by the onset of her menses:

Prohibitions surrounding first menstruation and menstruating women exist in many cultures and are grounded in fears that during menses a woman is polluted or possessed by dangerous spirits. Hovering on the edge of supernatural, such women are deemed especially treacherous and subject to taboo. 'Exceptional states' like menstruation and puberty foster taboos, Freud believes, because they elicit contradictory, yet

²² Shelley Stamp Lindsey (1996), Carol Clover (1992).

equally acute sensations of veneration and dread. Poised between natural and supernatural realms, then, the menstruating adolescent girl occupies a liminal state, an object of both aversion and desire. Equating Carrie's burgeoning sexuality with her newfound telekinetic power, the film hyperbolises this connection. (284)

According to Lindsey, "*Carrie* is not about liberation from sexual repression," but instead is "about the *failure* of repression to contain the monstrous feminine" (290). Lindsey asserts that *Carrie* "enforces sexual difference by equating the feminine with the monstrous, while simultaneously insisting that the feminine position is untenable precisely because of its monstrousness" (293). Carrie's monstrousness indicates the pervasiveness of masculine fantasies in which the "feminine is constituted as horrific" (281). In this light, *Ginger Snaps*' tagline, "they don't call it the curse for nothing," implies that construction of menstruation as "other."

In "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," Creed suggests that horror films are works of abjection because they abound with images of transgressive femininity and monstrosity. Creed utilizes Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* to detail three key aspects of horror films that foreground their abjection:

Firstly, the horror film abounds in images of abjection, foremost of which is the corpse, whole and mutilated, followed by an array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears and putrifying flesh . . . secondly, there is, of course, a sense in which the concept of a border is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film; that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject . . . the third way in which the horror film illustrates the work of abjection refers to the construction of the maternal figure as abject. (71-2)

According to Creed's definitions, *Ginger Snaps* intimates abjection in all its varying forms: the film's aesthetic is excessively gory, Ginger's transformation from adolescent girl to werewolf transgresses many borders and finally, the girls' mother, Pamela (Mimi Rogers), is frighteningly unwilling to relinquish control of her daughters.

Ginger's lycanthropic transformation also has feminist connotations. In "The Cycle of the Werewolf," Chantal Du Coudray points out that since the thirties, a "preoccupation with the feminine experience of lycanthropy has characterized fantasy fiction" and that such works of literature often "explore themes that have been a consistent feature of feminist critical thought" (61). Du Coudray explains that on the surface, lycanthropy in popular fiction appears consistent with the "equation of femininity with nature in Western culture, and the systemic degradation and exploitation of both under patriarchy" (61). As Du Coudray stresses, however, lycanthropy has also been utilized by women writers in order to explore "a specifically feminine process of individuation," a process that frequently merges "feminist and ecological concerns" (60-2). Perhaps the most obviously feminist issue werewolf narratives insinuate is that of menstruation, since lycanthropes exist in monthly cycles. In many cultures the monthly cycles of the moon (recurrently coded as feminine itself) are associated with the menses, which is in turn connected to the abject.

As Creed proposes in "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," like witches, vampires and zombies, the werewolf, with its monthly transformative cycles and its body that collapses the boundaries between animal and human, belongs to the category of the abject:

Abjection . . . occurs where the individual fails to respect the law. . . . Thus, abject things are those which highlight the 'fragility of the law' and which exist on the other side of the border which separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction. But abjection is not something of which the subject can ever feel free . . . the subject is constantly beset by abjection which fascinates desire, but which must be repelled for fear of self-annihilation. The crucial point is that abjection is always ambiguous. (71)

As Creed's comments suggest, Ginger's transformation and subsequent demise reveal abjection's ambiguities. During her lycanthropic transformations, Ginger persistently refuses to obey the gendered "laws" and disciplines of her small

Canadian town. Moreover, her werewolfishness signals the collapse of the border that separates civilisation from animality, animal from human, child from adult, rational from aggressive, active from passive and feminine from masculine. Because she refuses to comply with the norms of her culture, Ginger appears to be heading for self-annihilation.

However, while *Ginger Snaps* is undoubtedly comparable to *Carrie*, particularly because Ginger's monstrous sexuality is abject and transgressive, the sisters might also be gainfully compared to other contemporary horror-protagonists, such as Sidney in *Scream* and Buffy in television's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Buffy discovers at the onset of puberty that she is "not quite" human, but instead comes from a long line of female warriors who fight demons and vampires on earth. Sidney, as she gains knowledge of her mother's sexual reputation and experiences heterosexual intercourse herself, is subjected to repeated violence at the hands of ruthless stalkers. Similarly, in *Ginger Snaps*, Brigitte discovers that Ginger's sexuality is inextricably linked to violence and monstrosity, and that she must attempt to "rescue" her sister from her own animalistic and aggressive urges. According to Clover's definition, Brigitte might be considered a "final girl." Unlike their more sexually experienced peers, Clover's "final girls" survive the slaughter that takes place in their communities. With the foresight and intuition of a "final girl," Brigitte can see that her sister's transgressions appear monstrous to the well-disciplined inhabitants of their small-town. Brigitte kills her sister partly to protect her from the ostracism and vilification she would suffer and partly because Ginger no longer values their sisterly bond.

The deviancy of Ginger's sexuality is potently contrasted with the banality of the sisters' Canadian neighbourhood. The difference between Ginger's sexuality and the town's moral position highlights the repression that underpins the female experience of adolescence in general. The opening shots of the film depict a dull and pristine suburban landscape. The camera passes over streets full of identical houses, coming to linger on a brown tussock field where

many more such houses are planned. A real estate sign reads, “Bailey Downs: A Safe and Caring Community.” The ensuing scene is juxtaposed with this image of the safe and boring Bailey Downs. A woman emerges from her garden screaming, having discovered her son playing with the severed paw of their family pet, which she then finds massacred in a quaint doghouse. Children playing hockey on the street turn and stare at the hysterical mother, shrug, and resume play. The violence perpetuated by the “Beast of Bailey Downs” has become commonplace, an uninteresting daily reality. Here Brigitte is introduced into the film’s narrative explaining to her sister what she has just witnessed outside: “Baxter’s fertilizer and everyone’s just standing there, like, staring. Why don’t they just catch the thing? How hard can it be in a place full of dead ends?” As the sisters’ conversation develops, what is revealed is that their abject fascination with the horrors of death and violence is their one escape from the “dead ends” of Bailey Downs.

The sisters’ obsession with the topic of death seems inseparable from their desire to avoid the grim suburban future that potentially awaits them. Later in the film, their mother Pamela is also portrayed as fervently desiring an escape from this existence. Ginger explains that she feels that suicide is an escape from this world because it is “the ultimate ‘fuck you’” and insists that she and Brigitte “swore” to “go together” because that way they’d be “together forever.” While Brigitte expresses an understated enthusiasm for Ginger’s suicidal plans, she also fears that their deaths could be “little more than cheap entertainment” because “even your final moment’s a cliché” in Bailey Downs. The sisters take gruesomely realistic photographs of each other faking death and these snapshots form their “Life in Bailey Downs” school project. Their teacher’s response to the project represents the community’s ambiguous attitude towards violence. His disgust at the works of art Ginger and Brigitte have laboured over reveals that society is repulsed by the violence it at once nurtures and constructs as taboo.

The Fitzgerald sisters’ fascination with quirky morbidity excludes them from the mainstream of their high school, yet it is their idiosyncratic approach to

suburban life that begins to attract the attention of their male classmates. As the sisters play hockey with other girls from their class they are watched by a group of boys from Bailey Downs High, who urge them to “run” and “bounce.” The boys’ voyeuristic pleasure is heightened by their discussion of the girls’ physical endowments. When one boy comments that he likes Ginger, she seems impressed by this attention and proudly tells Brigitte that Jason McCarty (Jesse Moss) has “checked her out.” Brigitte’s response, that “high school’s just a mindless little breeder’s machine” and she’d rather “wait it all out” in their room, expresses her attitude towards being the object of a male gaze. Her disdain for the ritualised heterosexual exchanges of her high school is focused largely on their adversary, Trina Sinclair (Danielle Hampton). The sisters fantasize about Trina being “DOA at the hair dye aisle,” having “perished” on diet pills and laxatives. Brigitte labels Trina— who symbolizes popularity and sexual experience in *Ginger Snaps*— as “cum-buckety date bait,” while Ginger confirms that their dislike for their popular classmate is related to their knowledge of her sexual experience. Ginger suggests that because Trina “screws a drug dealer” she must be “begging for negative attention.” Brigitte explains that should Ginger also become interested in boys it would mean that she is “going average” on her. Brigitte would “rather die” than experience the abandonment she believes would be a direct result of Ginger’s interest in boys. Although she swears she will not abandon her sister, Ginger becomes sexually interested in her male classmates when she begins menstruating.

What Ginger desires to be her private experience of puberty soon becomes the focus of familial discourse. The first indication that Ginger is about to begin menstruating is a back pain she feels while eating dinner with her family. The girls’ mother, Pamela, immediately deduces that Ginger’s back pain is connected to menstruation and the girls are embarrassed by her intrusive comments about their sexuality, as is their father, Henry (John Bourgeois), who expresses his revulsion at overhearing a discussion to do with female reproductive processes at his dinner table. Revealing her invasive fascination with her daughters’ bodies, Pamela claims that the girls are “not normal” because

they are three years “late” menstruating. Ginger, however, subverts her mother’s curiosity and control by morbidly suggesting that her pain must be “cancer of the spine” and Brigitte comes to her defence with more excessive explanations, offering that it could instead be tuberculosis or spindalitis. When she responds by congratulating Brigitte for her creativity Ginger details the pleasure that their grim fantasies give them.

Once Ginger begins menstruating the film deliberates over the boundaries between “normal” and “abnormal” experiences of teen sexuality. In one of the film’s opening scenes, a short line from a television commercial poses the question, “can this happen to a normal woman?” Ginger’s experience of menstruation comes to incorporate two understandings of female adolescent sexuality. The onset of Ginger’s menses is simultaneously a sexual metamorphosis and a violent possession or infection. Creed’s *The Monstrous Feminine* considers how representations of possession are connected to Kristeva’s theory of abjection:

The possessed or invaded being is a figure of abjection in that the boundary between self and other has been transgressed. When the subject is invaded by a personality of another sex the transgression is even more abject because gender boundaries are violated. . . . One of the major boundaries traversed is that between innocence and corruption, purity and impurity. (32)

Only Brigitte understands what Ginger calls her “total fucking nightmare” (her parallel experiences of menstruation and lycanthropic metamorphosis) and she comprehends that Ginger’s body is being invaded by an aggressively masculine werewolf. Although Ginger’s menstruation embodies all that is culturally taboo, Brigitte realizes that Ginger’s “true” abjection is that the transformation renders her unable to discipline her bodily urges: Ginger is behaving “like” a man.

A biology documentary that the sisters watch at school suggests parallels between the processes of Ginger’s body— which Ginger insists are not “contagious”— and some kind of an invasion or infection that Brigitte wishes to

“cure” her of. The documentary, which considers the effect of a virus on human cells, contains a voiceover: “Preying upon normal healthy cells, the intruder gradually devours the host from within. Eventually the invader consumes the host completely and finally destroys it.” Because this is placed within the context of Ginger discovering her sexual desires, audiences are encouraged to accept Brigitte’s view that Ginger is possessed by an infectious other. Brigitte’s perspective is further emphasized when Ginger begins to behave violently, killing animals at first and then people. Their first encounter with the werewolf is the catalyst in Brigitte’s growing suspicions about Ginger’s sexuality.

At the same time as they discover Ginger has begun menstruating she is attacked by a werewolf and soon after her body begins to transform rapidly. While out walking one evening, avoiding the intrusive questions of their mother, Ginger discovers menstrual blood trickling down her leg and expresses her disgust to Brigitte by commenting that she “just got the curse” and that she hopes it is not “contagious.” Ginger laments what she calls her newly acquired “normality” by explaining that she has been “killing” herself to be “different” and that her body has now “screwed” her. Ginger even asks Brigitte to shoot her if she starts “simpering around tampon dispensers, moaning about PMS.” They have barely finished discussing the cultural cliché of a teenaged girl getting her “curse” for the first time when Ginger is attacked by “The Beast of Bailey Downs” and dragged off into the forest. After rescuing her sister from the jaws of the wolf, Brigitte convinces herself that the animal was attracted to Ginger because she was menstruating. Having watched an old werewolf film, Brigitte is persuaded that Ginger’s aggressive behaviour is linked to an infection she has incurred during this incident.

Brigitte’s interpretation of her sister’s sexual development is accompanied by an increasing sense of abandonment: she is clearly alienated by Ginger’s burgeoning adulthood. As they shop for tampons, Ginger’s condescending comments about “PMS” and cramps demonstrate that her sexual experiences have already begun to disrupt her bond with Brigitte. Also indicative

of this disruption is Ginger's acceptance of Jason McCarty's invitation for a "toke" on a joint, which he explains will help with the cramps. He professes that he should know because he has three sisters who use this form of pain relief to take the "edge" off their period pain. Ginger responds that she likes her "edge" and does not want to "lose it." She dismisses Jason's knowledge while expressing her pride in her "difference," but he eventually convinces her to smoke a joint with him by calling her "chicken." In taking up the invitation for a "toke" Ginger not only accepts Jason's understanding of menstruation, but also betrays her isolationist pact with her sister. Brigitte is clearly offended by Ginger's superior attitude and becomes convinced that her sister's uncharacteristically sociable behavior is "not normal." As Brigitte's suspicions and jealousy develop, she insists they see the school nurse.

The conversation the sisters share with their school's nurse (Lindsay Leese) is noteworthy because it informs the film's critique of gendered understandings of reproductive processes.

NURSE. I'm sure it seems like a lot of blood— it's a period.

BRIGITTE. Geyser.

NURSE. Everyone seems to panic their first time. Neither of you have had a period before and you're how old?

GINGER. I'm almost sixteen, she just turned fifteen— she skipped a grade.

NURSE. A thick, syrupy, voluminous discharge is not uncommon. The bulk of the uterine lining is shed within the first few days.

Contractions, cramps, squeeze it out like a pump. In three to five days you'll find lighter, bright-red bleeding. That may turn to a brownish or blackish sludge, which signals the end of the flow.

GINGER. OK, so it's all normal.

NURSE. Very. Expect it every twenty-eight days, give or take, for the next thirty years.

GINGER. Great.

BRIGITTE. What about hair that wasn't there before, and pain?

NURSE. Uhuh, comes with the territory. You'll have to protect
against both pregnancy and STDs now, play safe!

While this scene comically contrasts with our knowledge that Ginger is in fact experiencing other more unusual physical changes, it additionally, and perhaps more significantly, depicts how foreign and strange these hormonal changes must seem to the teenagers who undergo them.

The nurse's diction articulates the scientific discourses and sexual disciplines of medicine. Emily Martin explains that medical language describes the process of menstruation as a mechanism expelling a waste product. Medical textbooks describe menstrual blood as the "debris" of the uterine lining which is the result of "necrosis" or "death tissue." Martin suggests that our scientific explanations for menstruation carry "the idea of production gone awry" or the expulsion of "products of no use" (411). Medical texts and illustrations show menstruation as "a chaotic disintegration of the form . . . which describe it as 'ceasing,' 'dying,' 'losing,' 'denuding,' and 'expelling'" (411). "These are not neutral terms, but ones that convey failure and dissolution," Martin proposes (411). Where the school nurse in *Ginger Snaps* refers to a "discharge," which is "squeezed out like a pump," she likens the blood to a kind of "garbage." She further accentuates this by calling the "discharge" a "brownish blackish sludge." Martin compares these descriptions of menstruation with the language used to explain male reproductive processes:

In one of the same texts that sees menstruation as failed production, we learn that, 'The mechanisms which guide the *remarkable* cellular transformation from spermatid to mature sperm remain uncertain . . . the most *amazing* characteristic of spermatogenesis is its *sheer magnitude*: the normal human male may manufacture several hundred million sperm per day.' (411, author's own emphasis)

In *Medical Physiology*, Martin contends, the comparison is even more explicit: "Whereas the female *sheds* only a single gamete each month, the seminiferous tubules *produce* hundreds of million of sperm each day" (411-2).²³ This could

²³ Author's own italics.

explain why both sisters view the onset of Ginger's menses as a threatening, even shameful thing. Contrastingly, their male classmates view their own sexual transformations as celebratory occasions.

The sisters' confusion and concern over Ginger's bodily transformation is further exacerbated when their mother discovers that her daughter is menstruating. According to Kristeva's definition, Pamela is the abject mother who refuses to relinquish disciplinary control over her daughters and their bodily functions. Creed's comments on motherhood and boundaries are again apposite here. Creed outlines Kristeva's argument that all individuals experience abjection at the time of their earliest attempts to break away from the mother. For Kristeva, the mother-child relation is one marked by conflict: "the child struggles to break free but the mother is reluctant to release it . . . the maternal body becomes a site of conflicting desires . . . by refusing to relinquish her hold on her child, she prevents it from taking up its appropriate place in relation to the symbolic" (*The Monstrous Feminine* 12). Pamela is entranced by her teenaged daughters' sexual development and this obsessive fascination indicates her inability to relinquish her maternal control over their bodily processes. In response to Ginger's first period, Pamela presents her with a garishly red cake in a particularly comedic moment, congratulating her for her "achievement." That the cake bears an uncanny resemblance to the sisters' bloody death "projects" is no mistake, and this in turn serves to accentuate Pamela's excessive interest in Ginger's reproductive processes.

Although she "celebrates" Ginger's menses, Pamela's knowledge of her daughters' actual experiences is deficient. *Ginger Snaps* refutes the notion of "motherly instinct," portraying Pamela as lacking in intuition and as easily manipulated by her daughters. When Henry sees his daughters behaving strangely, commenting that he thinks they are "up to something," Pamela dismisses his suspicions and suggests "they're just being normal teenage girls." Pamela's exchanges with her daughters also portray her naivety: by simply asking questions about "boys" and body image, Brigitte and Ginger are able to

distract her from the most serious of tasks. It is only when Henry finds one of Trina's fingers while raking leaves that Pamela finally becomes suspicious. When she discovers her daughters' involvement in the disappearance of their classmate, she pledges her willingness to cover up the "terrible thing" they have done because she will not let anyone "take" her daughters away. Pamela optimistically tells Brigitte that they can "start afresh" by setting their home on fire and that it will be "fun." While Pamela's escape plans indicate her love for her daughters, they also suggest her obsessive attachment to them, given the unusual lengths she will go to in order to keep them with her for as long as possible. Her willingness to protect her daughters from the law extends so far as to endanger her husband's safety and in this sense it certainly appears to provide a much-awaited excuse to escape her married life.

Brigitte's excessive interest in her sister's hormonal changes is presented as very different from her mother's obsession, more so because she witnesses her sister being devoured by a werewolf. Brigitte recognizes before anyone else that something is unusual about Ginger's behaviour. What is most frightening for Brigitte is that when she expresses these concerns she finds Ginger is relegating her hormonal changes and her encounter with "The Beast of Bailey Downs" to the category of "normal," like everyone else in her town. Ginger condescendingly tells Brigitte, "I just got my period, OK? Now I've got weird hairs, so what? That means I've got hormones and they may make me butt ugly, but they do not make me a monster . . . Did I change last night, howl at the moon and kill shit and change back this morning?" When Ginger suggests that her sister is simply jealous, Brigitte responds by outlining exactly how she finds the sexual aspect of Ginger's maturation abhorrent. Brigitte sarcastically tells Ginger that she wishes she was "haemorrhaging and sucking off Jason Mc Carty." For Brigitte, sexual maturation involves heterosexual experimentation at the expense of female friendships.²⁴

²⁴ According to Karen Hollinger, there is a definable genre of "female friendship" films and, conversely, a category of films that she labels as "anti-female friendship." *Ginger Snaps* does not comfortably fit into either category.

Here Brigitte also reveals that she might be jealous of Ginger's rapid sexual development. Brigitte implies the rivalry in her relationship with her sister when she is angered by Ginger's flirtatious behavior. While at the start of the film both sisters agree to remain "united against life," Ginger begins to ignore Brigitte as she comes to reciprocate the attention she is receiving from her male classmates. Brigitte's anger at Ginger's interest in these boys implies more than her isolation. As Pamela deduces, Brigitte's separation from Ginger signals that she is observing her sister's sexual experimentation enviously. This possibility is specifically explored in one scene where Brigitte describes her sister as "monstrous" and Ginger retorts that the only monster she sees has "little green eyes." Ginger summarizes Brigitte's jealousy by exclaiming, "Poor B, I'm growing up and obviously you're not. . . . You always wanted to be me." Brigitte herself indicates that her fascination with her sister is envious when she stares at Ginger with amazement as she attracts wolf-whistles at school. Later, as Brigitte longingly inspects Ginger's razor and shaving cream, she is again enviously in awe of her sister's bodily transformations. These antagonisms are most explicitly addressed moments after Ginger murders their school's guidance counselor. Ginger articulates her knowledge of Brigitte's jealousy when she outlines that she believes she was "nobody" before puberty. As much as Brigitte retaliates by asserting her disgust at Ginger's violent behavior, her expressions of loathing signal that she resents her sister for her rapid sexual development and social inclusion.

Similarly, much of Ginger's aggression is targeted at men she perceives to be sexually attracted to her sister. Ginger kills their school's janitor (Pat Kwong-Ho) because she fears he has been looking inappropriately at Brigitte. Ginger also aggressively pursues Sam (Kris Lemche), a local botanist and drug dealer who shows an interest in Brigitte. Sam is aware that there is something unusual about the Fitzgerald sisters because he is responsible for saving their lives when his truck hits and kills "The Beast of Bailey Downs" while it is chasing Ginger. Though Sam insists his interest in Brigitte is not sexual, and

though Brigitte is adamant that he is just trying to help her find a cure for the “infection,” Ginger senses that he might have less than honorable intentions.²⁵ Ginger appears jealous of the attention that Brigitte is receiving from Sam but also accurately estimates the potential dangers that her young sister might face by involving herself with an older man.

Brigitte does not understand her community’s sexual double standards as well as her sister does and is noticeably appalled that Ginger is abandoning her in order to partake in heterosexual rituals. She does not initially realize that Ginger’s aggressively sexual behavior is in fact in opposition to the kinds of socially constructed gender roles they had sworn to rebel against. During her first sexual experiences with Jason, Ginger takes on a traditionally masculine role, something he finds increasingly perplexing. Jason repeatedly tells Ginger to “take it easy” and when she demands that he “just lie back and relax” he revealingly asks her, “who’s the guy here?” Ginger’s “masculine” sexual aggression is accentuated when the scene ends with the inference that she has raped him. This is presented as an unusual role reversal when Brigitte mistakenly assumes it was Jason who was forceful. Ginger explains to Brigitte that she gets an “ache” that she thought was for sex but which she now realizes is a compulsion to tear things to pieces. She explains that because intercourse with Jason had not satisfied her she was forced to kill the dog next door instead. She confides to Brigitte that sex with Jason wasn’t at all like she “thought it would be,” that there was “just all this squirming and squealing” and then he was “done.” Ginger conveys the sexual double standards in their community by explaining that Jason is likely to be bragging about his encounter with her and comments, “he got laid, I’m just a lay.”

Ginger’s prediction about the likelihood of Jason boasting about his sexual exploits is proven correct but though he brags to his peers that Ginger

²⁵ Trina repeatedly indicates that she has had sexual relations with Sam and her desperation at the abandonment she faces suggests the sexual double-bind many adolescent girls face. Trina articulates the gendered nature of teen sex in her community when she calls Sam a “cherry hound,” a term which celebrates the achievements of men who seek out intercourse with virgins.

Fitzgerald “rocked his world,” his claim sours once he realizes that she has “infected” him. When Jason tells his friends about his night with Ginger they immediately notice that he has blood seeping through the crotch of his trousers and they ask him if he has his “rag.” Brigitte witnesses Jason’s humiliation as he is feminized by his peers and confronts Ginger with the possibility that this infection is sexually transmitted.²⁶ Because Ginger spreads infection and behaves aggressively during sexual intercourse, her lycanthropic transformation functions as a metaphor for her sexual deviancy and transgressive refusal to perform within the limits of normative gender roles.

When Brigitte deduces that Ginger’s “infection” is both sexually transmitted and influenced by the cycles of the moon, she decides to confront the “monster” that is taking over her sister’s body. However, Ginger has no intention of having her sexual urges curtailed by her pre-pubescent sister and regards the men who try to help Brigitte as sexual predators. When Brigitte tells Ginger that her friend Sam “knows stuff” and “wants to help,” Ginger retorts that he just wants to “get down” Brigitte’s pants. Ginger also suspects that the school janitor, a seemingly innocuous man, is having sexual thoughts about Brigitte and tells her that he was looking down her shirt. As a result of her suspicions Ginger kills the janitor. When Brigitte is upset, Ginger tells her she killed him because she didn’t like the way he “looked” at her. In another scene, Ginger’s taste for “tearing up” men and her distaste for her own wolverine tail, an apparent phallic symbol, are explicitly connected: Brigitte finds her sister trying to cut off her tail. Ginger responds by commenting, “nothing helps but tearing live things to pieces.” The implication here is that she associates this pseudo-phallus with her masculine aggression.

²⁶ Several academic and critical accounts of Canadian David Cronenberg’s early work analyse protagonists’ transformations as symbolic references to the AIDS “epidemic” (Mathijs 32-3). Mathijs explains the significance of the AIDS metaphor in cinema as a representation of “the human body in crisis” (33). Just as Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) in *The Fly* experiences a bodily infection that signals a global crisis in sexuality during the eighties, Ginger experiences menstruation as an infection that implies the persistence of these anxieties in popular representations of sexuality. This is highlighted in *Ginger Snaps* because Ginger’s lycanthropic infection is passed on by the co-mingling of blood.

When she kills the janitor Ginger further expresses the sexual aspect of her killing. After mortally wounding the janitor, Ginger remarks, “It feels so good, B. It’s like touching yourself, you know, every move right on the fucking dot, and after, you see fucking fireworks, supernova, goddamn force of nature. I feel like I could do just about anything. You know, we’re almost not even related anymore.” Here Ginger explicitly links her violence to masturbation, a sexual activity where men are not necessary. It is Ginger’s description of the hyper-exhilaration that she feels while inhuman forces are raging through her that implies her utter difference from Brigitte. Ginger’s suggestion that they are “not even related anymore” is the catalyst that pushes Brigitte towards justifying killing her sister in the film’s final scene.

The final severing of all emotional, familial and physical ties to Ginger allows Brigitte to kill her just as her metamorphosis into a werewolf is almost complete. When Brigitte goes on to express her disgust at Ginger’s sexual urges, she indicates that she does not wish to experience sexuality in the same way. She accentuates this by insisting that she’d rather be dead than become “like” Ginger.²⁷ Brigitte confirms that their suicidal promise no longer makes sense to her when she remarks to Ginger, “you said you’d die with me cos you had nothing better to do.” After Ginger suggests that she was “nobody” before her sexual transformations Brigitte is convinced that she no longer shares a bond with her sister. As she plunges the knife, and not the syringe containing the “werewolf antidote,” into her sister’s chest, Brigitte shouts, “I’m not dying with you.” While Ginger exhales her last breath they are intimate for the last time.

The reasons behind Brigitte’s murder of Ginger are ambiguous. On the one hand, Brigitte kills Ginger because she has lost her both to normality—menstruation and heterosexuality— and abnormality— her inhuman animality and disengagement with their sisterly bond. On the other hand, Brigitte kills her sister because she has become a grotesque representation of all that their community loathes about female sexuality. In this wider sense Ginger is killed

²⁷ Brigitte’s disgust for Ginger’s developing sexuality could be read as a loathing of heterosexuality. An analysis of Brigitte’s “queerness” is beyond the reach of this chapter.

because she has challenged her community's sexual taboos. When Brigitte kills Ginger because she has become infectious, she emphasizes the sexual nature of her monstrosity. Ginger is not simply monstrous because a werewolf bites her and infects her, but also because she begins menstruating for the first time during the scene where she is attacked. The sisters' confused reaction to Ginger's sexual development suggests our culture's ambivalent attitude towards female reproductive processes.

Martin's analysis of the medical descriptions for ovulation used by educational textbooks and documentaries further explains our culture's marginalization of feminine sexuality. Martin describes the "marked contrast" that is set up in medical texts between male and female: the male who "continuously produces fresh sperm," and the female who "is faced with the continuous degeneration" of her reproductive abilities. According to Martin, medical texts explain how "femininely" the egg behaves and how "masculinely" the sperm:

The egg is seen as large and passive. It does not *move* or *journey*, but passively 'is transported', 'is swept' . . . or even, in a popular account, 'drifts.' . . . In utter contrast, sperm are small, 'streamlined', and inevitably active. They 'deliver' their genes to the egg . . . and have a 'velocity' which is always remarked on . . . they can 'burrow through the egg coat' . . . and 'penetrate it.' (412, author's own emphasis)

This begins to account for Brigitte's opinion that Ginger's predatory sexual behavior is unusual or abnormal. Throughout *Ginger Snaps*, Brigitte has been reading medical accounts of menstruation and reproduction and therefore comes to see Ginger's active, or "masculine" sexual behavior as deviant.

Martin paraphrases our cultural understanding of the egg's function in reproduction, an understanding that is again informed by socially constructed gender roles and upheld by medicine's explanation of menstruation as a process by which waste is produced. Within medical texts, cultural traditions that espouse passivity as a "female attribute" and activity as a "male attribute" are

replicated in reproduction narratives. The egg is therefore described as “set apart and above” and dependant on sperm to “rescue her.” The language of reproduction Martin analyses sheds light on Ginger’s characterization in *Ginger Snaps* because she represents our culture’s ambivalent attitudes about menstruation and women’s reproductive processes in general. When Ginger behaves aggressively during intercourse she becomes an extension of the “hostile environment” of the vagina into which the sperm must make a “perilous journey.” Ginger’s sexual violence disrupts the image of the “fragile” and “dependant” young woman.

Although Ginger’s menstruation epitomizes all that is taboo about femininity, Brigitte realizes that Ginger’s “true” abjection is that the transformation is making her behave “like” a man. Brigitte primarily kills her sister because she disapproves of her behaviour and thinks Ginger’s aggression has gone “too far.” Despite her own sexual inexperience, Brigitte eventually develops an understanding of the gendered binaries that are in operation in her small town and kills Ginger partly to protect her from the ostracism and vilification she would suffer as a result of her transgressions. Ginger is also dealt this phallic punishment because she denies the importance of her relationship with her sister. Brigitte does not simply feel abandoned because she is jealous of her sister’s burgeoning sexual maturity, but also because Ginger is spending time with boys and ignoring the importance of sisterhood. However, Brigitte herself rejects their sisterly bond by killing Ginger after her transformation into an animal is complete. When Brigitte murders Ginger she acknowledges all that is untenable about their sisterly bond: that their desire for an isolated and exclusive relationship with one another is somewhat incestuous. By simultaneously depicting female bonds as important and fraught with difficulties, *Ginger Snaps* portrays the double-binds a teenage girl faces. Ginger articulates these ambiguities most convincingly when she explains that a woman can only be “a slut, a bitch, a whore, or the virgin next door.” Ginger is an embodiment of these impossible binaries: she is at once sexually attractive and monstrous, “natural” and supernatural, human and animal, feminine and transgressive, sister and rival.

“If you want to exist you have to be pretty, you have to be thin-everybody else is wallpaper”

This is how it works at Braeborne. If you want to exist you have to be pretty, you have to be thin, everybody else is wallpaper. For years I was a nobody. I watched the world from the edges and learned not to dream.

Liz, *The Hole*.

If you want to exist you either have to be a bitch or a complete slut . . . Liz and Frankie are best friends . . . they’re practically the same person. Boring, vain, shallow . . . Liz is the really nasty one.

Martyn (Daniel Brocklebank), *The Hole*.

The Hole is a film about a teenaged girl’s uncontained sexual desires, desires which result in the deaths of three of her classmates. In its gradual disclosure of plot details and character portraits, *The Hole* plays on girl power themes as protagonist Liz’s rebellion against her school’s gender hierarchies is depicted. As a character, however, Liz could be likened to many of horror’s female villains, such as antagonists depicted in *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (Curtis Hanson, 1992), *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) and *Single White Female*. Liz is a wealthy teenager who attends a private British boarding school, Braebourne, where fees are “in excess of thirty thousand dollars a year.” *The Hole* opens as Liz stumbles along a lane littered with “missing” posters and ribbons—memorials for a group of lost teenagers. Before Liz’s experiences are recounted in flashbacks, news stories convey a sense of ominous mystery that references generic iconographies from countless serial-killer films. When Liz’s story emerges, viewers are initially encouraged to assume that she was somehow abducted, raped or traumatized by a male predator. Spectators are persuaded to sympathize with Liz as she explains the components of social success at her

exclusive boarding school. Liz outlines the gendered roles that students must perform in high school in order to “survive” and her narrative seems plausible because audiences are constantly exposed to similar scenarios in “teenpic” genres. We expect Liz to be dissatisfied with her social position at Braeborne High and can hardly blame her for scheming to overcome her status as “wallpaper.” These generically informed assumptions are challenged by *The Hole*’s conclusion, which reveals that Liz’s excessive desire for a classmate has resulted in the deaths of three of her peers.

Like *The Faculty*, which oscillates between Casey’s perspective and Stokely’s viewpoint, *The Hole* maintains a dualistic identificatory focus as the characters Martyn and Liz tell different sides to the same story. Martyn’s account of the events leading up to his peer’s incarceration in “the hole” gives viewers confirmation that Liz is an unreliable narrator. Liz’s description of her relationship with Martyn reproduces a typical “teenpic” character: the psychotic outsider. Liz explains that Martyn’s “philosophy” was to “take everything” possible from the popular students at Braeborne. “He said their greed makes them easy to control,” Liz explains. Martyn, like Liz, has a theory on “how it is at Braeborne,” which he outlines to the police. His explanation summarizes Liz’s scheming character and he calls her a “bitch.” Martyn also reveals that Liz’s friend Frankie (Keira Knightley) is excessively obsessed with her appearance and his narrative portrays her as a “slut.” Liz’s narrative is exposed to scrutiny only once Martyn’s story is recounted.

It is from the perspective of an undisciplined teenaged girl that viewers are shown most of the events that transpire in *The Hole*. While Liz portrays herself as a typical teenager with “out-of-control” hormones, she has a disturbed infatuation with another student and is willing to deceive everyone in order to fulfil her sexual fantasies. Just as the representation of Martyn in *The Hole* references the “teenpic” oeuvre, Liz’s corresponding account of her desire for American Mike Steele, “son of a rock star,” is redolent of teen-narratives where

the “underdog” girl “gets” the popular guy.²⁸ Audiences are privy to flashbacks depicting Liz’s conversations with Martyn as she bemoans her “unavoidable” feminine hormones, which have “forced” her to fall in love with Mike. “I can’t help it— it’s an egg thing. When I look at Mike I see the face of an angel, the soul of a poet. I need him,” she tells her friend. Martyn’s concern that Liz might “lose it” over Mike is eventually proven to be well founded. Liz’s exaggerated feelings for Mike are directly responsible for the deaths of three of her classmates, Frankie, Geoff (Laurence Fox) and Mike. Liz’s literary description for her “tragic” love for Mike indicates that she has an unbalanced perception of her relationships with her peers.

The Hole parallels Liz’s explanation for the events that transpired in bunker with the development of her relationship with a forensic psychiatrist, Dr. Horwood (Embeth Davidtz), in its opening scenes. Dr. Horwood, an accomplished professional woman, must decipher the “truth” about what happened in “the hole.” Horwood’s words of introduction to Liz early in the film persuade viewers to see her as a reassuring adult sent to “save” a traumatized teenager. Horwood’s encouragements initially give the impression that *The Hole* will focus on the friendship between a disturbed victim of patriarchal violence and a concerned, maternal psychiatrist. *The Hole* concludes, however, with a disruption of viewers’ impressions of this relationship. Horwood is mistakenly convinced by Liz’s deceitful act and as a consequence Martyn is arrested for the murder of his peers. The story Liz tells Horwood is concocted in order to incriminate Martyn and to distract the police from discovering the truth about her guilt. By the end of the film it is apparent that Liz has been manipulating Dr. Horwood’s maternal concern in order to escape prosecution for the murder of her friends.

Liz’s explanation of her friendship with Frankie also exploits viewers’ assumptions about female friendships. Eventually, *The Hole* emphasizes the fact that Liz sacrifices the life of her best friend in order to enjoy the pleasures of her

²⁸ For example, *Sixteen Candles* (John Hughes, 1984).

relationship with Mike in “the hole.” At first, Liz recounts the story of her unequal friendship with Frankie, a popular classmate, to Dr. Horwood. Liz tells Horwood that although Frankie fitted in with the popular crowd at Braeborne, she helped repair her less popular friend’s bleach-damaged hair after her attempt to get Mike to notice her failed. Spectators are manipulated into viewing Liz as a victim of unrealistic standards of beauty as she details the importance of her friendship with Frankie. Liz tells Dr. Horwood that because she could not attract Mike’s attention through enhancing her appearance she turned to Martyn, who offered to help her escape with her object of adulation during a school field trip. Martyn’s plan was to hide his classmates in an old bunker for the duration of the fieldtrip. In flashbacks the film reveals that while locked in the bunker Liz began a sexual relationship with Mike, and that it was at this point that her desires became so unrestrained that she could not see Frankie’s bulimic illness for the life-threatening situation that it was. Liz is constructed as a woman monstrous enough to effectively kill her best friend.

Liz’s desire is constructed as monstrous when the film reveals her explanation for Mike’s death. Liz explains to Dr. Horwood that after Mike confessed to her that he couldn’t strive to live if she had died, she deduced that she had “won him.” Liz confesses to Horwood that she had admitted to Mike at this point that she had the key to the bunker door all along. Mike had called her a “bitch” and a “whore,” and blamed her for Frankie and Geoff’s deaths. Liz indicates the extent to which she has repressed Mike’s reaction to her confession as she clarifies that he fell to his death from the platform near the bunker’s door: “He was the reason I breathed. I stayed there and I felt my heart die. . . . Then I thought at least this way he’ll never grow old. . . . This way he just stays perfect.” Dr. Horwood urges Liz to make an official statement after she finishes narrating her very own romantic tragedy but the monstrous teenager is represented as experiencing no remorse. Liz’s final plan unfolds in the last minutes of the film when Martyn’s body is discovered and the key to the door of the bunker is in his pocket. Horwood is powerless to alter her superior’s decision

about Martyn's guilt because she has taken Liz back to "the hole" against police protocol. The film finishes with a shot of an unrepentant Liz grinning smugly.

The "truth" beyond Liz's performance in *The Hole* is similar to the "truth" behind Hedy's desire for closeness with Allie in *Single White Female*: both films suggest that a woman's deviant desire can only result in violence and that female friendships are never as important as heterosexual romance. Liz confirms this when she explains her "love" for Mike as follows: "Have you ever loved someone so much that you didn't care what happened to yourself. . . . Have you ever loved someone so much that you didn't exist anymore?" By echoing conventional romantic vocabulary Liz demonstrates the dark side to our culture's fetish for depicting love as an all-consuming obsession. Though Liz's marginalization at school is sympathetically portrayed, *The Hole* presents her as a monster because she is unable to discipline her desires. In true horror form, *The Hole* constructs a woman's desire as a disease.

Conclusion

Audiences whose desires are rigidly regulated experience a voyeuristic pleasure as they watch this fictional world of adolescent nihilistic hedonism. . . . Although they might not identify with the characters in the film, they nostalgically identify with the longing to act on impulse. To aid in this seductive identification, and to deflect attention away from the primary emphasis on two teenage white males, strategies are relied on that are more commonly used in the construction of patriarchal pornography and erotica.

bell hooks's review of *Kids*, "White Light." (11)

bell hooks's review of *Kids* (Larry Clark, 1996), which hinges on her analysis of the film's racist and pornographic portrayal of teenagers in New York, explains that popular celebrations of teenaged resistance to adult control

may be ideologically conservative. While teenagers' resistance to institutional discipline is celebrated in *The Faculty* and *Disturbing Behaviour*, both films employ the conventions of "patriarchal erotica." *Disturbing Behaviour* and *The Faculty* depict the experiences of teenaged girls through the lens of a "male gaze." Viewers of *The Faculty* are invited to make connections between Herrington's pre-invasion blandness and the alien occupation, but the film's concluding scenes assert hegemonic normativity. Casey and Stokely find happiness in heterosexual union and join the ranks of the "popular" and "successful" at Herrington High. Though this seems preferable to the victimization they have suffered as outsiders, they now fit in because they are more like everyone else. Casey is a hero featured on the covers of *Time* and *People* magazines and Stokely has abandoned her boyish clothes and dresses "femininely." Stokely is no longer rebellious or angry about her social status as an outsider. Similarly, Gavin and Steve's encompassing voice-overs conclude *Disturbing Behaviour*, and audiences are permitted no opportunity to view Rachel as a significant character with a future. Masculine knowledge is eventually privileged in both films and female characters are subordinated. This demonstrates that Hollywood movies might at once value resistance and rearticulate the power-laden conventions of patriarchal filmmaking.

The patriarchal conventions of Hollywood filmmaking appear less blatantly in *Ginger Snaps* and *The Hole*. Like many girl power movies, both films problematically revel in the transgressiveness of "monstrous" teenaged girls. What Ginger and Liz have in common is their deviancy; and as Creed points out, female monstrosity is almost always sexualized:

The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience. . . . As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. That phrase 'monstrous feminine' emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity. (*The Monstrous Feminine* 3)

Ginger is not simply monstrous because a werewolf infects her, but also because she begins menstruating moments before she is attacked. Ginger's revulsion at the onset of her menses highlights our culture's ambivalent attitude towards female sexuality. As Foucault suggests in his analysis of sexuality, capitalist subjects are rendered docile when they subject their bodily desires to the disciplinary surveillance of medical and educational institutions. Ginger invites the retribution delivered to her in the film's concluding moments because she refuses to discipline her transgressive urges by seeking help. The concluding uncertainties depicted in *Ginger Snaps* emphasize the liminal nature of sexual maturation for adolescent girls and the binaries that continue to code feminine sexuality.

Martyn echoes these binaries in *The Hole* where he explains that in order to survive at Braeborne women have to be "bitches" or "sluts." Martyn's definitions for the survival tactics available to girls at Braeborne are proven accurate when it is revealed that Liz is "the bitch" responsible for the deaths of three of her friends. Liz's determination to "have" Mike at the cost of her friends' lives suggests that teenage girls who are sexually active are prone to dangerously abject desires. Frankie's sexual behaviour is another indication of this; her promiscuity is represented as the cause of her unhealthily narcissistic obsession with her appearance. Liz, however, is revealed to be the film's "monster" and her view that girls are forced to conform to unrealistic aesthetic ideals is refuted by her vilification in *The Hole*.

The Hole's representation of the relationship between Liz and Dr. Horwood also conforms to patriarchal cinematic conventions. Hollinger argues that many Hollywood products portray "destructive" female relationships that mock the possibility of women forming "bonds of loyalty and affection" (207). Liz manipulates her friendship with Dr. Horwood in order to implicate Martyn for the crimes she herself was responsible for. Liz's jealousy over Frankie's "one night stand" with Mike also fits Hollinger's description of films that negate female bonds: "They represent women's friendships as plagued by jealousy,

envy and competition for men, and they teach women to beware of and fear one another” (207). *The Hole* implies that women are victimized by unrealistic aesthetic ideals but ultimately concludes that female friendships are ineffectual and that feminine sexuality is inherently dangerous. Neither *Ginger Snaps* nor *The Hole* presents any reasonable possibility for feminine sexual maturation. Like *Disturbing Behaviour* and *The Faculty*, *Ginger Snaps* and *The Hole* portray adolescent feminine sexuality as abject and untenable.

CHAPTER 3

The “Sexploitational” Pleasures of Noir: “Filles Fatales” in *Wild Things* and *Cruel Intentions*.

I want to counter [the] tendency to locate rape-revenge within the horror genre by developing an analysis which argues that rape-revenge, together with the erotic thriller, form part of an ongoing historically, rather than generically, specific cycle. In doing so, I will attempt to displace the traditional emphasis on male spectatorial pleasure . . . and begin to explore why these films and the representations of women they construct are of such interest to feminist critics.

Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers*. (22)

This chapter, which is informed by Read’s assertion that rape-revenge themes are not confined to the horror genre, considers the role of “filles fatales” in recently produced noir films. Read outlines the limitations to feminist scholarship on dangerous women:

Work on the deadly doll and femme fatale . . . has taken its cue from more historically contextualized studies of film noir, which have read the emergence of the femme fatale as an articulation of anxieties about the changing position of women following World War II. . . . However, work on the deadly doll and femme fatale of the erotic thriller and neo-noir has tended to side-step discussion of the female avenger. Instead, rape-revenge receives its most extended discussion in Clover and Creed’s studies of the horror genre. (22-3)

Teenage girls in *Wild Things* (John Mc Naughton, 1998) and *Cruel Intentions* (Roger Kumble, 1999) seek revenge for gender crimes in a manner that might be compared to Vanessa Lutz’s vengeance in *Freeway*, Violet and Corky’s scheme against the mafia in *Bound*, and Sidney and Gale’s defiant self-defence in the

Scream trilogy. *Wild Things* and *Cruel Intentions* voyeuristically depict young women's bodies but both films also document the repressive rules and disciplines that teenaged girls must negotiate in their everyday lives.

The box office earnings of *Wild Things* and *Cruel Intentions* attest to the fact that stories featuring the exploits of undisciplined teenagers who scheme are profitable commodities. In a review of *Wild Things*, Mike Palshaw argues that the film bombards its viewers with a "visual overkill" that abandons "all sense of shame for an attempt at unadulterated sexploitation." Palshaw goes on to contend that *Wild Things* "follows all the clichés about psychological thrillers and deceitful scandals" but is "about the guilty pleasures revealed in the process" (*Daily Beacon*). This is most evident in the film's title, which capitalizes on the sexual appeal of "naughty girls." Palshaw specifically outlines this by comparing the film to *Jerry Springer*, tabloid television and pornography. The film's title insinuates another patriarchal construction by exploiting the notion that woman is "close to" nature. The film's opening scenes, which depict alligators and other assorted swamp creatures, further construct the eponymous protagonists as animalistic and "other." As the film's trick ending confirms, however, Suzie Toller (Neve Campbell) is not driven by animalistic desires but is instead a clever and calculating schemer. Though Palshaw accurately describes the film's "guilty pleasures," he misses the point of its conclusion in his review (perhaps because reviewers of *Wild Things* were begged to reveal as little as possible about its finale). *Wild Things* begins by focusing on the female body but spectators are ultimately invited to identify with Suzie as she is revealed to have enjoyed the upper hand in the film's plot of "revenge, corruption and seduction" (Palshaw).

Cruel Intentions, conversely, does not allow teen trickster Kathryn Merteuil (Sarah Michelle Gellar) such agency and power. Kathryn has been "taught her lesson" by the conclusion of *Cruel Intentions*— that young women who scheme should not succeed. Cindy Fuchs's review of *Cruel Intentions* misses this point and instead focuses on the film's class politics:

Rife with gorgeous, perfectly coifed private high school students, [*Cruel Intentions*] makes no bones about its moral lesson. . . . Unsupervised kids go bad. . . . This film's immediate thematic precursor is Larry Clark's *Kids*, in which poor unparented youngsters turned mean and violent. In *Cruel Intentions*, the villains are rich, but the film avoids even the most obvious class analysis. (*Philadelphia City Paper*)

Though Fuchs mentions Larry Clark's *Kids*, she overlooks a comparison that would reveal the films' similar portrayal of normative gender relations. Just as virginal, white-skinned Jennie (Chloe Sevigny) endows *Kids* with its only sense of pathos, Annette Hargrove (Reese Witherspoon), *Cruel Intention's* chaste protagonist, is touted as the film's heroine. bell hooks critiques *Kids* for its pornographic and racist portrayal of the plight of contemporary youth, and *Cruel Intentions* could be condemned for similar reasons (*Sight and Sound*). Though Annette's "purity" is compromised by her experiences with Kathryn's stepbrother Sebastian (Ryan Phillippe), she is portrayed as a protagonist worthy of admiration because he is her only sexual partner.

Teenage women in *Cruel Intentions* seek power and social acceptance by two different methods but only one route is condoned: that of obedience and sexual abstinence. Annette is placed at the centre of the film's ideological position because she conforms to her rich community's advocacy of religious submission for young women. Kathryn's behaviour is represented as outside the boundaries of acceptable conduct for young women when she participates in the same sexual activities and malicious schemes that her brother is forgiven for by the end of *Cruel Intentions*. Kathryn's deviancy is openly exposed by the film's conclusion and she is punished for her transgressions. While Suzie is granted ample revenge for the gender crimes committed in her community, Kathryn is rigorously rebuked and publicly humiliated for seeking vengeance. The philosophies of girl power are refuted in *Cruel Intentions* as women scheme against each other and fail to enact revenge against the men who have wronged

them. The character Suzie in *Wild Things*, however, demonstrates the extent to which the tenets of girl power are being incorporated in neo-noir.

“Her Whole Fantasy is Him”

Rape— real, threatened, or implied— has been a staple of American cinema more or less from the beginning. Until the early 1970s, however, rape was typically a side theme. . . . In the 1970s, rape moved to centre stage . . . the representation of rape has undergone a striking evolution since the early seventies.

Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws*. (138-9)

As Clover points out, “low-brow” films that represent women as “avengers” require an audience’s belief in “female self-sufficiency, both physical and mental,” for narrative development (138). The character Suzie Toller in *Wild Things* is predated by a tradition of noir femme-fatales and horror “final girls” who can scheme their way out of many dangers. It is only for a moment that viewers might be tempted to conclude that lawyer Ken Bowden (Bill Murray) concocted the elaborate scheme that tricked rich “society-mom” Sandra Van Ryan (Teresa Russell) out of millions of dollars. It becomes obvious that Suzie has been manipulating people and events since the beginning of *Wild Things* when she walks away with a briefcase containing the money from the film’s scam and refuses to answer any of her lawyer’s questions. As Duquette (Kevin Bacon), a corrupt detective in *Wild Things*, points out, “people aren’t always what they appear to be.” Though the action takes place off screen, the film *seems* to depict Suzie being murdered. Duquette also *seems* dismayed at a police inquiry that finds him guilty of suspiciously shooting local teenager Kelly Van Ryan (Denise Richards). Because he convinces Detective Gloria Perez (Daphne Rubin-Vega) of his concern for his “angry, sexually confused” students, it also *seems* as if Sam Lombardo (Matt Dillon) is a skilled conman who plays the role of a hardworking guidance counsellor. The film’s most successful con-artist,

however, is Suzie Toller, and Duquette is revealed to be the focus of her plot for revenge. Suzie has been involved in compromising sexual encounters only in order to subvert her enemies' assumptions about her intelligence. Suzie, that is, utilizes rape laws to manipulate even those who appear close to her, skilfully outwitting men from Florida's underworld networks and judicial systems.

While many reviewers comment on the "sexploitational" themes apparent in *Wild Things*, few note its interest in the class and gender politics of rape.¹ The film's five protagonists are introduced during an assembly at Blue Bay High, where Lombardo introduces Detectives Duquette and Perez from Blue Bay's "Sex Crimes Unit." Lombardo tells the students that they've all "heard the words 'date rape' and 'sexual harassment'" and explains that they are at the assembly to give a "fresh perspective" on these subjects. Before their presentation can begin, however, protagonist Suzie Toller is shown shouting from the back of her school's assembly hall that "this prick" (Duquette) can "kiss her ass." Duquette ignores the outburst and suggests that they begin with the question, "what is a sex crime?" The low level of seriousness with which these students treat such issues is articulated by one student who offers that for him a "sex crime" is "not getting any."

As the film's rape-narrative unfolds, it is established that protagonist Kelly Van Ryan is a cheerleader from Blue Bay's most wealthy family and that Suzie Toller is an independent social outcast from the town's lowest socio-economic neighbourhood. Like many other resourceful girl power heroines, Suzie knows how to fix things and take care of herself. Whereas Kelly

¹ Palshaw's review of *Wild Things* is not alone in its estimation of the film's "sexploitational" qualities. Roger Ebert's review for *The Chicago Sun-Times* describes the movie as a "lurid" "Florida Noir" film; a "three-way collision between a soft-core sex film, a soap opera and a B-grade noir." Ruthe Stein of *The San Francisco Chronicle* compares the film to Russ Meyer's creations but like Ebert admits that she enjoyed the movie: "as long as *Wild Things* stays in *Valley of the Dolls* territory, it's amusing in a trashy sort of way." Stein suggests that the film is so "sexploitational" that she thought "for a moment" that Matt Dillon and Kevin Bacon might end up in bed together to "balance out" the sex scenes between Neve Campbell and Denise Richards. This is of course a taboo subject that few mainstream Hollywood films would dare tackle. The film's lesbian sex-scenes only go so far as to combine classical cinema's fetishization of the female body with pornography's obsession with lesbian sex, whereas a homosexual relationship between Bacon and Dillon would disrupt too many mainstream sexual boundaries.

seductively begs Lombardo for a lift home after school one evening, Suzie refuses a ride, even when her car breaks down. Suzie displays her resourcefulness and self-sufficiency by repairing the engine of her car as Lombardo and Kelly look on. Kelly's discriminatory comments construct Suzie as "white trash," like Nancy in *The Craft* and Vanessa in *Freeway*. Kelly, for instance, comments, "Where'd she get those shoes? Whores for less?" This scene reveals that Lombardo shares inappropriately close relationships with his students when Kelly reminds him that he has promised to let her wash his jeep the coming Sunday for charity. The film's rape narrative begins to unfold when Kelly and a companion arrive to wash Lombardo's jeep that weekend and it is implied that she has unsuccessfully attempted to seduce him.² The film's plot eventually rests on the mystery surrounding the events that have occurred during these scenes.

Wild Things further insinuates that Kelly has an unbalanced desire for adult attention as her relationship with her mother, Sandra Van Ryan, is explained. Their mother-daughter relationship is characterized by competition for men, especially Lombardo, and Sandra Van Ryan is portrayed as a promiscuous woman who has little time for her daughter.³ This plot strand is also presumably designed to divert viewers' attention away from Suzie's positioning at the film's narrative core, which in turn adds to the concluding "twist" that *Wild Things*' suspense relies on (that is, Suzie's intelligence and power). In these sequences, Sandra Van Ryan is shown in bed with her "hired help" when she receives a phone call from Blue Bay High's message system informing her Kelly was absent from school that day. (The message system indicates that absenteeism is so common and mundane an issue for Blue Bay High that it only warrants the attention of an answering service). Sandra Van Ryan's reaction to her daughter's erratic attendance at school is similarly

² Kelly's body is depicted via a series of fetishized close-ups here as she washes the jeep.

³ It is implied during this scene that Sandra Van Ryan has had sexual relations with Lombardo. When Sandra Van Ryan suggests that she will keep him from becoming one of the included social elite in Blue Bay if he continues to ignore her sexual demands, her comments demonstrate the class conflicts that exist in their small town. Sandra Van Ryan also tells Kelly during this scene that she can "have" whichever employee she wants and casually offers her a sedative when she mentions how much she misses her father, who has recently committed suicide.

customary: she appears bored with the news. Sandra Van Ryan confronts her daughter as to her reasons for not going to school and Kelly eventually explains that Lombardo has raped her. Here the film cuts to a scene at the Blue Bay Police Station, where Sandra Van Ryan angrily explains to Detectives Duquette and Perez that her daughter “does not get raped in Blue Bay.” Sandra Van Ryan sees the sexual attack made on her daughter as an attack on herself and angrily remarks “that son of a bitch must be insane to think he can do this to me.”

The remainder of Kelly’s testimony is depicted in explicit detail as Perez videotapes the interview.⁴ Perez demonstrates the intersections between class and gender politics in Blue Bay by expressing concern for Lombardo’s wellbeing as she discusses Kelly’s testimony with her colleagues. Perez conveys her disbelief to her colleagues by suggesting that there is no physical evidence of the rape because “nothing happened.” She insists that her “gut” is telling her Kelly is “acting,” that “she set it up to be alone with him so that he could come on to her” and is “upset because he didn’t.” Perez indicates her willingness to “go with her gut” or “feminine instinct” but it is significant that as a female detective she repeats a frequently used “excuse” for date rape— that a woman “invites” rape when she “sets things up so that a man can come onto her.” Perez further asserts her sceptical “instinct” by asking if they may request that Kelly take a polygraph test. Duquette, however, opposes this, arguing that Blue Bay’s social hierarchies are as unchangeable as Sandra Van Ryan has indicated. Duquette’s view is contrary to Perez’s: he believes that men should not put themselves in a position where they are alone with the women they maintain power over. Perez’s request for a lie-detector test is denied, though she ridicules Duquette’s fear of the Van Ryans’ lawyer. Perez’s apprehensions are also ignored when her superior, Hunter (Jeff Perry), explains that he is powerless to

⁴ That *Wild Things* describes the rape narrative for the audience’s titillation illustrates that it is, as many reviewers have noted, generically close to pornography. When Detective Perez asks Kelly for the details of the rape that might lead to admissible forensic evidence, Kelly provides the expected responses: “I said stop. I screamed. I mean that’s how it sounded in my head. He hurt me . . . he had my wrists pinned behind me. He kept saying ‘let it happen, let it happen.’” However, as she goes on, the humiliation of the alleged rape begins to surface: “He just stopped. It’s hard to remember exactly. I know one thing he said. He said, ‘Don’t worry, I didn’t come.’ I can’t forget that. He said, ‘No little girl can ever make me come.’”

stop legal processes initiated by a Van Ryan. Hunter and Duquette insist they must investigate Kelly's allegations because they feel intimidated by the Van Ryans' clout in their community, not because they believe her.

The class politics that exist in Blue Bay are further highlighted as Lombardo struggles to find a lawyer who will challenge the Van Ryans in court, and as Suzie Toller contacts the police to allege that Lombardo has raped her. While Lombardo finds a lawyer, Ken Bowden, who finds "shit" on Kelly Van Ryan, Suzie fares less well with Blue Bay police force.⁵ Blue Bay's sex crimes unit responds slowly to Suzie's allegations and in contrast to the speedy response Kelly's claims elicited. When Duquette and Perez arrive at Suzie's trailer home she complains about the time they took to respond and has a valid point about the attention that poorer residents in Blue Bay receive from its police force. Moreover, as the detectives question Suzie about the night that Sam allegedly raped her, Duquette is impatient. Though Perez does not alter her approach from that used while questioning Kelly, Suzie does not feel as convinced as her more privileged classmate that the law will have faith in her story. When Perez asks the routine question, "Did you ask him to stop?" Suzie responds, "What difference does it make? Nobody's gonna believe me anyway." However, Suzie's final account of the rape—which mirrors Kelly's—is central to the trial depicted in the subsequent scenes of *Wild Things*. The doubt Perez had earlier expressed about Kelly's allegations was presumably a result of her social position as a working-class detective, and her interest in Suzie as a victim of sexual violence during this scene establishes her as a sympathetic character.

The intersections between gender and class politics are further developed in *Wild Things* as Lombardo's trial is portrayed. Lombardo's defence hinges on bringing Kelly's character into disrepute and his well-recognized career as guidance counsellor to the attention of the jury. A reporter outside the

⁵ Because Lombardo is a well-known womaniser who is frequently "busy chasing booty at the yacht club," citizens in Blue Bay accept that he is also capable of raping his students. Lombardo is forced to find a lawyer in an "ethnic" suburb of Blue Bay (the offices are situated in a grimy strip mall next door to a pawnshop, and Mexican music plays conspicuously as he arrives).

courthouse explains the problems young women must face in presenting such charges to a court of law: “in the end the jury must choose between the words of these two eighteen year old girls and that of Sam Lombardo.” When the examination of the witnesses begins it is quickly revealed that the jury’s decision will rest less on a rape victim’s statement than on the ability of lawyers to find “dirt” in their opponents’ pasts and to provoke an emotive response. After being rigorously cross-examined over her record of drug charges, Suzie ultimately admits that their rape allegations were based on revenge fantasies, which appear all too plausible to the judge when expressed by a young woman. Suzie confesses that Kelly had talked her into making her statement because she holds a “grudge” against Lombardo: “She’s in love with him . . . her whole fantasy is him since her old man died. Then she found out that Mr Lombardo was doing her Mom.” Suzie’s testimony also demonstrates her rebellious desire to ridicule the police force that incarcerated her at a young age. Suzie remarks at one point, “When Kelly said we should do this, I thought, cool, all these big shots screwing me over, like the cop, Duquette. Now they’re gonna get screwed.” The court’s willingness to believe that both girls aspire to punish a man of authority who has refused their sexual advances is demonstrated when the case is dismissed. The court’s decision to reject their statements as the hysterical testimonies of jealous girls is validated when Kelly is unable to control her anger at Suzie’s comments. Kelly’s resentment is especially convincing because it is directed at her mother—the competition that exists between women for the attention of men is an established norm in Hollywood cinema.

“That girl could do just about anything she put her mind to”

For revenge fantasies to work, there must be something worth avenging . . . [in] rape-revenge films, that something has to do not only with rape, but with the power dynamic between men and women that makes rape happen in the first place and, in the second, that makes it so eminently avengable.

Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws*. (144)

I admit that *Wild Things* would not comfortably fit into the category of rape-revenge films that Clover analyses in *Men, Women and Chain Saws*. However, Suzie's scheme rests on an "analysis of quotidian patriarchy," which Clover insists female revenge is predicated on in cinematic depictions of rape revenge (144). Suzie violence appears justified when she avenges Duquette's murder of a child from "The Glades"—he has, after all, also callously murdered Kelly. It is Suzie's account of her motive for murdering Lombardo, however, which communicates the feminist premises behind her scam. Suzie explains that she is disgusted by the way men like him "cruise" through life, all the while taking advantage of less fortunate women. Clover contends that narratives of revenge insist upon male spectators' identification with vengeful women (*Men, Women and Chain Saws* 152) and when viewed thus *Wild Things* exhibits more feminist potential than its reviewers give it credit for. Spectators are encouraged to identify with Suzie's feminist motivations for revenge by the end of *Wild Things*.

While the opening scenes of *Wild Things* play upon the male nightmare of false accusations of rape, its concluding scenes initially appear to pander to male fantasies. The film depicts Lombardo returning to his sleazy motel room the night the charges against him are dismissed, and Kelly and Suzie materialize to join him in a threesome. Lombardo's power within these liaisons *seems* demonstrated when he explains their need for discretion: "One more celebration is OK if we're in agreement that from hereon out we do exactly as I say—now I want you two to kiss." However, as *Wild Things* develops it is increasingly apparent that both Kelly and Suzie have scammed all adults by convincingly performing their respective roles of "spoilt brat" and "white-trash drug-addict."⁶

⁶ Another aspect of the girls' role-playing is their lesbian relationship. When Kelly comforts Suzie one night, *Wild Things* presents more voyeuristic pornographic fare: as the girls touse in the Van Ryans' pool, the physical tension of their argument develops into another display of lesbian sex. Audiences watch from the perspective of Duquette's digital camera, which he has been using to film their sexual encounter. This emphasizes the fact that their display might be for Duquette's benefit. Because the girls are later revealed to have scammed Duquette, it seems they would be aware that he is watching.

The concluding scenes of *Wild Things* renounce Duquette's control over the girls' fate and Lombardo's power as coordinator of their plot. These scenes are set on a Caribbean island where Duquette believes he is meeting with Lombardo to collect his share of the money from the scam. Lombardo, however, ensures that his "partner" is thrown overboard when they take a spin in his new yacht—purportedly because he is disgusted that Duquette actually killed Kelly. When Duquette survives, Suzie emerges from below deck to remedy the botched job, explaining why she has little regard for his life: "You really shouldn't have killed Kelly and you shouldn't have killed that kid out in the Glades either." It is clear that Suzie also intends revenge on Lombardo once Duquette is dispensed with. Though she complains that Lombardo is paranoid for thinking she might spike his drink, his concerns are justified. Lombardo insists he just wants to "cruise" and Suzie clarifies that "cruising" is a luxury only men can indulge in:

You like to cruise. Take college, for instance, I bet the only classes you took were the ones where the finals were multiple choice. And you'd never buy the books, you'd always find some girl to loan you hers and of course then you'd have to fuck her after that. Well I've got a good pop quiz for you, multiple-choice, of course: before sailing away on the Helios, Medea killed King Creon and the princess with what? A rock, a spear gun, or a little poison?

Lombardo guesses correctly but his last minute intelligence does not save his life. Lombardo was never cunning enough to have thought up such a clever scam: the plan has been Suzie's all along.

As the film's credits roll viewers are shown how Suzie carefully concocted the entire swindle, using compromising photos of Lombardo and Kelly to blackmail them. She then engineered Lombardo's friendship with Duquette, insisting that a "dirty" cop would "love" her plan, especially the idea of killing her. Lombardo was even too gutless to perform during the staging of Suzie's murder: she had to pull her own teeth out. Suzie is depicted as smart enough to have concocted the whole scam when she collects her money from Bowden at a beachside café in the Caribbean. As Bowden hands over the money,

he expresses admiration for Suzie's clever schemes, exclaiming that he hopes he never gets her mad. Suzie establishes that she has no desire to obey orders when she walks away, refusing to answer Bowden's last request that she be "good."

Perez is also depicted as shrewd and perceptive during the film's final scenes. Perez visits Suzie's guardians (Carrie Snodgrass and Marc Macaulay), who recount the story of a murder Duquette committed in "The Glades." Davey—the seven-year old murdered by Duquette—had witnessed the Detective assaulting a prostitute. Suzie's guardians also explain that she was an expert sailor and that when they had her IQ tested once it was "way up there, round two hundred." She could do "anything she put her mind to," they proudly insist. This estimation of Suzie's talents is cut with a shot of her confidently sailing Lombardo's new yacht, and the film concludes with this image. *Wild Things* is shown here to be primarily about a young woman scheming her way out of poverty in order to spite her community's narrow-mindedness. Suzie's revenge is specifically enacted to punish those men in her life who have abused positions of power. Perez's eventual awareness of Suzie's part in the scam serves to further reinforce the film's depiction of intelligent, powerful women. That Perez presumably does little to investigate Suzie's guilt further implies that she understands why the young girl has embezzled the money.

"Keep Your Friends Close and Your Enemies Closer"

While Sebastian is casually open about his reputation, student body president Kathryn has to cloak her routine sexual adventures in strictest secrecy. . . . the late 1780s and the late 1990s have little to do with each other . . . in a world of automatic birth control, communication and putative classlessness, this kind of scenario becomes less fraught with actual danger than simply mildly titillating. . . . De Laclous' Marquise became "a virtuoso of deceit" because her repressive, male-dominated society left her little other choice.

Gemma Files, *Film.Com*.

Unlike Laclos, who dispatches her counterpart to a convent where she dies, Kumble rewards Annette for her virtue. Speeding off in Valmont's Jaguar, she's sent out into the world, enriched by her experiences.

Edward Lawrenson, *Sight and Sound*.

Cruel Intentions— a remake of Choderlos De Laclos's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*— depicts the foibles of a group of wealthy Manhattan teenagers. Reviews that compare *Cruel Intentions* with the original text raise crucial points about both narratives' gender politics but tend to simplify the characters of Annette and Kathryn. Files assumes that because "modern" women have access to birth control, advanced communication and environments of "putative classlessness," negotiations like Kathryn's are less dangerous than the deceits of De Laclos's Marquise. Kathryn's insistence that she has to "act like Mary Sunshine twenty four seven" so that she "can be considered a 'lady'" would suggest otherwise. Kathryn's lament clearly reinforces the film's depiction of the imbalanced gender relations that exist in New York's upper classes. Files's contention that contemporary society is "putatively classless" is also misguided: the world of *Cruel Intentions* depicts privilege that is by no means typical of New York.⁷ The cruelty of Kathryn's conduct is emphasized in *Cruel Intentions* when her society's hypocrisies are effaced. Though the film ends with Annette driving Sebastian's Jaguar Roadster along a freeway leading out of the corrupt city (as Lawrenson points out), it is asserted that she deserves such exhilaration and freedom only because she has obeyed the rules of polite society. This message is mirrored in the film's depiction of Sebastian, who until his death appears as the film's central character. Sebastian is as "cruel" as Kathryn but he expresses regret and repents through his love for Annette. Kathryn, however, is not absolved of her sins as Sebastian is in *Cruel Intentions*.

⁷ *Cruel Intentions* focuses on the lives of wealthy Manhattan teens, presumably so as to display as many luxurious commodities as possible. The film's ostentatious settings also function to allow protagonists the mobility and economic freedom necessary for their schemes to take place.

Unlike Kathryn, Sebastian need not conceal his behaviour to experience pleasure and the admiration of peers. The film's opening scene, which depicts Sebastian's conduct during an appointment with his therapist, Dr. Greenbaum (Swoosie Kurtz), celebrates his sadistic ability to conspire. Greenbaum explains to Sebastian that without "great parenting" adolescence can go "awry" but her clichéd adage is no match for his skill at manipulation and deceit. Greenbaum's materialism during this session is ridiculed unforgivingly and like many female characters in *Cruel Intentions* she is presented as a caricature worthy of Sebastian's scorn. Greenbaum doodles dollar symbols on her notepad while Sebastian talks and this supports his allegation that she is overcharging him. This scene goes on to depict how easily Sebastian dupes Greenbaum and her daughter (Tara Reid). Sebastian effortlessly convinces his therapist that he is "cured" of the compulsion to deceitfully deflower young virgins, while having only just posted nude pictures of her daughter on the internet. Though Greenbaum snobbishly alleges that her daughter is "an exceptionally rounded young woman" who is out of Sebastian's "league," his revenge still seems particularly ruthless. It is clear that Greenbaum's daughter has had her "reputation" destroyed for the sake of Sebastian's whimsical desire to exact revenge on his therapist. In the moral world of *Cruel Intentions* this type of behaviour is forgivable only when it is Sebastian's.

Kathryn's carefully constructed façade, which she must uphold in the company of other members of Manhattan's upper-class society, is portrayed as similarly deceitful in the film's opening scenes. During a meeting with Mrs. Caldwell (Christine Baranski), the mother of a young student Kathryn is to mentor at their prestigious prep school, she is described as "one of the most popular girls at school." Mrs. Caldwell tells her naïve daughter Cecile (Selma Blair) to "listen to whatever Kathryn has to say" and that if she does she'll "go far." Mrs. Caldwell asks Kathryn where she "gets her strength" from and her reply expresses an exaggerated regard for religious traditions: "I know this sounds corny but whenever I feel the temptations of peer pressure I turn to God

and he helps me through the problem.” Viewers learn that Kathryn’s religious devotion is a scam when Sebastian arrives and the Caldwells are chased away by his suggestive comments about Cecile—the cross that she wears around her neck contains her stash of cocaine. While her brother might get away with looking up a young girl’s skirt, Kathryn must conceal her sexual exploits.⁸

As this scene continues, Kathryn articulates her disdain for her community’s niceties and indicates that her relationship with Sebastian is her only outlet for expressing her uncensored opinions. Kathryn explains that she has “a mission” for Sebastian when he sighs that he is sick of sleeping with “insipid Manhattan Debutantes.” The mission is to seduce Cecile (who her ex-boyfriend, Court, has fallen for) and turn her into the “premier tramp of the New York area.” Should there be a blatant attack made on her “ex,” Kathryn elaborates, it could be traced back to her. Kathryn’s rationalization for hurting her “ex,” however cruel the plan might be, is that her “feelings were hurt” when she learned he had fallen for Cecile. She clarifies that should her plan succeed, her ex’s “new little princess” will be “damaged goods.” Kathryn may not exact “revenge” on her “enemies” in the open way that Sebastian can; she must “attack” her enemies indirectly by utilizing society’s gendered double standards, victimizing other women in the process. This creates an environment in which women’s friendships with each other are not easily maintained and where Kathryn must perceive of other women as “enemies.”

Kathryn is able to concoct her plan only because she understands the competition that supposedly exists between women for the attention of men. Her schemes are also derived from sibling rivalry, which Sebastian emphasizes when he explains that he has found his own “challenge”: Annette Hargrove. Annette, Sebastian recounts, has published her “Virgin’s Manifesto,” “Why I Plan to

⁸ During this scene Mrs. Caldwell’s racial prejudice is also exhibited. When she explains to Cecile that she must “keep her legs together,” Mrs. Caldwell insists “this isn’t Jamaica,” demonstrating that the social principles Kathryn must conform to are openly bigoted. While racial prejudice is critiqued in *Cruel Intentions*, racism is also perpetuated. Cecile’s love interest, Roland (who is older than the teenagers and dark-skinned), is easily duped and reacts aggressively rather than rationally when he discovers that Sebastian has seduced Cecile.

Wait,” in a teen magazine. Sebastian has confidence in his masculine prowess and argues that his plan to deflower this debutante will be appreciated by his peers. “Annette will be my greatest victory,” he tells his sister. Kathryn, however, is convinced that she has the ability to outwit Sebastian, and promises him that if he can successfully seduce Annette she’ll give him that “something” he’s been “obsessing about ever since their parents got married”—her body. Kathryn alleges that he cannot help but accept her challenge because she’s the only person he can’t “have” and it “kills” him. Sebastian reluctantly agrees that if Kathryn wins the bet (that is, if he fails to seduce Annette) he must give her his vintage Jaguar Roadster. Kathryn cheerfully calls out “happy hunting” as they set off to put their plans into action, which communicates that they see innocent teens like Cecile and Annette as “prey.”

Sebastian’s “prey,” Annette, is constructed in *Cruel Intentions* as a headstrong and independent young woman who has faith in her own moralistic perspective. Sebastian’s initial attempts to seduce Annette take place when he leaves New York to stay at a country estate, where she is also staying while her parents look for a house in the city.⁹ Sebastian’s first conversation with Annette illustrates that she is not as naïve as he had presumed: she responds to his seductive techniques by commenting that she is “well informed” of his “reputation” for promising girls “the world” just to “get them into bed.”¹⁰ Later, when Sebastian invites Annette to join him for a swim at his Aunt’s pool, he places the blame on her when she accidentally encounters him naked. Here Sebastian reverses a situation that verges on sexual assault by making Annette feel awkward and embarrassed. Annette, however, regains control by asserting her suspicions: “Listing my qualities on your fingers is not going to get you anywhere with me. The best you can hope for is my friendship and you’re walking a fine line with that.” Annette initially appears determined to resist Sebastian’s charms but her opinion alters as she is slowly convinced by his

⁹ Annette’s family is in the process of moving to Manhattan from Kansas and this fact contributes to the movie’s depiction of her as an ingénue who is uncorrupted by the city.

¹⁰ Perplexed by Annette’s knowledge of his “reputation,” Sebastian cannot think of a counter-attack to her estimation of his exploits and his prejudices surface when he assumes that because she is not interested in him she must be a lesbian.

seductions. Annette is ultimately persuaded to relinquish her beliefs in order to maintain her relationship with Sebastian.

At the outset Kathryn has similar “troubles” with Cecile, who is portrayed as an innocent and gullible young girl at the start of *Cruel Intentions*. Though Kathryn assumes that the young ingénue will be easily manipulated into resuming a relationship with Sebastian, Cecile has in fact been enjoying a secret relationship with her African American cello tutor, Roland (Sean Patrick Thomas). Files contends that Kumble’s decision to make De Laclos’s character Danceney black was “last minute”; however, it is apparent that the character Roland Clifford in *Cruel Intentions* is black because his “difference” highlights Mrs. Caldwell’s bigotry. Mrs. Caldwell perversely expresses the racial exclusivity of Manhattan’s upper-class environment as she openly disapproves of her daughter’s affection for Roland. Kathryn easily manipulates Mrs. Caldwell’s prejudice, and Cecile’s innocence of the racial issues that could be sparked through her relationship with Roland allows her to be similarly influenced. Kathryn relates news of Cecile’s developing relationship with Roland to Mrs. Caldwell, all the while encouraging her prejudice.¹¹ Kathryn outlines her community’s bigotry by telling Mrs. Caldwell that “something like this could destroy Cecile’s reputation at Manchester.” Though she begs Mrs. Caldwell to be “discreet,” it is obvious that she will not be.¹²

Kathryn’s manipulation of Mrs. Caldwell’s racism is paralleled with Sebastian’s exploitation of his society’s homophobia. Upon discovering that Annette has heard discouraging stories about his reputation, Sebastian pays a visit to a wealthy teenaged drug dealer, Blaine (Joshua Jackson), who is openly gay. Sebastian ascertains that a student from another prep school, Greg McConnell (Eric Mabius), a reputable football player, is acquainted with

¹¹ When Kathryn arranges a meeting with Mrs. Caldwell to discuss her “concerns” about Cecile, she dramatically tells her that it’s “worse” than drugs, meaning Cecile is seeing a black man.

¹² Mrs. Caldwell explains to Roland that he is being paid to teach Cecile to play the cello, not to “pervert” her. Mrs. Caldwell also expresses her ignorance of Roland’s actual background by commenting, “I got you off the streets and this is how you repay me.” Roland explains that he lives in a comfortable neighbourhood and Mrs. Caldwell responds that she feels she is “immune” to accusations of racial intolerance because she and her husband “gave money to Colin Powell.”

Annette. Sebastian's problem with this particular acquaintance is that he fears that McConnell "hates him" because he once seduced his girlfriend. Blaine, however, explains that McConnell has frequently approached him for sexual favours. McConnell must keep his sexual preferences hidden because he fears his homosexuality would impede a career in football. Blaine insists that he could easily manipulate McConnell in order to identify the "informant" that has been telling Annette about Sebastian's "reputation."¹³ The reputation of a teenage girl again becomes the focus of Sebastian's desire for revenge when he discovers that Mrs. Caldwell has been the "informant" all along. Sebastian resolves to devote all his energies to destroying Cecile so as to humiliate her mother.

The portrayal of Kathryn's community's homophobic and racist culture creates persistent contradictions in *Cruel Intentions*. If audiences are to believe that Kathryn is wrong to rebel against society's double standards then her culture's dominant ideologies would have to be presented as appealing. Perhaps what this suggests about the film's most insidious underlying message is that racism and sexism are being presented as attractive "norms" in *Cruel Intentions*. Although Kathryn has pertinently voiced the injustices of her world, the film dismisses her critiques as the perverse opinions of a cruel schemer.

"Everybody Does It, It's Just That Nobody Talks About It"

It's alright for guys like you and Court to fuck everyone but when I do it I get dumped for innocent little twits like Cecile. God forbid I exude confidence and enjoy sex. Do you think I relish the fact that I have to act like Mary Sunshine twenty four seven, so I can be considered a "lady"? I'm the Marcia fucking Brady of the Upper East Side and sometimes I want to kill myself for it.

¹³ It is further suggested that homophobic attitudes are the norm in this community when Blaine rings Mc Connell. As his phone rings, McConnell is recounting an apparently fictitious sexual experience he has had with a woman to a group of his peers, and the film implies that such displays of excessive machismo conceal deviations from the accepted heterosexual norm.

Kathryn Merteuil, *Cruel Intentions*.

Cruel Intentions establishes the fact that racism and homophobia underpin Manhattan's social rules but does little to maintain any further censure of the discriminatory practices that sustain economic privilege. The conclusion of the film serves to establish Sebastian's centrality to the film's moral perspective. Kathryn's astute assessment of her community's gendered double-standards, racism and homophobia is left unresolved as she is presented as the film's cruel villain. Any girl power philosophies that Kathryn espouses in her tirades against her culture's double standards are refuted as the film normalizes the homophobic, sexist and racist ideologies of New York's upper classes.

Sebastian's remorse is placed in contrast with his stepsister's "cruel intentions" as the film progresses. Kathryn's protests against the hypocrisies of her society are eclipsed by her remorseless behaviour. Rather than expressing concern for Cecile after Sebastian assaults her, Kathryn derides her for feeling ashamed. Kathryn alleges that Cecile should be "proud" because she is "becoming a woman" when she recounts her humiliating story. Kathryn tells Cecile that now she's "on her way, it would be stupid to stop" and that she should think of Sebastian as a "tutor." When Cecile explains that she doesn't love Sebastian, Kathryn insists that because "practice makes perfect" she should "sleep with as many people as possible." Then, Kathryn explains, she will know how to make Roland "happy." Cecile conveys her knowledge of sexual double standards by communicating that she's aware this might make her a "slut" but Kathryn deliberately misinforms her, explaining that "everybody does it, it's just that nobody talks about it." Here Kathryn tutors Cecile in the art of "feminine" submission and deceit.

Though Sebastian sexually assaults Cecile, he is contrastingly granted redemption through his "pure" relationship with Annette.¹⁴ Sebastian asserts his

¹⁴ Sebastian spikes Cecile's drink and insists that she allow him to orally pleasure her. When Cecile recounts this experience to Kathryn it is obvious that she recalls it with a sense of shame. She tells Kathryn "something awful happened last night," that Sebastian "took advantage of her."

power by offering and then retracting his affections at key moments during his encounters with Annette. Annette initially sees through Sebastian's attempts to impress her and when she explains that their friendship is "not about winning" she indicates that she has no desire to participate in his macho vocabularies. It is apparent that Sebastian's redemption will ensue when Annette teaches him to "lighten up." Kathryn, however, endeavours to convince Sebastian that his "feelings" will lead to him losing the bet, and he is easily coerced. Determined to "win," he forces himself on Annette, explaining that he cannot keep his feelings "bottled up" like her. Sebastian proposes that the only outcome of Annette's passion for her beliefs has been her "denial of love." He also attempts to make Annette feel ashamed about her virginal aspirations by informing her that she makes him feel "inadequate." Though similar historical stereotypes have designated women as "frigid," the film emphasizes this moment as Annette's first admission that she has "feelings" for Sebastian. Sebastian eventually convinces Annette to offer him her body but humiliates her by turning her down. Sebastian succeeds in seducing Annette on his own terms.

Sebastian's seduction of Kathryn is similarly constructed on his own terms. Kathryn offers herself to Sebastian when she realizes she has lost their bet, but he tells her that he's "not in the mood." Though Kathryn retorts by threatening Sebastian with the possibility of Annette's father finding out about their relationship her power is short-lived. Sebastian is killed in an accident and Kathryn's schemes are subsequently uncovered by his conquests, Cecile and Annette. Kathryn's humiliation is presented as especially compelling because it is other women who uncover her schemes using Sebastian's diary. *Cruel Intentions* implies that Kathryn has behaved the most abhorrently by using a man (Sebastian) as a "toy" and she is punished for this when he leaves his journal in the hands of her enemies. Though Annette and Cecile give her one last-minute chance to redeem herself through friendship, Kathryn refuses their offer. The film concludes with Kathryn disgraced and its final scene depicts Annette driving Sebastian's car away from the city. Sebastian's journal sits on the seat beside Annette, reminding her of the power he has exerted in her life. Annette is

given agency in the film's final moments because she has reverence for her older generation's dominant expectations.

Conclusion

Womanliness . . . [can] be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if . . . [a woman is] found to possess it. . . . The reader may ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade.' My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial. They are the same thing.

Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as Masquerade." (39)

Female protagonists in *Wild Things* and *Cruel Intentions* are forced to act out "roles" in order to survive in the manner they desire. *Wild Things* and *Cruel Intentions* depict the façades that independent women construct to conceal transgressions, and both girl power movies highlight the repressive disciplines that teenaged girls must negotiate in their everyday lives. Riviere's analysis of "intellectual" women, who supposedly employ a "mask of womanliness" to "avert . . . the retribution feared from men," is pertinent to an analysis of the roles that girls perform in both films (36). The difference between the two films lies in the extent to which Suzie and Kathryn are successful at fooling their communities with clichéd performances.

Kathryn's performance as "Mary Sunshine" is exposed as a con in *Cruel Intentions*; however, a certain amount of acting and deceit is necessary for a woman to fulfil her "needs" in her society. Kathryn bemoans performing as "the Marcia Brady of the Upper East Side" but is allowed no opportunity to overcome her entrapment within normative gender roles. Kathryn must conceal her sexual adventures while her stepbrother Sebastian may flaunt his. Annette and Cecile seem to come to understand that they must perform within the same roles as

Kathryn in order to experience pleasure, and also learn to scheme against other women. This is demonstrated when Annette and Cecile use Sebastian's journal to reveal Kathryn's cruel behaviour to their community. Both are inadequate conspirators to begin with, yet they learn to plot against others—ironically, they must use Kathryn's own methods in order to destroy *her* "reputation." It is additionally implied that Annette, though no longer a virgin, will continue to perform within the realms that her society expects. The ideological implications that follow from the construction of female protagonists in *Cruel Intentions* are as follows: women who masquerade as "feminine" in order to conceal a desire for "masculine" power are punished; women who accept their lot within the accepted realms of normative femininity are lauded as heroines worthy of audience identification.

Powerful women in *Wild Things* also masquerade as stereotypically feminine. Suzie is able to outwit unsuspecting authorities by concealing her real self from Blue Bay's residents. However, a key difference exists between Suzie's masquerade as drug-addicted dropout and that of the academic women Riviere writes of. Riviere contends that educated women masquerade as excessively feminine stereotypes in order to disavow the "masculine" aspect of their profession. Suzie, however, performs within normative gender roles in order to profit economically and to enact revenge against men. Like Suzie, Detective Perez is sufficiently skilled at masquerade herself to identify other women's scams. Without knowledge of the roles that women perform within, Perez and Suzie would have no means of survival in their world. *Wild Things* is a complicated film in which the tenets of girl power are affirmed as female protagonists profit from their masquerades. *Cruel Intentions* contrastingly asserts that conforming to the constructs of normative femininity is the only tenable possibility for girls like Cecile, Annette and Kathryn.

CHAPTER 4

“Violent Revenge”: Gender and the Serial Killer Film

The movies traded on one opposition in particular, American culture’s traditional dichotomy of individual and community that had generated the most significant pair of competing myths: the outlaw hero and the official hero . . . the outlaw hero stood for that part of the American imagination valuing self-determination and freedom from entanglements. By contrast, the official hero, normally portrayed as teacher, lawyer, politician, farmer, or family man, represented the belief in collective action, and the objective legal process that superseded private notions of right and wrong.

Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*. (58-9)

We see the adult world around Vanessa fail her: the police do not believe her, the courts will not protect her, and she is left to fight back on her own. And fight back she does. . . . The criminal justice system rarely protects women and girls from sexual predators and even more infrequently punishes the perpetrators of these predatory crimes. For this reason, even violent revenge can resonate for female audiences.

Kimberley Roberts, “Pleasures and Problems of the ‘Angry Girl.’” (221-5)

Freeway (Matthew Bright, 1996) and *The Cell* (Tarseem Singh, 2000) demonstrate that the philosophies of girl power might be expressed in the serial killer genre. Female protagonists in both films assert their own form of “outlaw” justice when they realize that America’s legal system cannot punish serial killers

for their act of violence against women. Philip Simpson's *Psycho Paths* studies the conventions and ideologies of the serial killer horror sub-genre, outlining precisely how these narratives have evolved their own sets of rules.¹ The serial killer sub-genre, according to Simpson, dates from the late seventies or early eighties with the appearance and widespread dissemination of the term "serial murder." Though the term "serial killer" was not coined until the sixties or seventies, the horror/thriller sub-genre of mass-murder films is a hybrid category with a long tradition. The aristocratic vampire, multiple murderers and menacing folkloric figures in fiction predate the postmodern serial killer film (Simpson 14). In the seventies and eighties, many filmic serial killers commit their crimes according to some structured pattern or design. For Simpson, multiple murderers in these postmodern narratives are indeterminate and unexplainable, and therefore pliable to ideological agendas from both ends of the political spectrum (14). Feminist ideologies are expressed by active female protagonists in *The Cell* and *Freeway*. The characters Catherine (Jennifer Lopez) and Vanessa (Reese Witherspoon) are unwilling to stand for patriarchal violence and both work outside of social institutions in order to punish men who have committed crimes against women.

Read asserts that it is possible to divide feminist revenge films into three categories: "primary, secondary and displaced revenge" (95). For Read, the final category—displaced revenge—is applicable to cases where women avenge their treatment at the hands of a rapist by punishing other men in his place (*The New Avengers* 95). Vanessa in *Freeway* and Catherine in *The Cell* are exemplary of the kinds of avenging protagonists that Read analyses. Vanessa punishes men who mistreat her in a manner that indicates a social acceptance of misogynistic practices and her revenge does not stop with serial rapist and murderer Bob Wolverton (Keifer Sutherland). As she journeys through Southern California's impoverished suburbs, desperately trying to prevent Bob from

¹ This system of narrative obligations and expectations is given satirical treatment in the *Scream* films and *Freeway* (Matthew Bright, 1996), though there are other serial killer films, such as *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) and *Kiss the Girls* (Gary Fleder, 1997) that take these conventions more seriously.

killing again, Vanessa encounters many more men who are willing to exploit young women. Just as she eventually avenges Bob's violence against women, Vanessa shows prejudiced detectives the error of their ways and punishes a man who attempts to solicit sex from her with no intention of paying her price. Catherine in *The Cell* also encounters the rigid world-views of detectives tracking a prolific serial killer, Stargher (Vincent D'Onofrio). Catherine kills Stargher to prevent him from murdering more women when she deduces that he is beyond curing and that institutional methods for punishing him are ineffective. While neither Vanessa nor Catherine is actually raped, they punish men who have serially violated and murdered other women.

As Roberts proposes, *Freeway* also highlights the inter-connected oppressions facing Vanessa and the survival strategies she adopts to fight them. From the outset, *Freeway* marks Vanessa as the epitome of "alienated and disenfranchised youth" (Roberts 221). However, Vanessa is not helpless; she is sharp and resourceful. Like "Little Red Riding Hood" Vanessa outwits and escapes "the big bad wolf," serial killer Bob Wolverton, who stalks freeways, searching for young girls to violate and kill. The lives of other impoverished and neglected teenagers are intertwined with Vanessa's experiences. All youth in *Freeway* have been attracted to crime— drugs, theft, prostitution and guns. Roberts suggests that Vanessa's angry outbursts "function in the film specifically to disrupt audience expectations regarding her class, race, and gender position" and argues that her rage, which is largely directed at faulty social institutions, is depicted as justified (222). Audiences can therefore enjoy Vanessa's rebellion, especially once it is clear that she has become "the ultimate feminist avenger" (Roberts 222). Although Vanessa's rebellion and vengeance utilizes the "masculine" tactics associated with violence and guns, viewers are encouraged to identify with her adoption of these regimes because it is clear that none of the social institutions that are there to protect and serve her would-be assailant are there to protect and serve her. Vanessa's experiences within social institutions highlight that *Freeway* is focused on her class rage. Vanessa is convicted for defending herself against the serial killer whose identity she uncovers, but

because of his class this murderer goes free. The criminal justice system in *Freeway* is biased towards people with class-privilege and Vanessa's violent outbursts (a result of her social status) are viewed as indicative of her guilt.

Freeway's depiction of race parallels its critique of class structures. Vanessa's interactions with a black policeman, Detective Breer (Wolfgang Bodison), initially appear to demonstrate her racial prejudice, especially when she calls detective Breer a "nigger." However, when Vanessa's comment is placed in context (he has just called her a "natural born whore") it seems the detective has prompted her to refer to his racial difference because he has made class-based assumptions about her (Roberts 222). Vanessa describes the fine line between voicing the types of prejudiced language that this detective has articulated and the practices of rape and violence. Later Breer alters his perspective on Vanessa, admitting that she is a victim of class prejudice as much as he has been subordinated by racism, when he realizes that her boyfriend Chopper (Bokeem Woodbine) is black (Roberts 222).

Vanessa's rebellion and revenge are also placed within the context of her friendships with other marginalized members of Los Angeles's underclasses. Vanessa eventually comes to share an intimate relationship with another juvenile inmate, Flacco, and though they are at first enemies, they come to respect each other and plan their escape together. Vanessa responds affirmatively to Flacco's "feminist" principles and they help set each other up with the necessary tools for survival when they escape custody. However, while Vanessa is able to expose Bob's culpability by relying on her friendships with other underclass teenagers, the conclusion of *Freeway* still leaves her alone with an uncertain future. She has defeated a serial-killer and proved herself innocent in the eyes of the law, but her grandmother has been murdered, her mother and stepfather are now in jail and she has no home or family to return to. Vanessa's revenge may be voyeuristically enjoyed but the fate that lies ahead for her is grim.

Like Vanessa, Catherine features in *The Cell* as the one character with the requisite morals to capture and punish a fierce serial killer, Stargher, who has been kidnapping and murdering young girls. Catherine's relationships with other women play a significant part in this narrative's development. Catherine is convinced to assist the FBI in their search for Stargher's hideout when she identifies with the young woman he has abducted. The one person Catherine relies on for professional support throughout this ordeal is her co-worker Miriam (Marianne Jean-Baptiste). Miriam counsels Catherine before and after her experiences inside her patients' psyches and expresses extensive concern for her wellbeing.² Just as Claire is shown to share her most honest moments with other women in *What Lies Beneath*, Catherine and Miriam in *The Cell* are shown to have an important affinity.

Another character that understands Catherine's devotion to the "revolutionary" psychiatric treatment she is testing on her patients in *The Cell* is an FBI agent, Novak (Vince Vaughn). While audiences might expect a romantic bond to be exhibited between Novak and Catherine in the movie's final scenes, *The Cell* offers no such closure. Instead, *The Cell* concludes as Catherine and Novak share a conversation about one of her patients, which demonstrates the professional bond they have come to share. While audiences might expect Catherine and Novak to kiss as they say their goodbyes, they simply shake hands and hug. It is Catherine who initiates their embrace, presumably in order to express that their business-like handshake is an inadequate reflection of the ordeal they have experienced together. Their embrace helps to validate the importance of Catherine's knowledge in *The Cell* and the film ends within her "world" as we watch her with her patient, Edward (Colton James).

² While authorities discuss the dangers of a counsellor entering Stargher's mind using their underdeveloped psychiatric technique, it is Miriam who suggests that her friend can be "tricked into thinking" the procedure is "real" and asserts that it is "up to Catherine" herself whether or not she should use their experimental procedure on a serial killer. Miriam affirms Catherine's right to professional autonomy by commenting, "She's the one who would have to face whatever risks there might be, so I support whatever decision she might make." Miriam is also the only person to realize Catherine's intentions before she "reverses" their standard procedure.

“I sure wanna meet your mom, Bob”

The viewer is interpellated . . . as a *subject*, as the bearer of a familiar social role, or rather one that has become familiar over time through the operation of ideological apparatuses that confirm the real conditions of existence.

Philip Green, *Cracks in the Pedestal: Ideology and Gender in Hollywood*. (16)

On the surface *Freeway* reworks the conventions of the serial killer sub-genre, yet Vanessa might also be compared to “slasher” final girls. Unlike typical female protagonists in serial killer films, Vanessa is given extensive power in her revenge and multiple opportunities to humiliate her attacker. Despite her restricted vocabulary, Vanessa talks back to her would-be killer in a manner that conveys her experiences and emotion far more effectively than his psychiatric jargon. However, though *Freeway* adheres to typical slasher “rules,” it violates horror conventions in that it sardonically comments on social hypocrisies. Philip Green outlines that a spectator’s own social or ideological position influences the identificatory position they might experience while viewing media texts (*Cracks in the Pedestal* 16). *Freeway* is self-reflexively comedic but viewers are discouraged from laughing at Vanessa and her community without recognizing that the hierarchies of social privilege that the film satirizes are prevalent in “real life.”³ *Freeway*’s humour might therefore sit

³ Mick La Salle’s review of *Freeway* for the *San Francisco Chronicle* aptly describes the film’s tone: “The first clue that *Freeway* is more than just a smirky black comedy comes early, when Vanessa’s parents are arrested. The mother and daughter share a moment of tenderness. There’s love in their relationship, in the midst of all this squalor. . . . *Freeway* shows the complexity of the culture of violence, and it does so without knee-jerk moralizing.” Vanessa’s grim world is depicted in an amusing manner, yet a sense of empathy for her community is not lost. Roger Ebert entirely misses *Freeway*’s sympathetic tone in his review and instead distances himself from Vanessa’s experiences by taking the condescending position of a middle-class observer: “The movie retells the Grimm fairy tale in a world of poor white trash, sexual abuse, drug addiction . . . it plays like a cross between the deadpan docudrama of *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* and the berserk revenge fantasy of *Switchblade Sisters*. . . . This is a story based on the most disquieting and disgusting experiences of the most hapless guests on the sleaziest daytime talk show.” We are not encouraged to laugh at Vanessa’s world because it is “sleazy” and “disgusting.” Rather, we are shown that Vanessa’s “disquieting and disgusting experiences” are a result of wider social frameworks, and that her poverty is not due to her lack of resourcefulness.

somewhat uneasily with viewers who are aware that Vanessa's world seems "real." We become part of Vanessa's story because it is apparent that every social institution is structured to isolate girls like her. Vanessa's behaviour does not appear reprehensible because she has few survival resources to rely on. Instead, the values of middle-class America— which have created corrupt institutions that trap many unfortunate citizens in spirals of poverty— are portrayed unfavourably. Spectators might therefore feel most comfortable laughing at privileged characters, such as Mimi Wolverton (Brooke Shields).

The opening scenes of *Freeway* establish that Vanessa is illiterate and exists in an underclass of drug-addicts and prostitutes. Viewers are first introduced to Vanessa in a high school classroom, where she struggles to read aloud the sentence "The cat drinks milk." Vanessa's jaded teacher sighs at the task of improving her pupils' literacy skills, and the bleak educational prospects that lower working class youth in America face are outlined. Vanessa catches a lift home from school on her boyfriend's bike and they encounter her mother (Amanda Plummer) "turning tricks" on a street corner. As she and her mother argue about prostitution, Vanessa asserts that she disapproves of this occupation. Mrs. Lutz suggests that her teenaged daughter is naïve, proclaiming that she "don't know nothing about nothing."

While the remainder of this scene highlights the dismal existence that Vanessa suffers, it also functions to place the film within the serial killer sub-genre. Scenes on the family's television document the "grisly" murders of prostitutes that have been taking place on freeways near Los Angeles. Before our anxieties about Mrs. Lutz and the serial killer are relieved, another grim feature of Vanessa's existence is disclosed: Larry's sexual abuse. Larry dismisses Vanessa's concerns about her mother and casually lights his crack pipe, making a pass at his stepdaughter at the same time. The scene cuts to outside as Vanessa attempts to fend off his advances: Mrs. Lutz is being picked up by the local police force. While Mrs. Lutz is arrested she loudly voices her concerns for Vanessa, farewelling her with the assurance that she still loves her. Vanessa is

eventually left waiting for her social worker as she makes excuses for her parents' behaviour to the officer who remains behind.

Vanessa's encounter with this officer and her social worker indicate the extent to which viewers are encouraged to empathize with her perspective and to dismiss the moral viewpoint of the institutions represented in the film. Many of the police officers' comments to Vanessa and her family are unnecessarily humiliating.⁴ Vanessa fights back by voicing her disdain for the role of the police force as she asks the officer if she can stay with her: "I could do all sorts of chores while you is out messing people up." When the officer refuses her plea with a transparent lie, Vanessa astutely picks up on this and responds by criticizing her blatant dishonesty. Vanessa further undermines the officer's authority by shouting "come on over and ruin my life again real soon." Vanessa explains to her social worker that she can't help but dislike the police because they have just taken her entire family to jail and her comments here make the hypocrisies in the officer's work palpable. While the police force is supposedly doing some kind of a service to society by arresting drug-addicts and prostitutes like Vanessa's parents, they are also performing a disservice by leaving these families and communities in states of disarray that no institution can adequately mend. Social structures are incapable of dealing effectively with these states of disorder in *Freeway* and this highlights how difficult it is for families like the Lutzes to avoid lives of crime and poverty. Vanessa is afraid she will be placed in foster care again and therefore handcuffs her social worker to a bed and runs away. When her car breaks down on the freeway she is picked up by Bob, to whom she recounts her experiences of abuse and powerlessness in foster care.

Much of Vanessa's trip in Bob's car portrays the energy and emotion that she invests in explaining the abuses of her childhood to the very first listener she has encountered. Bob ultimately deserves the damage Vanessa inflicts on

⁴ For example, when an officer enters the bedroom and catches Larry pinning Vanessa down on the bed, she rudely comments, "You diddling the daughter, Larry?" Later, as she questions Vanessa about her parents, the same officer dismisses her insistence that they're just having a "hard time" with patronising remarks, such as, "well kid, I sure don't envy your situation," and, "they still got enough money left over to buy drugs."

him because he clearly violates her trust. Viewers witness Vanessa explain to Bob that in one foster family she was forced to care for an incontinent elderly man, which involved nursing him as full-time work. According to Vanessa, the same elderly man had sexually abused her and when she had retaliated her foster father hit her so hard that she had to have her jaw wired shut for weeks. Vanessa details that her violent reaction to this man was partly due to the fact that she was “pissed off” because she couldn’t see her mother.⁵ Vanessa describes to Bob many other experiences she had as a child that help to explain the circumstances surrounding her tendency to commit crimes like arson, soliciting and shoplifting at such a young age. She relates her sexual abuse in disturbing detail, trusting Bob because he has identified himself as a guidance counsellor. Vanessa tells him that she’s “been so anguished” that she “can’t even remember being happy,” explaining that her sexual abuse began when her mother went to jail for the first time and she became “the woman of the house” as a young child.⁶ Vanessa determines that Bob is the “I-5 Killer” after he asks her if she “liked it when Larry fucked her.” It is clear to Vanessa that he has a level of disdain for her equivalent to that of many other people who have attempted to “help” her and she discovers that “garbage people” exist in many communities. Bob attempts to place Vanessa within the same category of “garbage people” that the police officers, her social worker and foster families have relegated her to; however he himself is one of these people.⁷ Vanessa has an uncanny ability to point this out to Bob, which obviously infuriates him.

Rather than accept her fate as a victim, Vanessa fights back by resisting Bob’s stereotyping and violence, and by belittling his every endeavour to violate and humiliate her. For instance, she asks him “why” he’s killing all of those girls and tells him that “he wouldn’t like it if someone was doing that to him.”

⁵ This same family also told Vanessa many lies, which helps to explain some of her learning difficulties. Her own mother has also been telling her lies about her past: when Vanessa shows Bob a picture of the man she has been told is her father, the photo is of the Boston strangler.

⁶ She explains to Bob the humiliation she felt when she was forced to perform oral sex for Larry: “I thought he was going to the bathroom in my mouth.”

⁷ Bob explains that he is committing rape and murder because he has “reached his fucking limit” with people like Vanessa, people whom he identifies as “drug addicts, fathers who fuck their daughters, drug addicted mother-fucking whores with their bastard offspring.”

Vanessa expresses disbelief instead of fear when Bob aggressively cuts off her ponytail, and angrily asserts, “Mr, I’m a person, I’m a human being.” Vanessa is more determined to resist her would-be murderer when he calls her mother a “drug-addicted fucking whore,” and responds, “I sure wanna meet your Mom.” True to horror conventions Bob reacts very violently to any probing question about his relationship with his mother. Bob furiously ends their dialogue at a mention of his mother, and orders her to lower her pants, referring to her as a “cunt.” Here Larry’s comment about Mrs. Lutz “kicking” the serial killer’s “ass” turns out to be a comment best applied to his stepdaughter’s self-defence skills. Vanessa angrily reacts to Bob calling her a “cunt” and turns the tables on her assailant by seizing her gun (a present from Chopper).

The remainder of *Freeway* focuses on Vanessa’s “revenge” for the acts of “perversion” that Bob has committed with other women. Vanessa firstly tells Bob to “settle down” and clarifies that she is angry that he has violated her trust and mistreated other women. Each time she strikes him for his “bad manners” the blow represents an act of disrespect he has committed against her: one for not letting her out of the car when she asked, one for tricking her into telling him secrets she hadn’t even told Chopper and one for cutting off her hair. Vanessa seizes control of the situation here, which is symbolized by the fact that Bob is now attempting to explain his disturbing past to her and also by the fact that she is ostensibly driving the car by commanding him where to go. Vanessa shrewdly shows as little respect for Bob’s wishes as he did for hers and responds to his excuses with the simple remark, “anyone who would do sex to a dead person is definitely sick.” Vanessa’s resourcefulness during this scene demonstrates that she does not need to be rescued by a diligent police force or male hero.

However, when Vanessa decides to take Bob to the nearest police station his class privilege emerges as an obstacle to her plans. Bob tells her that he would win should it be his word against hers. His following comments articulate the powerlessness of women like Vanessa in the American judicial system: “The likelihood of someone like me going to prison is absolutely nil. . . .

they won't take me for a killer, they'll let me go free and they'll send you to some new foster home." Vanessa responds with more philosophical clarity than Bob is capable of:

There's a whole bunch of guys out there that get all hard thinking about messing women up, hell, that's all you ever see on TV. But when a guy goes and does that stuff for real, like you was planning on doing to me tonight. . . . When a guy goes and hurts someone that never hurt him, that makes him a criminal first and a sick guy second. It's like being sick has to take second place to being crooked, and Bob, you're crooked.

Vanessa articulates that Bob's violence, as a "perverted" extension of what she says many men fantasize about or watch on screen, is "criminal" and "crooked." Because Vanessa considers many of the felonies her family commit in order to survive as necessary, we may deduce that she does not use the term "criminal" lightly here. Vanessa thinks carefully about her past experiences with the law and reasons that "working things out" with Bob will not be "playing it safe," as he insists. Vanessa deduces that she must achieve justice in her own way. She forces Bob to drive to a deserted field where she shoots him several times in the head. Indicating that she has not taken her violent crime lightly, Vanessa falls to her knees, vomits and says a prayer to apologize for what she has done. She also asks God to bless her family.

"I'm pissed off and the whole world owes me"

During *Freeway*'s second half, spectators witness America's judicial system at work through Vanessa's eyes. Vanessa powerlessness persists throughout the legal proceedings that follow her encounter with the "I-5 Killer." Vanessa is apprehended shortly after she shoots Bob and innocently wanders into a roadside diner covered in blood. The film simultaneously depicts Bob stumbling into a hospital where he is questioned by police and is told he must suffer a "colcoctomy." The scenes that ensue depict Bob's suffering as his gunshot wounds are mended, presumably in order to make the most of the fact

that viewers are aware that he deserves to suffer. Though audience members are conscious of Bob's guilt, police assume that he is a victim and that Vanessa has shot him in order to steal his wallet.⁸ The officers investigating the "I-5 Killings" remain sceptical of Vanessa's story— even though she stands by her account when offered a reduction in her harsh sentence if she admits to her "crimes." Vanessa's struggle to tell the truth is in direct contrast with the detectives' version of justice. When they ask her why she did not turn Bob in she answers:

He kept saying that it would be his word against mine and that he would just get off and I would go to foster care again. . . . I just knew that if I let him go he would go out and kill some other girl, and that it would've been my fault, and I couldn't have lived with that.

Vanessa's understanding of justice takes into account the victims of Bob's crimes. In contrast, the version of justice that the police seek to uphold has less integrity and does not incorporate the stories of disempowered girls like Vanessa. The detectives go on to discredit Vanessa's story by referring to her multiple arrests. She is finally provoked into attacking Detective Breer after he suggests that whilst soliciting she was "just doing what came natural" to her.

While Vanessa is treated like a criminal, the law assumes that Bob and his wife are the innocent victims of a crazed and violent thief. The couple are depicted as possessing the educational and financial resources necessary for using the law to their benefit. Vanessa's rants are treated as irrational and obscene by the detectives and the court, yet Mrs. Wolverton's equally insensitive tirades about her husband's rights as a victim are treated with respect and quiet tolerance. However, Mrs. Wolverton is educated enough to know the right time to hold her tongue. Mrs. Wolverton's desire for vengeance is made to seem far more irrational than any of Vanessa's outbursts in *Freeway*:

If he dies I think she should be put in the electric chair. . . . I certainly hope that the people that are responsible for prosecuting this case can

⁸ When Vanessa is arrested, the police refuse to acknowledge her presence or answer her questions. The only piece of information with which they provide her regarding the arrest is that it is illegal to carry a firearm (she astutely points out to them that "half the goddamn world's got a gun"). Vanessa's only form of empowerment here is to taunt the officers who arrest her.

muster just a little bit more sensitivity for the rights of the victims than you appear to have. I want that little monster to pay for this.

The detectives sit silently through Mrs. Wolverton's narrow-minded outburst but Vanessa is silenced by almost every authority figure in the film: police, the judge at her trial and even her own her lawyer.⁹ When the judge goes so far as to threaten to gag her for talking out of turn and acting in contempt of court, it is evident that Vanessa behaves in this manner because the court does not offer her any kind of fair justice. Vanessa's conduct during her trial contributes to the judge's decision to have her tried as an adult, despite her lawyer's insistence that she is an "illiterate child." As a consequence, she is sent to a juvenile prison while she awaits her trial as an adult.

Vanessa's experiences in the juvenile facility she is sent to also portray her powerlessness. Vanessa is tied to a bed in an isolation chamber and injected with tranquillisers against her will after she attempts to defend herself against the jail's head bully, Flacco (Guillermo Diaz). It is here that the education Vanessa has received from her family becomes relevant and useful: she would perhaps never survive in such an institution without the training she has received from her parents. As Vanessa prepares out of cling-wrap and a toothbrush the razor she will use for her escape, the prison psychiatrist (Susan Barnes) details that she should "pay for her actions in a facility for adults" because she is a "sophisticated criminal" and "an extreme danger to society." Vanessa explains that her stepfather taught her to improvise in this manner and articulates her feminist rationale for needing a weapon: "a knife is good so you don't feel so at the mercy of the men."

It is apparent that Vanessa can rely on her underclass peers when she escapes jail: her community has a sophisticated criminal network that is their

⁹ Mrs. Wolverton is given another opportunity to gain public support during a news report that explains her case. She complains, "How dare the media talk about how horrible [Vanessa's] life is. What about ours?" The news reader expresses the same opinion as the judge: "I know there's a lot of people looking for some real life heroes and I think I've found a few." However, the inanity of the reporter's comments is emphasized by the absurdity of the news story that follows—a story about "a couple of sweltering polar bears."

only means of survival. Vanessa concocts a plan to escape prison after a news feature that she watches in jail reminds her that Bob Wolverton still roams free. An opportunity to flee arises when she and three other inmates, including Flacco, are transferred to another prison. The girls make their escape when the prison van makes a stop at a gas station.¹⁰ Flacco and Vanessa share their resources and feminist beliefs following their getaway. They express a newfound respect for each other, despite their obvious ethnic difference (Flacco is hispanic). Flacco best describes their bond in her girl power philosophy: “girls have gotta help out other girls.” Flacco’s boyfriend provides Vanessa with a gun, new clothes, a car and some money for petrol. Like Chopper and Vanessa, Flacco and her boyfriend share a genuine tenderness that transcends their grim underworld existence.

The film’s closing scenes depict Vanessa’s stubborn determination to make it to visit her grandmother and to therefore salvage the last piece of family solidarity that exists in her life. Vanessa uses whatever methods she must to survive on the way. While Vanessa is doing so, the detectives investigating the “I-5 Killings” follow up on her story and find that all of her friends testify to her honesty. The detectives’ tentative belief in Vanessa’s story is confirmed when they discover her severed ponytail at the scene of the shooting. The detectives search the Wolvertons’s home and discover Bob’s stash of child porn and human remains.¹¹ *Freeway* depicts Vanessa offering her body for cash in parallel to Bob’s escape from the police, and it is emphasized again that the survival tactics underprivileged children are forced to use are unpleasant. Vanessa solicits a male client on the streets of Tijuana, who takes her down a back alley in his car. When

¹⁰ After attacking the prison psychiatrist and a guard in the restrooms, Vanessa justifies her violent hatred for “screws” with the following philosophy: “You think normal people just wake up one morning and decide they’re gonna work in a prison? They’re perverts, every last one of them.” It is implied that the girls have suffered all kinds of abuses at the hands of “screws.” The language Vanessa uses when demanding the guard’s keys implies this. Vanessa threatens to cut off the guard’s “pecker” if he refuses to hand over the keys and her sexualised taunts mirror the language Bob had earlier used to humiliate her. Vanessa transfers her revenge fantasies onto the prison guard and her disdain from him implies that he has mistreated her. This suggests patriarchal abuse often takes more subtle and everyday forms than rape and murder.

¹¹ Mrs. Wolverton’s reluctance to sign the detectives’ search warrant confirms that she may have suspected her husband’s culpability all along. While the police make the grisly discoveries in her husband’s shed, Mrs. Wolverton commits suicide.

he realizes that Vanessa is underage he tells her that he is not bothered, which prompts her to take the opportunity to rob him. She is forced to retaliate further when the man is revealed to be carrying less money than he had promised to pay her. The fact that he would solicit sexual favours from a minor and then not pay her the agreed sum makes him almost as villainous as Bob in *Freeway*. Vanessa therefore appears to be behaving reasonably when she locks him in the boot of her car. "I'm pissed off and the whole world owes me," she explains to him.

Eventually Vanessa makes it to her grandmother's trailer park, only to discover that her future is harsher than she could have envisioned. Vanessa ascertains that Bob has murdered her grandmother and is so grief stricken that her anger leaves him no chance for survival. Though Bob is armed with a gun, he is helpless against Vanessa's bare-fisted rage. By the time the detectives arrive Vanessa has subdued Bob and the scene inside the trailer home indicates his guilt. *Freeway* concludes suddenly at this point without any promises about Vanessa's future. Whatever the world "owes" Vanessa, it appears not to be a secure and happy life with her family. Vanessa is a strong and resourceful young woman who is unwilling to ignore injustice, and she is therefore a character that embodies the tenets of the girl power movement. *Freeway*, however, is unable to propose a future for this character.

"My World, My Rules"

Though Catherine in *The Cell* is a generation older than Vanessa she performs a similar role in her community: Catherine avenges the gender crimes of a serial killer, Stargher, in order to prevent the suffering of more women. Like Vanessa in *Freeway*, Catherine independently fights this serial killer and is eventually successful in her quest to avenge his crimes. However, the disconnectedness of postmodern life allows patriarchal violence to continually flourish in Catherine's world in *The Cell*, where police tactics are implicitly ineffective and Stargher effortlessly claims multiple victims. While Catherine

individually restores justice in *The Cell*, the film implies that her community will not be safe for long.

Except for moments where the plot is best served by Detective Novak's point of view, action in *The Cell* asserts Catherine's narrative dominance by showing events as they unfold from her perspective. The film's opening scene confirms this as we are introduced into the world of a young schizophrenic, Edward, who Catherine is counselling within the disciplines of an innovative psychiatric procedure. Catherine experiences her patients' mental illnesses by transporting herself into their minds using a futuristic "transferral" machine. While "hooked up" to this machine, Catherine counsels her patients' in their own "territory." Catherine's supervisor Henry (Dylan Baker) comments that she has a natural "gift" with her young patients that no other psychiatrist interviewed for her position had exhibited. Henry explains that when they chose Catherine, he and his business partner Miriam "interviewed some of the best child therapists in the country." Miriam claims that all the other candidates did was "observe and report" when more is required in their psychiatric profession than this scientific approach. Henry explains that many of their patients "only talk to Catherine," which might suggest that her "maternal" nurturing skills are superior to those of others in her occupation. This would appear to reinforce the patriarchal assumption that women make naturally superior caregivers.¹² However, Catherine's "maternal" care does not cure Edward's acute schizophrenia and her revenge skills ultimately supersede her nurturing abilities. It is Agent Novak who performs the role of nurturer at the end of the film when he rescues Stargher's victim, Julia Hickson (Tara Subkoff). Although Agent Novak is a generically

¹² Nancy Chodorow (1978) argues that that mothering is socially reproduced by women and passed on generation to generation. According to Chodorow, boys are not taught to nurture and mother like girls. Because of this, women have become our society's primary caregivers, responsible for the early education of children. Chodorow suggests that this has resulted in the cultural entrenchment of the biological realities of reproduction and mothering. A consequence of this has been the gendering of private and public spaces. Chodorow offers that the primary corollary of the gendering of mothering is the production of tacit hierarchies that allow domestic work to remain underpaid or unpaid.

conventional detective, committed to restoring moral equilibrium, his participation in *The Cell* is limited to Hickson's rescue.¹³

Like Annie in *The Gift*, who asserts that her psychic abilities are her livelihood and profession, Catherine has a pragmatic dedication to the work she performs.¹⁴ Catherine's "gift" as a counsellor is made use of through her work and she has no ties to a husband or family. The behaviour of police officials in *The Cell* is placed in contrast with Catherine's devotion to her job and justice. Detectives in *The Cell* are not simply incompetent; they treat the victims and perpetrators of the crimes they investigate with little sensitivity. Detectives discuss Stargher's victims clinically as they survey gruesome corpses. For instance, during one scene the FBI's doctor and coroner Teddy Lee (James Gammon) gives the order "dump the body over there" to another officer. Lee's diction indicates the estimation that he has of the murdered women: this body is a statistic for the FBI.¹⁵ When Stargher collapses into a schizophrenic coma after he is captured, detectives ponder the science of the matter without addressing the problem they are faced with— finding the woman Stargher has left trapped in his "cell."¹⁶ It is only because Novak has the ability to state plainly what will happen to this woman, Julia Hickson, if they do not see the "big picture" that the FBI are

¹³ In "Genre Film: A Classical Experience" Thomas Sobchack outlines the role of the private eye (read detective) in the thriller genre: "The ideal of commitment to square dealing and presumably to a community of square dealers is demonstrated in the moral integrity of the private eye who can't be bought. Hence we may understand that in the particular social order shown, the police may be stupid or even corrupt, but there is somewhere a moral order of community and group benefit as opposed to personal and material benefit, an ideal vindicated by the private eye's sending to prison the girl he's fallen in love with" (111)

¹⁴ Catherine explains to Edward's parents the details of the procedure she has been using on their son, implying that her work is a job, not a "gift." She tells Edward's parents that they have chosen her to work with their son and that if they think that there's someone better at this job, someone who's "more devoted," she will relinquish her role as his caregiver. Although she does use the word "devoted" here, which has emotive connotations, this is exactly the kind of vocabulary that would be appropriately used to describe Novak's attitude to his work.

¹⁵ An FBI official, Agent Cole (Dean Norris), asks another agent, "do they all look like dolls?" and the detective responds "every unfortunate one of them." Here the detectives objectify the killer's victims by accepting his logic.

¹⁶ As doctors and agents discuss Stargher's condition, Novak is forced to point out that all involved with the investigation are so caught up in the procedures of their work that they have become removed from the central aim of their jobs. Novak explains this straightforwardly: "I think we're missing the big picture. Whatever state that he happens to be in, there is a girl that is missing and her name is Julia Hickson and he is the only one that knows where she is. He keeps them in this thing for about forty hours. He took Julia Hickson at seven thirty last night."

even referred to the facility where Catherine works. This referral saves Hickson's life because Catherine is determined to restore justice her world.

Catherine's utilization of the psychiatric procedures she has helped to develop is portrayed at once as clinical and compassionate, and without her professionalism the FBI would not have the resources necessary to discover Hickson's whereabouts.¹⁷ Catherine takes Stargher's state of mind into account and proposes that it takes months to build the trust necessary to enter his mind. Catherine also asserts that he may "no longer know the truth" because severe schizophrenics cannot discern between fantasy and reality. Catherine only agrees to enter Stargher's mind because she overhears another of his victims cry out for help on the videotape they are shown. Her professionalism is further demonstrated when she points out that much of what the FBI medical team have done to prepare Stargher's unconscious body for her counselling session may violate the effectiveness of her procedures.¹⁸ Catherine's concern for Stargher's well-being implies that she realizes she must understand him if she is to find Hickson.

However, Catherine begins to realize that Stargher is beyond rehabilitation when she returns from her trip into his mind. This is where Catherine's motivation for revenge begins to crystallize. The images in Stargher's world Catherine experiences demonstrate that death and decay dominate his imagination. Catherine professes that with Stargher she "felt things" she "never wants to feel again." Despite her desire to save Julia Hickson's life, Catherine is unwilling to participate in a procedure that appears clinically impossible. However, Novak convinces her to resume her work with

¹⁷ As Novak explains Hickson's abduction to Catherine and her colleagues, his compassion for the victims of violence is also in contrast with the detachment of his colleagues. Novak appears to have a talent for expressing in clear, emotive terms what the other FBI Agents can only explain methodically and he lucidly details the horror of what Stargher does to the women he kidnaps while still expressing a respect for the killer's victims.

¹⁸ When she notices that they have removed the piercings along his back, Catherine comments that they should have left him "the way he was." The piercings, she explains, allowed him to "suspend" himself because he felt "comforted" by a "feeling of weightlessness." Catherine again expresses the importance of Stargher's comfort for the success of the procedure she is partaking in when she insists that his dog be brought into the laboratory. "Whatever gave him pleasure should make him more accessible," she explains.

Stargher by recounting a story that implies the likelihood of him re-offending.¹⁹ As she realizes that should the FBI not compile the right evidence Stargher might recover and kill more women, Catherine agrees to try “transferral” once more. Whilst inside Stargher’s mind for the final time, Catherine witnesses scenes from the killer’s miserable and violent childhood. Stargher’s childhood abuse is connected to his desire to kill when the film cuts from his memory of this violence to a recollection of his first murder. Stargher confirms that it was his violent childhood that compelled him to murder as he recounts the trauma of his baptism.²⁰ Catherine deduces that Stargher’s rehabilitation is not possible when she escapes from captivity in his mind. At this point Catherine begins to focus on avenging his crimes against women.

Catherine rebels against medical procedures and the orders of her superiors by bringing Stargher into her own “world” in order to punish him. Henry and Miriam explain that Catherine’s attempt to rescue Stargher is dangerous and that “she’s reversing the feeds” when “the process is intended for her to go into *his* mind.” With Stargher inside *her* mind Catherine is able to hear his analysis of his own childhood.²¹ Listening to Stargher’s explanation for the crimes he has committed, Catherine deduces that he is beyond a cure: he sees murder as the solution to his personal history of abuse. Rather than attempt rehabilitation, Catherine pins Stargher down and beats him to death, shouting “My world, my rules.” Here the film cuts to a deserted country locale, where Novak discovers Stargher’s hidden “cell.” Novak’s status as hero is undermined, however, when Hickson confuses him with her captor. Hickson is also portrayed as a character with agency in her own survival: the cell is flooded with water and she would be dead had she not found a source of air herself. The FBI quickly

¹⁹ Novak tells her about a case of his, which had involved a man named Charles Gish, who had sexually assaulted a young girl. Gish escaped conviction and returned to murder the girl.

²⁰ Stargher recounts this experience as follows: “My father pushed me under. I think I had some kind of seizure. I think I was drowning and everybody just looked at me and nobody helped me, nobody, except him. My father took me home that night and broke three of my ribs and fractured my jaw. I was six years old.”

²¹ Stargher tells Catherine the following story: “When I was a little boy I found this bird and he was injured— he had a broken leg or something. If my father found out I had it I knew he would do something horrible to it, it was just a matter of time. So I took it to the sink and I held it under. It was better for the bird— I saved him.”

dismisses Catherine's experiences inside Stargher's mind as supernatural fiction but she is clearly the film's hero. Though the validity of Catherine's knowledge and work is questioned by the FBI's institutional law, it is clearly her dedication to her job that saves Hickson's life.²² Like Vanessa, who is determined to ensure that Bob does not kill again, Catherine is dedicated to guaranteeing that Hickson survives and that Stargher is subsequently prevented from killing again.

Conclusion

We shall see in such genres as female action films or rape revenge films... [that] issues of gender are illuminated by the manner in which race and class are addressed or ignored while depicting them, and vice versa.

Philip Green, *Cracks in the Pedestal*. (30)

Freeway is a film with a more noticeable social commentary than many other examples from the serial killer genre in that it at once foregrounds issues of gender and class. As Green points out, when a film highlights these social intersections, feminist perspectives may be illuminated in a forceful manner. *Freeway* is a significant exemplar from the rape-revenge/serial killer genre because Vanessa's narrative sympathetically portrays lower socio-economic communities. *Freeway* makes a political statement about American institutions: Vanessa's journey demonstrates that institutional law might be best described as "patriarchal" law. Vanessa asserts an alternative form of law, an "outlaw justice" that incorporates feminist principles and addresses patriarchal violence more directly. Whereas Kathryn Merteuil is punished for her rebellion against social mores in *Cruel Intentions*, *Freeway* depicts Vanessa Lutz emphatically articulating her oppression and angrily asserting her resistance.

²² Novak explains the FBI's viewpoint to Catherine: "According to the FBI you guys put me on some drug-fuelled mind-bender, which triggered a memory I already had. Officially we found Julia Hickson through good old fashioned detective work."

The Cell shares one central aspect with *Freeway*— that a woman avenges the crimes of a serial killer. However, there is a key difference between the concluding ideologies of the two films in this chapter: *The Cell*'s ending is less dismal than that of *Freeway* in that Catherine is given a future. Like Vanessa, Catherine utilizes her feminist knowledge to survive and to defeat the source of violence in her community. While the FBI maintains that the psychiatric procedures Catherine utilizes to do so in *The Cell* are fictional, the law still needs her participation in this process to rescue Hickson. It is Catherine who restores order to the world by murdering Stargher, and her moral perspective is central to *The Cell*'s narrative resolution. Unlike Catherine, whose professionalism has been validated within her workplace, Vanessa is unable to function within social institutions. Vanessa appears to have nothing at the end of her film, yet viewers of *The Cell* can be assured that Catherine will return to her job with a renewed sense of achievement. Though Detective Breer eventually respects Vanessa for telling the truth, it may be assumed that he will have little influence on her future. *Freeway*'s opening scenes imply that the only place for homeless teenagers like Vanessa is the perilous foster care system and concludes by suggesting that in a world where institutional law is ineffective, women must face grim futures. While *Freeway* asserts the philosophies of girl power, as Roberts suggests, it cannot provide an empowered and positive future for its protagonist. This in many respects reveals the limits to the rebellion of “angry women” in girl power movies.

CHAPTER 5

Women, Friendships, Knowledge and Power in Occult Films: *The Craft*, *What Lies Beneath* and *The Gift*.

The Craft (Andrew Flemming, 1996), *What Lies Beneath* (Robert Zemeckis, 2000) and *The Gift* (Sam Raimi, 2000) are girl power films that consider the possibility that feminist forms of spirituality are available to communities of women who work in unison. Each film represents the knowledge of groups of women in opposition to the “masculine” knowledge of social institutions. Alternative spiritualities are empowering and enlightening for the women involved in all three films; however, in *The Craft* young girls are castigated for not seeking the guidance of those with authority when utilizing their newfound powers. In *What Lies Beneath* and *The Gift*, feminine spirituality is in opposition to institutional knowledge. The locus of a middle-aged woman’s terror is derived from within the family institution in *What Lies Beneath* and communal institutions are represented as corrupt and ineffectual for a young mother in *The Gift*. While women are convinced to be mistrustful of conventional forms of spiritual belief in *The Gift* and *What Lies Beneath*, *The Craft*’s conclusion affirms patriarchal power by disavowing the importance of bonds between women.

The Craft is initially concerned with female friendships and how these relationships might empower young girls, yet the film also reveals that young women will eventually become blind to their own self-destruction when intoxicated with feminist powers. *The Craft*’s protagonist Sarah Bailey (Robyn Turney) is an outsider at her new high school and seeks solace in friendships with three other outcasts— Nancy, Rochelle and Bonnie (Fairuza Balk, Rachel True and Neve Campbell). Their friendships soon come to revolve around learning about goddess

cults and witchcraft. Initially the girls spend time together, sharing fears and supporting one another through crises caused by the stigmas that have made them outsiders at school.¹ Ultimately, however, the girls' friendships sour, and so violent is their falling out that Nancy is incarcerated in a psychiatric institution. Implied in *The Craft's* conclusion is the message that young girls who seek control over their lives should realize that the power they are allowed has limitations.

The Gift is also about women surviving on the margins of communities, using witchcraft to communicate with each other. *The Gift* depicts the life of a small-town Georgian single parent, psychic and therapist, Annie Wilson (Cate Blanchett). Annie listens to her clients and helps them in ways that institutions (medical, psychiatric, legal, penal) in her town, Brixton, may not. The corruption of Brixton's institutions becomes apparent as *The Gift* develops and we are shown that Annie herself is the "soul" of the town, a hero to local women. Narrative events in *The Gift* centre on the murder of a young socialite, Jessica King (Katie Holmes). The men who run Brixton's institutions attempt to search for the truths behind her murder and are unsuccessful. Annie's psychic interpretation of events preceding this violence, however, is revealed to be accurate. *The Gift* concludes with the suggestion that Brixton's institutions do not provide adequate services to the community's marginalized populations: residents instead rely on Annie's alternative therapies.

It is apparent from the outset in *What Lies Beneath* that something is not quite right beneath the surface of the marriage of Claire and Norman Spencer (Michelle Pfeiffer and Harrison Ford). The film borrows from many of Alfred Hitchcock's films, most notably *Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960) and *Rear Window* (1954), but is more similar to *The Craft* and *The Gift* in its reliance on supernatural themes. Reviewer for *The San Francisco Examiner*, Wesley Morris, points out that

¹ *The Craft* portrays the stigma of "being poor" the least favourably in its representation of Nancy, whose family lives in a trailer park.

from the moment opening credits roll in *What Lies Beneath* we witness allusions to Norman Bates in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), Glenn Close's performance in *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) and Ingrid Bergman's in *Gaslight* (George Cukor, 1944). *What Lies Beneath* and these older films have in common an initial emphasis on the mundane aspects of claustrophobic domestic life. Spectators are also encouraged to believe that some foreign, exotic and radically "other" being is threatening what seems to be a familiar setting. Ultimately, however, Norman's unhealthy obsession with his career and academic advancement is revealed to be that which is "beneath" the Spencers' marriage.

As Claire gains confidence in her own opinions through friendships with other women, she makes disturbing discoveries about her husband's past. Claire only comes to see that her husband is a violent and dangerous man by befriending other women, both dead and alive. Through her communications with the ghost of her husband's victim, Madison Frank (Amber Valetta), and other key women in the film, Lois Templeton (Sloane Shelton), her neighbour, Mrs. Feur (Miranda Otto), and her friends Elena (Wendy Crewson) and Jody (Diana Scarwid), Claire gains the confidence to see "what lies beneath" the façade of her marriage. Claire establishes strong relationships with other women and viewers are encouraged to identify with her perspective, rather than that of her husband.

Another key aspect of all three films is a focus on occult themes. Clover analyses occult films extensively in *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, speculating that such films do not simply focus on women's superior understanding of alternative realities, but also on perceptions of masculinity. Clover proposes that although the story of the standard possession film concentrates on the female body, these films are not primarily about women. The "occult possession" film's psychological interest resides at least as much in men's struggles to understand supernatural events: "The quandary of the rational male faced with the satanic or its equivalents is a simple one: should he cling to his rational, scientific understanding, or should he

yield to the irrational? . . . The standard scheme puts the female body on the line only to put the male psyche on the line” (85-6). Occult narratives insist upon a thematic opposition between “White Science” and “Black Magic.”

Clover argues that the world at the opening of the standard occult film is one governed by “White Science” but this scientific understanding of the world is placed in doubt by the intrusion of the supernatural. Even the most sophisticated forms of “White Science” are ultimately unable to account for the mysterious happenings of occult films. Clover suggests that only a marginal person or group (usually a woman or community of women) is able to offer an explanation for the events that occur in such films. This marginal account is eventually represented as more plausible than anything “White Science” has to offer (Clover 96-8). According to Clover, “the conflict between White Science and Black Magic is a deeply gendered one, constitutive of a conflict between male and female and . . . ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’” (96). This is precisely the case with Sarah, Catherine and Annie’s experiences of magic in *The Craft*, *The Gift* and *What Lies Beneath*. Although women’s knowledge is in opposition to institutional explanations for unusual events in *What Lies Beneath* and *The Gift*, a shared feminine spirituality is depicted as important in both films, and female protagonists are represented as “heroes” worthy of spectator identification.

“Ours is the Power”

The Craft concerns the empowerment of a quartet of high school outcasts and their subsequent misuse of those powers. Initially, the ceremonies draw the four girls into a joyous friendship . . . they share their fears and support one another through crises. Then their incantations begin to work, and like the pitiless suburban princesses of *Heathers*, they become intoxicated with their own power.

Rita Kempley, *Washington Post*.

Karen Hollinger's definition for the "anti-female friendship" film locates *The Craft* within a cinematic sub-genre where the importance of female companionship is negated:

The manipulative female friendship film portrays a destructive female relationship that mocks the possibility of women forming . . . bonds of loyalty and affection. . . . By focusing so strongly on conflicts between women, they obscure other issues related to women's position in society, relieve men of any responsibility for women's problems, and suggest, instead, that women should grant men primary importance in their lives because they are the only ones upon whom women can rely. (*In the Company of Women* 207)

Teenaged protagonists in *The Craft* initially rely on friendships with one another and collectively enact revenge on those who have stigmatized them at school or at home. However, by the end of the film, two of the four girls are left feeling unsure of their powers, one is incarcerated and the fourth is alone, without any sense of community outside of her family. *The Craft* concludes with the suggestion that the girls have misused the powers given to them by a masculine deity by enacting revenge on those around them (even on a young man who has attempted to rape a member of their coven). The conflict between Sarah and Nancy that is at the focus of much of *The Craft* is for Nancy centred on "jealousy, envy, and competition for men." Early in the film Nancy is shown up as the supposedly corrupt coven leader responsible for the power struggles developing within the group of young girls. Through her experiences with Nancy, Sarah learns to mistrust other women. By realizing that family is the one communal experience she may rely on, Sarah "grants men primary importance" in her life, as it is her father (Cliff De Young) who maintains power in

her family.² *The Craft* verifies Hollinger's premise that the "anti female friendship film" affirms patriarchal power when Sarah is left with only her father to rely on.

The Craft also fits Hollinger's timeframe for this type of movie: the mid-nineties. Hollinger explains that a "backlash" against popular representations of communities of women occurred during a politically conservative era in the eighties and nineties: "The female friendship film had already developed almost exclusively into a socially conformist cinematic form that presents female bonding as a useful means of social integration, guiding women into acceptance of the existing social structure" (208). By the end of *The Craft* Sarah realizes that the power she has acquired is best used within the boundaries of her family. Sarah accepts the existing patriarchal structures in her life when she dismisses Bonnie and Rochelle in the film's final scene, and this indicates that the role that "female bonding" will play in her future is minimal. The only woman with whom Sarah has a healthy relationship is Lirio (Assumpta Serna), the owner of her suburb's witchcraft supplies store.

Though *The Craft* represents "female bonding" negatively there is still a progressive aspect to the film: all four girls go through positive empowerments together and it is not until Nancy "invokes" the power of Manon, a Wiccan God, that their friendships sour. As reviewer Mick La Salle points out, the girls use magic to rebel against the prevailing social ideologies that allow sexist and racist attitudes to flourish:

School gives *The Craft* a context within which it becomes perfectly understandable why four bright girls . . . would develop witchcraft skills, cast spells and kill people. Each of the girls has something that makes her not quite fit in. Bonnie (Neve Campbell) was burned in a fire as a child and has severe scars on her back. Rochelle (Rachel True) is black in an all-white school. And Nancy (Fairuza Balk) comes from a white-trash background . . .

² He insists the family move to LA, which uproots Sarah from her established home and community of friends in San Francisco. He also protects Sarah from unpleasant things, like the snake charmer who invades their home in the film's opening scenes.

trailer park, drunken mother and sexually and physically abusive stepfather. Even Sarah, who seems an unflappable middle-class girl, is a survivor of a grisly suicide attempt. (*The San Francisco Chronicle*)

While the film may be read within the context of Hollinger's suggestion that "anti-female friendship" films support existing patriarchal institutions, it may also be read as a celebration of Sarah's individual powers. Sarah is represented within the film's logic as the only member of the coven whose morals remain intact when invoking the powers of Manon and her mother's spirit gives her the confidence she needs to take this power into herself.

Sarah

Sarah is established as a determined protagonist in *The Craft* and she initially resembles the types of characters Clover describes as "final girls." For instance, on her first day at a new school Sarah appears unconcerned about the fact that she may stand out as a new pupil without the correct attire. "I just wanna get started and get it over with," she tells her father. Sarah stresses her desire for independence by insisting on walking when she is offered a ride home. At school Sarah again demonstrates that she is courageous when she speaks out in French class in order to ridicule a peer. Sarah is appalled when a fellow student protests about learning French in Los Angeles when he feels learning "Mexican" would be more appropriate. This pupil establishes the ideological tone of the school when he expresses ignorance about his region's Hispanic population and answers his teacher's inquiries about his weekend by telling his class in stilted French that he had a "good lay." Male sexual prowess and racial ignorance are tolerated and celebrated at Sarah's new school.

As Sarah's outsider status is further implied in *The Craft*, she is also depicted as persistently questioning of the school's established social order. The school's most celebrated football star, Chris Hooker (Skeet Ulrich), approaches Sarah during

recess on her first day. Their conversation illustrates that Sarah is not afraid to point out the shortcomings of the “in” crowd at her new school and that her future companions— the coven members— are also non-conformists. Chris outlines that Bonny, Nancy and Rochelle have been marginalized at school when he calls them “the bitches of Eastwick.” Sarah is hesitant about accepting Chris’s advances here and even mocks his invitation for her to watch his football practice— an activity that he assumes any female classmate would be honoured to partake in. Sarah seems aware that Chris symbolizes the status quo at her school— a dominant social order that subordinates certain students. However, Sarah still goes to watch Chris practise, though she at first responds sarcastically to his invitation. This reveals that Sarah is vulnerable and craves the approval of peers. While watching Chris practice Sarah is approached by Nancy, Bonnie and Rochelle, who are determined to disrupt her budding relationship with their school’s football star.

Sarah discloses that she is dissatisfied with the power balances in her life in the first conversation she shares with the coven. During this scene Sarah explains that her family has moved to LA against her will and she admits that the scars on her wrists are the result of a suicide attempt. Though Sarah’s mental illness seems serious, Bonnie, Nancy and Rochelle are in awe of her attempt at taking her own life. The girls admire the fact that she “did it the right way” when Sarah tells Bonnie that she used a kitchen knife. Sarah explains why she attempted suicide later in the film: “I used to hallucinate things— all I’d see was just snakes and bugs everywhere.” Impressed by Sarah’s outspoken defiance of her school’s structures of power and also by her attempt at suicide, the girls take Sarah to their favorite magic supplies shop. This initiates Sarah into their alternative community and introduces her to her spiritual “mother,” Lirio.

Sarah’s relationship with Lirio is the one bond that is not fraught with jealousy, power-struggles and betrayals in *The Craft*. Sarah forms a friendship with Lirio because she is uncertain about joining the coven. While Sarah peruses Lirio’s

magic shop for the first time Bonnie explains their justification for shoplifting: “everything in nature steals, you know, big animals steal from little ones.” This is a rationale that Sarah later dismisses by paying for her supplies. Bonnie also details the importance of keeping a journal as a young witch: “you put spells and power thoughts in it and then you don’t let anyone else read it, ever, except maybe us.” Though Bonnie outlines here that the practices of witchcraft allow young women a form of expression, Sarah is disgusted with her new friends’ Darwinian philosophy. Lirio immediately distinguishes Sarah from the rest of the group when she pays for her supplies during this scene, and is immediately protective of her. Lirio’s maternal advice allows Sarah to reclaim her bond with the “spirit” of her birthmother. Lirio introduces Sarah to the “spiritual truths” of “The Craft” and therefore performs the role that her mother would have performed had she lived— Sarah’s mother was a powerful witch herself. Though Sarah is uncertain about learning “The Craft,” Lirio reassures her that she has the ability and is a “natural witch.”

The Craft depicts the empowerment that Sarah feels as she is included in the coven; however, the danger that is brewing in the girls’ close relationship is also implied. An old snake charmer follows Sarah along the street when they leave Lirio’s shop, and shouts ominous premonitions about her future. As he chases Sarah, a car hits him and the girls are exhilarated by what they consider to be their first combined magical effort. Bonnie insists that they have used their collective powers to will the man’s accident and that Sarah is the fourth member of their coven— just as her Wiccan almanac had predicted. Bonnie indicates her newfound sense of empowerment by persuading the others they can “make things happen.” The three original members of the coven tell Sarah about their God, Manon at this point, and explain that “he” is “like God and the devil,” though more powerful than the Christian God their Catholic community worships.

This scene also depicts the development of a conflict between Sarah and Nancy. Sarah explains to her new friends that she often experiences control over the

physical world through her mind and Bonnie remarks that she must be a “natural witch.” As with *Carrie* and *Ginger Snaps*, however, Sarah describes her psychic powers as a curse: “It’s always getting screwed up. It’s like sometimes I will it to rain and a pipe will burst in my room and it’ll just get flooded.” Though Bonnie and Rochelle are impressed by Sarah’s powers, Nancy is jealous and asks if Sarah has heard of the superior powers that can be achieved through “invoking.” Nancy explains this process: “when you call him, Manon, it’s like he fills you.” Sarah, perhaps afraid of the sexual undertone to Nancy’s pleasurable anticipation of invocation, replies “nothing makes everything all better again” and tells her new friends they are “freaking her out.” Unlike Nancy, who conveys her desire to have Manon “fill her,” Sarah is reluctant to “invoke.” This references the “slasher” tradition of a virginal “final girl.” Sarah is reluctant to have other sexual experiences in *The Craft* and Manon is referred to throughout the film as a “he.” The girls only reach the peak of their powers through “invoking” him, or letting him into their bodies, which has obvious sexual connotations. Here, the language describing the practice of a feminist cult is re-worded to imply a masculine invasion.

Sarah seems reluctant to join their coven after this encounter with Bonnie, Nancy and Rochelle, and seeks out male companionship instead. It is only because Sarah’s experiences with Chris turn sour that she seeks solace in female friendships once more. Sarah goes on a date with Chris but he spreads rumours about what a “bad lay” she is because she refuses to go home with him. The coven informs Sarah of this rumour and Nancy explains that this is typical behaviour for Chris (he has said the same thing about her in the past). Sarah reacts in her usually bold manner by confronting Chris, yet his response only reaffirms his masculine prowess in view of his peers. Sarah’s unheard protests only make apparent the force of the existing patriarchal status quo at their school. This particular scene depicts the extent of Sarah’s vulnerability: despite her strengths she is powerless to challenge the existing order in her community. Sarah’s dream that night, which is about slitting her wrists, confirms her sense of helplessness.

The Craft ultimately depicts Sarah's official integration into the coven as indicative of her failure to be accepted by others at her new school. Sarah's first wish during the coven's initiation ceremonies is, "I ask to love myself more and allow myself to be loved more by others, especially Chris Hooker." Though she mentions needing Chris's affection with a sarcastic tone in her voice, loving herself for Sarah still seems to involve being accepted by her peers. Sarah discovers that their spells have worked when Chris attempts to explain why he started the rumour about her. His explanation— "when you're a guy, and I am, people expect things"— demonstrates once more the pervasiveness of normative gender roles at their school. Unimpressed by his excuses, Sarah asks Chris if he told his friends that he's a "lying sack of shit," to which he submissively responds, "I'll tell them tomorrow." Later Chris carries Sarah's books, which makes him the object of taunts from his friends, who ask him to hold their "jocks." Chris is emasculated by Sarah's spell, but this does not confirm the importance of her empowerment so much as the film's insistence that women need to feel loved by men.

Unlike Nancy, who relishes Chris's emasculation, Sarah is concerned for his wellbeing when her spell works, despite the anguish he had earlier caused her. Sarah's response to Chris's torment is in contrast with Nancy's delight in his suffering. Chris begins stalking Sarah, and though his obsessive behaviour is not condoned, audiences are encouraged to sympathize with him because the spell has made him confused. Appalled by Nancy's suggestion that they should "let him suffer," Sarah turns to Lirio for help in undoing her "love spell." Lirio explains that once a spell is started it may not be stopped: "there is no undoing, it has to run its course." Lirio insists that "true magic is neither black nor white," that the girls are defenceless in the face of an innate "nature" which is stronger than they. Lirio asserts that "whatever you send out you get back times three" and that this is "part of a basic spiritual truth, set in many ways, in many faiths." Lirio explains here what the ideological centre of the film is: "do unto others as you would have them do unto

you.” While Lirio initially uses Wiccan language to express this “spiritual truth” she must resort to biblical language to get the girls to understand. Lirio scolds Nancy for suggesting that Chris deserves to suffer, emphasizing that she should not make decisions fit for a God. This echoes a sermon from the Book of Genesis given earlier in the film: “Do not eat from the tree of knowledge. Do not compare thyself to the heavenly father. Do not even try to know what only God can know.” Though the girls worship within an alternative belief system, Lirio’s doctrines rearticulate patriarchal Christianity. This is further reinforced when Sarah accepts a dinner invitation from Chris because she is uncertain of her position in the coven. When Chris attempts to rape her, Sarah experiences Lirio’s belief that “what you send out you get back times three.” Sarah is therefore punished for her attempt to avenge Chris’s earlier abuse of her trust.

Nancy

Nancy is comparable with Vanessa Lutz from *Freeway* and Rachel from *Disturbing Behaviour*, in that all three characters are constructed as outspoken and defiant members of a transient, “seedy” underclass. However, while Vanessa is positioned at the centre of *Freeway*’s moral universe, Nancy is not represented favourably in *The Craft*. Nancy morally opposes Sarah and does not learn the lesson “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Nancy is associated with snakes throughout the film and therefore symbolizes the dangers that the snake charmer wished to warn Sarah of.³ This association with snakes is significant because a sermon that is given at the girls’ school refers to Eve’s transgression in the Garden of Eden. Eve is convinced by a serpent to eat the forbidden fruit and as a result paradise is destroyed. Nancy supposedly behaves as Eve did by invoking the spirit and using her powers to enact revenge on men. By doing so, Nancy destroys the haven the girls have built for themselves as protection from their cruel

³ In one particular scene Nancy carries and talks to a snake in a jar, warning Sarah about its power.

classmates.

The Craft also references the bible's story of Adam and Eve's "loss of sexual innocence" in its depiction of Nancy. Nancy, like Eve, is characterized as sexually forward and excessively promiscuous in *The Craft*. Some of the first words Nancy speaks in the film, after Bonnie reads aloud a prediction about a "new arrival" in her Almanac, are, "wonderful, I'm getting my rag . . . we don't need a fourth." Here Nancy unnecessarily links a new arrival to the reproductive processes of her body and dismisses the possibility that her feminist community might be expanded. Nancy further confirms her sexual knowledge by referring to her past experiences with Chris Hooker when she first introduces herself to Sarah: "He comes onto everything with tits. . . . He spreads disease. I speak from personal experience." Nancy also utilizes sexual innuendo frequently and relishes her association with deviant sexuality. For instance, when a bus driver tells them to "watch out for those weirdos" Nancy replies, "we are those weirdos." Nancy is constructed as the "weirdo" in *The Craft* because of her sexual experience. Sarah's refusal to go home with Chris after their date contrasts with Nancy's willingness to deceive him into going to bed with her. Nancy embodies the film's ideologically conservative warning that sexual knowledge is destructive for young girls.

Nancy's disrespect for patriarchal authority is paralleled with her sexual promiscuity in *The Craft*. This is evident when Nancy urges Sarah to "make something up" after she complains that she cannot join them for coffee because her father is waiting. Nancy does not just desire to defy patriarchal authority; she wishes to be the authority herself, or to take on God-like powers. This is depicted as the cause of her self-destruction. When the girls hold a ceremony to ratify their coven's status, Bonnie, Rochelle and Sarah make specific requests of the spirit world, yet Nancy's wish is to take into herself all of Manon's power. Nancy disregards Lirio's cautionary words about "invoking" and responds sarcastically to her warnings. Nancy's desire to "invoke" is a crime against the established spiritual order of

things, and her disrespect for Lirio's knowledge and experience is tantamount to Eve's disregard of God's warnings about the forbidden fruit.

Nancy's relationship with her mother is also significant in *The Craft*, and the film's depiction of her family life exposes its socioeconomic prejudices. Rochelle crudely explains that Nancy "doesn't want to be white trash anymore;" however, it is implied that Nancy's discontent within her family is more complex. Nancy's mother is always intoxicated and engaged in drunken disputes with her husband. Later it is suggested that Nancy's stepfather hits her mother and sexually abuses his stepdaughter. Eventually Nancy's telekinetic anger during one of her parents' arguments causes their trailer to catch fire and her stepfather suffers a fatal heart attack in his fright. When Nancy and her mother are informed by his insurance broker that he has left them \$175,000 they scream with delight. However, this opportune death does not mend Nancy's relationship with her mother. Nancy's mother is drunkenly disoriented in their new high-rise apartment and buys idiosyncratic objects that make no sense to the girls— for example, a jukebox containing only Connie Francis records. Nancy's mother has a door slammed in her face when she suggests they have "a little house-warming party." Nancy has no desire for a close relationship with her mother and this is further accentuated by her disregard for Lirio's motherly warnings about invoking the spirit of Manon.

Nancy is ultimately portrayed as a dangerous fille fatale who throws the coven out of balance with her lust for revenge, which takes on a sexual dimension with Chris Hooker. Nancy is determined to punish Chris when she hears that he had tried to rape her friend and uses magic to deceive him into thinking she is Sarah, insisting that "he's gotta pay" because the only way he knows how to treat women is "like whores." However, when she attempts to seduce Chris herself, he tells her he's "not in the mood" to get his "dick bitten off." Here Nancy is depicted as a sexually threatening castrator. Nancy tells Chris he's "the whore" before she uses magic to push him out a window to his death, and her words reflect that she has taken on the

judgmental powers of a God, something Lirio has warned her against. Though Nancy's anger seems justified (Chris has attempted to rape one of her friends), she is portrayed as perversely aggressive. Her grim fate at the end of the film further suggests that she has used her powers inappropriately. Women are not permitted to avenge the crimes of men in *The Craft*, instead, we are encouraged to believe that characters like Chris should be forgiven for acts committed under spells concocted by dangerous women.

Bonnie and Rochelle

Bonnie and Rochelle are represented as Nancy's "side-kicks." Bonnie initially seems a powerful component of the coven, especially when she urges Nancy to accept a fourth member after she sees Sarah use telekinesis in class. However, Nancy demonstrates the power she wields in the coven when she refuses to allow Sarah to sit with their lab group in chemistry class. Viewers are also shown Bonnie's emotional and physical pain as cosmetic surgery is performed on her back in attempts to remove the severe burn scars that have stigmatised her at school. When Nancy tells Sarah that Chris "sleeps with anything that moves," Bonnie adds, "except me," which suggests that her physical scars have affected all aspects of her life. Bonnie's contribution to their initiation ceremony emphasizes her desire to be "beautiful" and she performs a spell hoping to remove the scarring on her back. Bonnie confidently begins wearing more revealing clothes after the spell succeeds in *The Craft*, but this is not portrayed positively. As Bonnie becomes more sexually assertive she is depicted as narcissistic and Sarah confirms the film's perspective on this matter by calling her a "slut." Bonnie is left with no magical powers at the end of the film, presumably as punishment for her inappropriately sexual behaviour.

Rochelle, the only black character in *The Craft*, is similarly stripped of magical powers once the coven disintegrates. The revenge she enacts on a fellow Dive Club member, Laura (Christine Taylor), is represented as unnecessarily cruel.

Laura constantly taunts Rochelle at training sessions, distracting her as she practises by shouting abusive remarks. Laura later confirms that her hatred is racially motivated when she makes a comment about Rochelle's "little nappy hairs." Rochelle confronts Laura about her taunts and is given the response "I don't like Negroids." From this point Rochelle focuses her spells on her nemesis but is plagued with guilt when Laura's hair begins to fall out. *The Craft* frames Rochelle's revenge as unnecessarily malicious and Laura is eventually portrayed as a sympathetic character, despite the fact her behaviour has been openly racist.

Invoking the Spirit and Friendship

When Rochelle, Sarah, Bonnie and Nancy perform initiation rites for their coven they agree to enter their circle with "perfect love and perfect trust" and drink of their "sisters." However, as the narrative develops, the conflict between Sarah and Nancy's moral viewpoints is exacerbated. During a Wiccan ceremony where Nancy invokes the power of Manon, she uses the word "me" instead of "us," which voices her disrespect for the communal ritual they are partaking in. The morning after her rebellious invocation, Nancy perversely describes the dozens of stranded whales that have appeared along the beach they performed their rites on as her "gifts." She explains that she feels as though she is Manon's daughter and that he is "inside" her. For Nancy, invoking is a sexual experience that has incestuous connotations.⁴ The coven's behaviour begins to disgust Sarah after the invocation. She complains that Bonnie is narcissistic and that Nancy's hunger for power is "throwing things out of balance." Nancy responds that she's having "fun" and doesn't "give a shit," and Bonnie defends their conduct by explaining that she spent a "big chunk" of her life being a "monster" and now just wants to "have a good time." Though Bonnie is able to give a perfectly reasonable explanation for being focused on her appearance, and though Rochelle has been ruthlessly taunted by a racist classmate, Sarah finds their

⁴ This perhaps references her relationship with her stepfather.

empowerment abhorrent. While Nancy relishes Chris's punishment for his mistreatment of women, Sarah regretfully comments "I didn't want him to get hurt. I think that he was a good guy." Sarah's disgust with her friends dominates identificatory positions available to viewers during *The Craft*'s conclusion.

The concluding scenes of *The Craft* represent the final battle of wills between Sarah and Nancy. Sarah's ultimate success in this battle implies that the film's ideological positioning is aligned with her viewpoint. Sarah is depicted attempting to "bind" Nancy from doing harm but is tormented in her dreams by the three remaining members of the coven. Nancy explains to Sarah that the people they have victimized "deserved it" and threatens her with stories of traditional Wiccan punishments. "In the old days, if a witch betrayed her coven they would kill her," Nancy explains. Nancy's threats are depicted as the crazed rants of a girl who has taken the meaning of her bonds with other women too far. Sarah seeks help from Lirio and is told to turn to the spirit of her birth mother. Lirio's explanation for utilizing this power, however, establishes the film's patriarchal tone. She tells Sarah, "you can defeat those who challenge you but you must surrender yourself to a higher power." Two conflicting ideologies are presented here: firstly, that Sarah has "natural" powers and must realize her own strengths; and secondly, that Sarah is not formidable alone because she must invoke a masculine deity in order to utilize her magic appropriately.

Sarah's ultimate confrontation with Nancy reinforces the film's assertion that the girls must use magic through the guidance of a patriarchal authority. Because she has not "misused" Manon's powers as Nancy has, Sarah remains the only powerful witch by *The Craft*'s conclusion. The film's closing scenes additionally confirm that the girls' friendships with one another are over. Sarah dismisses Bonnie and Rochelle's offer of companionship one last time, warning them to "be careful" because they could "end up like Nancy." *The Craft* concludes with a shot of Nancy, strapped to a bed in a psychiatric hospital, high on sedatives, insisting that she can

fly. This reinforces the fact that the girls are answerable to a patriarchal deity that punishes those who exceed their authority. According to the logic of these final scenes, Nancy has behaved beyond the bounds of her authority by seeking revenge for acts of incest, sexual humiliation and rape. *The Craft*'s conclusion celebrates Sarah's isolation from her female friends and negates the philosophies of girl power. Angry women who fight back are dealt with severely in *The Craft*.

“The soul of the town”

It is through Annie that we experience the extreme harshness and meanness of this tiny Georgia town, where women count for nothing, violence rules, no one can be trusted, and corruption runs through everything. Men are comprehensively awful.

Michael Thomson, *BBC Online*.

Protagonist Annie in *The Gift* performs the role of lawyer, therapist and instigator of justice for much of her town's population. Annie insists that the “clients” she provides psychic counselling for provide for her family. Forced to take care of her sons alone, Annie must utilize the spiritual connections she has with vulnerable residents in her town, Brixton, in order to survive. After her psychic abilities also contribute to the conviction of Jessica King's true murderer, Annie is reunited in honest grief over her husband's death with her three sons. A shot of Annie and her sons embracing concludes *The Gift* and asserts her ability to capably perform both parental roles within her family. Annie's successful restoration of social order to her community indicates that institutional law in Brixton has failed.

Valerie Barksdale (Hilary Swank), a victim of domestic violence in *The Gift*, represents the failure of Brixton's institutions to protect and provide for women. When she is introduced in the film's opening scenes it is obvious that Valerie has no one to turn to aside from Annie, who addresses her situation with honesty and

concern. Valerie feels comfortable enough with Annie to take off her sunglasses and reveal the full extent of the beatings she receives from her husband, Donnie (Keanu Reeves). Annie's disgust at Donnie Barksdale's violence is evidenced when she explains that she'd feel guilty taking Valerie's money if she weren't taking it away from him. However, when Annie insists that her client needs to find "legal help" so that she can leave her husband, it is easy to understand why Valerie feels as though this is no option. Valerie obviously fears the consequences she might face if she left her husband. While Annie provides Valerie with the one form of hope in her life, it seems there is no other refuge from domestic violence in Brixton.

Donnie Barksdale's terrorization of Annie demonstrates the relationship between southern custom and violence in Brixton. Barksdale visits Annie and threatens to hurt her sons should she give Valerie another reading. Barksdale's "polite" use of the word ma'am when he addresses Annie is in contrast with his aggressive and threatening demeanour. Barksdale's threats illustrate the acceptance of racism and other types of prejudice in Brixton. He tells Annie at one point that she is "no better than a Jew or a nigger" and ironically threatens her with what he calls her "own medicine"—voodoo. This implies the constant parallels that are drawn between Annie's spirituality and Brixton's "legitimate" Christian religion in *The Gift*. Christianity is integrated with a belief in psychic spirituality in Annie's life, but while most Brixton residents accept institutional "faith," they refuse to believe that a woman may have power to see things the police force cannot. Annie assertively protects her family from Barksdale and tells him that if he continues to harass her she will have him "thrown in jail."

Annie finds that when Barksdale's harassment continues, like Valerie, she has no one to turn to for protection. Barksdale's intimidation worsens after Valerie resumes her appointments with Annie. One evening Annie finds that Barksdale has broken into her home and spelt out the word "Satan" on her bed with tarot cards. Barksdale also leaves Annie's radio on a Christian channel and the delirious rants of

a minister seem to echo his fanaticism. Annie's promise to have Barksdale "thrown in jail," however, is ultimately depicted as an empty threat when she reports his harassment to the local sheriff, Pearl Johnson (J. K. Simmons). Johnson tells Annie that Barksdale is "a score hunting buddy" of his as he writes up a report on the incident, and that he therefore doesn't believe that he could hurt his wife or intimidate another woman. His reluctance to pursue Annie's complaint suggests that there are patriarchal systems in Brixton that protect men's rights to harass and abuse women. Brixton's sheriff's office is more interested in protecting masculine comradeship than the wellbeing of women. Barksdale's persecution continues as a result, and Annie must rely on her own strengths to protect her family.

Annie's close relationship with her client Buddy Cole (Giovanni Ribisi) further implies that institutional structures are failing Brixton's inhabitants. Brixton's psychiatric institutions are unable to provide Buddy with the care he needs and he insists that he is "hooked on" his "medicine," which implies that doctors and counsellors have provided him with superficial treatments. Throughout the film Annie demonstrates a peculiar ability to ease Buddy's mental torment, giving him hope by explaining that his anguish may be a common human experience. Annie helps Buddy but he never fully recovers from his mental illness. Buddy has deep-seated psychological problems that stem from an incestuous relationship with his father. Buddy's reliance on Annie is depicted during Barksdale's trial when she has less time to attend to his needs. During this scene, Buddy's mother calls Annie and explains that he is "going crazy." Buddy reveals to Annie the paternal abuse he has suffered as he douses his father in petrol, insisting that he's "gotta be punished" because he has "ruined" his "little boy." Buddy's relationship with his father is symbolic of the fact that patriarchal authority has become corrupt and incestuous in Brixton. Buddy also demonstrates the neglect he has suffered by implicating Annie for not having provided him with the care he needed. Annie is a "hero" to her clients in that she offers them advice, patience and concern, but she may not undertake all of the tasks that local institutions should perform.

Annie's "Gift," Female Friendships and Institutional Knowledge

Annie's "gift" represents more than just the title of the film— it signifies her link with other women in her community. This is suggested in the film's account of the growth of her psychic abilities. Annie's grandmother visits her as a ghost at one point in *The Gift*, bringing the following advice: "there's a storm coming . . . always use your instinct." Annie explains this feminine power during Donnie's trial: "My granny told me that I had a gift, it runs in my family, and she told me that I should just always use my instinct and I'd be alright." This advice allows Annie to provide for her family and to convict Jessica King's real killer, Wayne Collins (Greg Kinnear). Annie's visions of the murder are the "storm" that her grandmother's ghost foresees. *The Gift* implies that women have psychic connections during Annie and Jessica's first meeting. Annie realizes that something bad is going to happen to Jessica when she first meets her in Collins's office, and Jessica in turn instantly senses that Annie has had an ominous vision.⁵

The affiliation between Annie and the young socialite takes on another meaning when Annie visits Brixton's country club with her friend Linda and there witnesses Jessica's infidelity. While Linda tells Annie to "quit living like a nun" during these scenes, Jessica's conduct is contrastingly sexually forward. Annie comes across Jessica in the country club's bathrooms with a man who later features as the prosecuting lawyer in Donnie Barksdale's trial, David Duncan (Gary Cole). Annie also shares a moment of intimacy with Jessica's fiancé, Wayne, at the country club, where they have a discussion about Annie's "gift." Wayne's attitude towards Annie's "gift" is suggestive of his wider community's opinion of her psychic abilities. He tells her, "I just don't believe there are any great mysteries in life. I figure that what you see is what you get." Annie's psychic abilities are clouded

⁵ When Jessica asks if she and Collins will "live happily ever after" Annie has a disturbing vision. A pencil falls to the ground, landing at Jessica's feet, which are covered with mud and pondweed.

when she trusts Wayne enough to express her emotions over her husband's death. Annie suggests that Wayne is "like" her husband but is misguided: Wayne rudely questions her failure to prevent her husband's death and his attitude towards her "gift" is an indication of his character. The men who are sceptical of Annie's psychic abilities in *The Gift* are portrayed as cruel, violent or incompetent.

Whereas local police struggle to find clues as to Jessica King's whereabouts after she is reported missing the next day, Annie's connection to the missing woman is confirmed in a dream she has about her murder. The Brixton police visit Annie with Collins and Jessica's father, Kenneth King (Chelcie Ross), desperate for any insight. Sheriff Johnson's views on Annie's "gift" paraphrase Collins's attitude about her psychic abilities. Before he asks for Annie's help, Johnson qualifies his request with the following remarks: "I don't believe in what you do. . . . I don't like it. But we've got to the end of the road with our investigation, we've looked under every rock there is to look under, and we'd like you to tell us what you can to help us. Now, no hocus-pocus and chanting and carrying on." Johnson attempts to explain their need for Annie's assistance as a rational thing— she may have "heard something" from a client during one of her readings and knows "a lot of folks' business." Though at first Annie's "gift" does not work because the men present do not believe in her abilities, that night she has a dream where she picks a white lily which shrivels and turns black, and then sees trees reflected in water.⁶ When Annie wakes, her clock shows that it is one thirty in the morning (she eventually discovers that this is the time of Jessica's murder) and she goes outside to take milk to her dog. Annie looks up after she feels drops of water land on her hand, and has a vision of Jessica tied in chains in an overhanging tree. However, when Annie attempts to explain her vision to Sheriff Johnson he insists that he doesn't "investigate dreams" and that if she knows something that she is "withholding" she could get into "serious trouble." Johnson demonstrates that he is unwilling to accept belief systems

⁶ Raimi often uses trees as an ominous image: in an infamous scene in *The Evil Dead*, a woman is literally raped by a tree.

that exist outside of his limited knowledge and suggests that Annie is lying in order to protect a client.

The information that Annie's dream provides is proven accurate when they drag the bottom of a pond on Barksdale's property. Officers present at the pond-dragging indicate their disrespect for women through various actions. Firstly, Johnson makes an insensitive remark about needing coffee while they look for Jessica's remains. Then, when Barksdale arrives home and finds that his wife has given the police permission to search his property, he attacks Annie and Johnson does little to curtail his violence. Once they discover Jessica's body, not one of the officers present has the sensitivity to take the hooks of their dragnet out of her until Mr. King orders them to. These incidents convey that respect for women, dead or alive, is not a priority for Brixton's police force.

Men representative of Brixton's institutions are portrayed as interested only in perpetuating the power systems of their own professions at the expense of finding a truthful outcome when Donnie's trial begins. The prosecuting lawyer for the trial, Mr. Duncan, echoes the officers' lack of concern for Jessica during an interview he has with Annie. When Annie explains that Barksdale had threatened her family, Duncan responds that he heard Annie "threatened him right back." Duncan suggests that Annie might have been involved with Barksdale because he is a "ladies' man." This implies that the only rational explanation for Annie's desire to implicate Barksdale is that she is jealous over his involvement with other women. Duncan also suggests that in Brixton a "ladies' man" is a man who abuses his wife. Annie, however, points out that Duncan's legal vocabulary does not adequately describe what happened to Jessica and she emphasizes that he has disrespected her when she reminds him of the victim's name. Barksdale's lawyer expresses a similar attitude towards women during the trial: he brings an inappropriately humorous tone to the courtroom. Moreover, as he questions Sheriff Johnson, he indicates the extent to which patriarchal institutions in Brixton exclude any alternative forms of

knowledge. *The Gift* emphasizes the fact that Brixton's legal system is founded to serve men by depicting the extent to which Barksdale's defence rests on denigrating Annie's profession and mocking Johnson's reliance on her testimony.⁷ The salient message of the court scene is conveyed when the judge supports the defence lawyer's proceedings, giving him an uncontested opportunity to call Annie's life a "carnival sideshow."

Barksdale's appearance in court again reinforces the fact that Brixton's institutions do not see the physical abuse of women as a serious crime. Barksdale pleads guilty to being a "bad husband" but his defence rests on this being a crime of no importance. "I'm guilty of cheating on my wife and being a bad husband and a bad Christian, but I ain't guilty of killing," he tells the court. Though Duncan attempts to prove that Barksdale's treatment of his wife is a crime indicative of a temperament violent enough to commit murder, the callous attitude that he had earlier expressed to Annie suggests that he only disapproves of the defendant's behaviour because it is part of his job. Duncan additionally suggests that there is some kind of "scale" that exists between an "acceptable" beating of a woman and an "excessively violent" beating by inquiring as to how severely Barksdale "beat up" Jessica on the night she went missing. Duncan provokes Barksdale's final outburst in court, which eventuates in his conviction for the murder. In the eyes of the court Duncan is successful at his job— to convict someone for the crime of murder.

Annie becomes aware of the fact that Duncan has convicted the wrong person for Jessica's murder as the young socialite's ghost continues to make contact with her. Annie encounters Jessica's ghost again in her bathtub, wrapped in chains and attempting to communicate with her. This indicates that Jessica will only be

⁷ The defence attorney also ridicules Annie by insisting that she give evidence of her "gift." When she cannot tell him the number of fingers he is holding up behind his back, he suggests that her "special gift" doesn't work unless she's being paid for it. By using the phrase "no money no honey" to describe Annie's "gift" he compares the services she provides to that of a prostitute. Just as Annie's work exists because of the oppressiveness of Brixton's institutions (such as heterosexuality and marriage), prostitution also exists largely as a result of repressive sexual mores.

freed when Annie ensures that her true murderer is convicted. Annie is determined to seek out justice so as to put Jessica's spirit at peace, and visits Duncan in an attempt to get the case re-opened. The following dialogue between Annie and Duncan demonstrates that justice in Brixton is a "black or white matter" and that once a case is "open and shut" it may not be reconsidered.

ANNIE. I know that Donnie didn't kill Jessica in the same way that I knew that her body was in his pond.

DUNCAN. And do you know who did kill her?

ANNIE. No.

DUNCAN. So what do you care? Son of a bitch is in jail.

ANNIE. I got a warning today. I think somebody's gonna try and kill me.

DUNCAN. So what do you want me to do?

ANNIE. I want you to reopen the case and find out who really did it.

DUNCAN. I can't, he's been convicted.

ANNIE. Well, you could talk to somebody.

DUNCAN. I got no basis to reopen this case, I'd look like a fool.⁸

Duncan appears more concerned about looking "like a fool" than he does about finding out the truth behind the murder of a woman with whom he has had a sexual relationship. Moreover, when Annie threatens Duncan with her knowledge of his affair he offers her money and condescendingly asserts that she should "let sleeping dogs lie." While Annie is determined to seek out justice, Duncan reveals that he is corrupt because he is willing to pay off a witness to his sexual relations with the murdered woman. It is apparent that Annie will not find an answer to Jessica's murder unless she does the work herself. Brixton's justice system is not interested in the truth; the only aim of the trial was to find a quick and easy solution.

It is Annie who ultimately perseveres until she discovers the identity of Jessica's true murderer. In her desperation to free Barksdale Annie takes Wayne

⁸ Duncan's insensitive attitude about his community's justice system is further reflected when he remarks, "so what do you care— son of a bitch is in jail."

Collins to the pond where Jessica's remains were discovered, and there has a vision of him murdering his fiancée. Collins explains that he wanted Annie to know that he is a "good man," and that Jessica was "hurtful and spiteful." Annie is eventually "rescued" by Buddy, who helps her to deliver Collins to the local police station. When Annie apologizes to Buddy for not listening to him the day he set fire to his father he accepts her apology and articulates her role in their community: "You was the only one that was a friend to me and I love you. You're the soul of this town." Though Johnson contends that Annie's story is not plausible because Buddy had earlier hanged himself in prison, her experiences are ultimately confirmed when she discovers the handkerchief he had returned to her earlier that evening. Viewers are encouraged to believe in what Annie has seen because her perspective has been dominant in the film. Annie's "gift" is represented as crucial to her community and Brixton's men come to understand a deeper sense of feminist responsibility for the "truth" than their institutional occupations can allow for.

"He was the perfect husband until his one mistake followed them home"

[*What Lies Beneath*] relies on a gleeful, Alfred-Hitchcock-style of storytelling. There is a very deliberate view of events through the eyes of the lead actress, Michele Pfeiffer . . . her fascination with the comings and goings of the house next door, and her view of these events through a pair of binoculars, cannot be written off as mere chance. This is a *Rear Window* moment. . . . Zemeckis has cast the film wisely, for both Pfeiffer and the dependable Harrison Ford bring a certain amount of baggage to it that helps mix things up further in a story that delights in causing confusion.

Anwar Brett, *BBC Online*.

In "'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism' Revisited," Barbara Klinger claims that the

locus of horror in the modern genre film is specifically familial:

The formula for the genre, abnormality threatened by the monster, which represents the conventional core of narrative/thematic oppositions, is in horror films preceding *Psycho* usually dramatized less problematically: that is, the monster is always foreign, exotic, radically other than the family it threatens. . . . The strategic importance of *Psycho* within this trajectory is in revealing the locus of horror as specifically familial, as being produced from within the family institution. (79)

Like *The Gift*, where a woman is murdered by her fiancé, *What Lies Beneath* is no exception to Klinger's "rule." Norman Spencer is haunted by the memory of his illustrious father and will go to any lengths to further his career, and Claire Spencer's torment within her marriage is further exacerbated by the culturally prescribed gender roles that she feels she must adhere to in order to keep her family intact. Claire explains this lucidly during an argument she and her husband have when she finally remembers the day Norman murdered his student, Madison Frank. She tells Norman that she gave up "her life and her music, everything, to be his wife" and alleges that there was never any choice. Claire explains that because Norman decided to play the role of "perfect Daddy," she felt she had to perform as a "perfect wife" within a "perfect family." Because she was forced to play the role of "perfect mother" to her daughter, as society's ideals dictate, Claire gave up music, her career and passion. Claire's performance within this normative gender role eventuates in her disempowerment, which in turn leads to her inability to realize that her husband is a brutally ambitious man.

Although the Spencers' marriage appears routine and safe during early scenes in *What Lies Beneath*, practised horror spectators might read more into Claire Spencer's encounters with the spirit world. Generic inter-textuality in the film is effective because Claire's experiences are set up as the hysterical imaginings of a woman suffering from what she terms "empty nest syndrome" (Claire's only daughter has just departed for college). At first, spectators are invited to identify

with Norman's disdain for Claire's "crazy" ideas about ghosts. However, identification with Norman is proven to have been untenable as his cruelty becomes apparent. Viewers are gradually encouraged to identify with Claire as she develops supportive relationships with other women in *What Lies Beneath*. As Brett's review for *BBC Online* demonstrates, Harrison Ford's star "baggage" could potentially influence contemporary spectators' interpretations of the opening scenes of *What Lies Beneath*. Barry Keith Grant explains the function of stars like Ford in films:

The context of genre is perhaps the most significant factor in determining a star's persona or iconographical meaning. As Maurice Yacowar has said, 'The film actor is all image,' hence all fluid associative potential, so his performance is continuous over all sorts of roles. This is especially true of genre films, in which actors are typecast . . . from film to film within the same genre. ("Experience and Meaning in Genre Films" 121)

Grant argues that stars' "fluid associative potential" would have no effect on films' meanings if it weren't for their work in specific genres (14).⁹ Harrison Ford has famously performed as an archetypal genre character— an action hero.¹⁰ Ford's persona is continuous over the action films he stars in and also informs his roles in other genres. *What Lies Beneath* initially appears similar to other thriller films that Ford has starred in, such as *Frantic* (Roman Polanski, 1988) and *The Fugitive* (Andrew Davis, 1993).¹¹ Early scenes in *What Lies Beneath* are confusing because a gap exists between what viewers might expect from the characters that Ford plays and Norman's threatening behaviour.

What Lies Beneath juxtaposes Norman's personality as a caring husband and as a work-obsessed scientist. Thomas Sobchack explains that genre films use an economic system of signs to spell out which characters fulfil such stereotypes:

⁹ Grant cites Fred Astaire, John Wayne and Edward G. Robinson as examples for their roles in musicals, westerns and gangster films.

¹⁰ In the *Star Wars* films Ford plays Han Solo, an unpredictable yet dependable fighter for rebel forces fighting a corrupt and homogenizing empire.

¹¹ Though his characters are subjected to some ambiguity in *Frantic* and *The Fugitive*, Ford plays the wrongly accused middle-class hero who must restore justice and order to his world.

Characterization in a genre film often uses the shorthand of iconography. We know a person by what he wears as opposed to what he says and does. And once known, the character cannot change except in the most limited ways. . . . Frequently generalized and known by their vocation, genre characters are conveyed through iconographical means— costumes, tools, settings, and so on. (“Genre Film: A Classical Experience” 107)¹²

Dr. Spencer, a man obsessed by “Spencer’s Theorem,” the groundbreaking work of his father, is a stereotypical “mad scientist,” clouded by his ambition, which he disguises as a desire to discover new truths for humanity. Because he is a “mad scientist,” Norman might only respond in a limited manner to a student who threatens to destroy his career and a wife who wishes to report information that might damage his reputation.¹³ Ford’s persona as action-hero subverts what contemporary viewers might assume about Norman: initially visual and verbal cues encourage spectators to suspect that the Spencer household is haunted by an ominous spirit. However, as his inter-textual name suggests, Norman is the threat to Claire’s safety.¹⁴

¹² Sobchack explains this further: “The man who wears a star, whether he is a figure in the crowd or a major character, has a limited range of responses to situations. The same is the case with men who wear lab coats, carry sawn-off shotguns, or drink their whiskey straight” (107).

¹³ Sobchack describes the effectiveness of comparable tactics used by directors Fritz Lang and John Ford in *Scarlett Street* (1945) and *The Whole Town’s Talking* (1935). In these films, Lang and Ford utilize the popularity of Edward G. Robinson’s gangster roles, like *Little Caesar* (Mervyn Le Roy, 1931). In *Scarlett Street* in particular, Robinson’s performance as a meek clerk is “signalled” by icons from the gangster genre, which include the presence of the actor Robinson. According to Sobchack, audiences expect the character Robinson plays, Christopher Cross, “to stab his wife one evening as he is subjected to one of her shrill harangues while slicing bread” (107). Sobchack suggests that Lang “teasingly raises the viewer’s expectation here, then thwarts it, as nothing happens, only to fulfil it later when Cross wildly hacks to death the woman he has loved with an ice pick” (107). In *The Whole Town’s Talking*, Robinson’s well-known gangster persona is comically juxtaposed with the awkward submissiveness of an office worker. “[*Scarlett Street*] has suggested not only that the most abject and repressed of men may reveal themselves as little Caesars and that it may happen suddenly and unexpectedly, but also that this is true for us too— for we have been implicated in imagining (even hoping) that Cross will murder his wife” (107). Sobchack’s analysis of Edward G. Robinson’s character Christopher Cross in *Scarlett Street* establishes that an actor’s persona might interfere with an audience’s interpretation of a movie’s themes.

¹⁴ Norman’s name references Norman Bates in *Psycho*. It is significant that Norman Spencer is named after Norman Bates because *Psycho* is widely recognised as the film that transformed the horror genre by firmly placing the locus of violence within the institution of the family.

Viewers' assumptions about the kinds of characters Ford plays are tested as *What Lies Beneath* comes to rely on Claire's interpretation of events in the Spencer household. Much of Norman's behaviour is ambiguous during the film's first half. Two understandings of Norman's character are available to viewers during these early scenes: one characterization presents him as a caring husband who is worried about his wife when she is at home alone; another indicates his tendency to overreact and his unwillingness to accept his wife's interpretation of events.¹⁵ After Claire's only daughter, Caitlin (Elizabeth Towne), departs for college dialogues between the couple simultaneously depict Norman's detachment and his concern about his wife's wellbeing. The developing tension between Claire and Norman—which provides for an oscillating identification with either character—is also emphasized as they have a petty argument over cell-phone reception. Norman insists on his viewpoint in an unnecessarily condescending manner. In contrast, our doubts about Norman's devotion to his wife are relieved in other scenes as the movie depicts him as a kind and thoughtful husband. For example, when Claire appears at Norman's laboratory after a terrifying encounter with the ghost, he seems worried about her safety and agrees to drive her back home when she admits she is too frightened to return by herself. Claire, however, does not trust Norman enough to tell him that she suspects she has seen a ghost, and when they return home there are further indications that he has a tendency to over-react about small matters. Claire laughs about an incident Norman recounts about a rival scientist and Norman is visibly irritated. Claire is prompted to comment on Norman's "sensitivity" and tendency to "overreact." These scenes demonstrate that while Claire turns to Norman for protection, she does not honestly confide in him because she cannot trust him to respond calmly.

Much of the continuing focus of *What Lies Beneath* is on Claire's preoccupation with other women as she comes to realize the threat her husband poses. This is primarily represented in her communications with a ghost that begins

¹⁵ As Caitlin is leaving for college, Norman insensitively asks "when's she out of here?"

appearing in their lakeside home. Minutes before her first encounter with the ghost Claire is in tears after sorting through some old storage boxes. When she realizes that her neighbour, Mrs. Feur, is also in tears on the other side of the fence, Claire asks her if “everything all right.” Mrs. Feur stammers back that she can’t breathe, that she’s afraid one day she’ll “just disappear.” Claire is justifiably worried when Mrs. Feur seems distraught that her husband is arriving home. Norman belittles Claire’s apprehensions when she tells him what happened, but because we have witnessed the women’s ominous encounter it is difficult for us to dismiss her concerns.

As Claire and her husband interact socially with others there are further signs that Norman is not a sympathetic character suitable for viewers’ identification. More is revealed about the type of man Norman is when he and Claire have dinner with a friend Stan (Ray Baker). Spectators are invited to see Claire from a different perspective during this scene. Stan brings along a woman Claire and Norman call his “new squeeze.” Stan’s date, Elena, is a talented musician who was once friends with Claire, not an unremarkable sexual object as the term “squeeze” implies. Elena explains that Claire had an eminent career before she met Norman and asks her why she gave it up. Claire tells her that one night after a concert she met a “dashing scientist” and was married three months later, which suggests that she rushed into her marriage.¹⁶ Viewers are invited to query assumptions about Norman further when he derisively recounts Claire’s “ghost story” in order to entertain his fellow diners. However, though Norman insists “Claire’s hearing things,” that the ghost she has encountered is “inside her head,” his intentions backfire when Elena reveals that she and Stan “believe in all that stuff.”¹⁷ This allows spectators to see another side to Claire that Norman’s derisions repress: Claire has obvious bonds with other women

¹⁶ Norman’s credibility is further questioned when Stan tells a story about a scientist friend of theirs. Though this colleague was head of cardiology at a nearby hospital, he was involved in a stalking incident with an intern and “went nuts.” When Norman casually responds, “they don’t screw around with that shit anymore,” he implies that he does not view this professional misdemeanour seriously.

¹⁷ The men and women also have cross-conversations in this scene. Claire and Elena, and Norman and Stan are so absorbed in their exchanges that there are few moments where conversations meet.

based around beliefs that her husband does not approve of.

Claire's relationships with her old friend Jody and new friend Mrs. Feur similarly reflect that she may not be as "crazy" as Norman thinks. Jody relates that Claire is upset about her only daughter leaving for college and proposes that this is related to the fact that she has not yet recovered from the trauma of a serious car crash. Claire admits that she is still "a little tender" and Jody congratulates her for being "human." Jody also participates in a séance with Claire and provides her with support when she temporarily leaves Norman. Even Mrs. Feur eventually shares an affinity with Claire. Mrs. Feur visits the Spencers after Claire accuses Mr. Feur of murder. Mrs. Feur appears genuinely moved that her neighbour had reacted so extremely to their previous conversation. Mrs. Feur's visit allows Claire to rationally assert that she was not over-reacting when she deduced that something unusual had happened next door, and this further asserts her status as a character suitable for audience identification. Mrs. Feur admits that she was indeed feeling "panicked" the day they had talked and had tried to leave her husband. She explains how "touched" she was by Claire's neighbourly concern and their encounter concludes only once they resolve to stay friends. Claire and Mrs. Feur demonstrate an empowering respect for one another that excludes their husbands and reflects the importance of the support of other women. Claire's friendships with other women are proven to be valuable in a way that her relationship with her busy husband is not because her friends are willing to understand the very anxieties that Norman derides her for.

Another exchange that indicates the significance of other women in Claire's life occurs during a cocktail party that she and Norman attend. The wife of another professor, Lois Templeton, is genuinely concerned about Claire. Lois reminds Claire of events from the previous year's Du Pont party which was held in Norman's honour. After Claire confesses that she has forgotten what happened at this function, Lois reminds her that she got "upset" during the party and looked as though she had "seen a ghost." Lois provides more information about Claire's accident and her

recollection of the previous year's reception parallels Mrs. Feur's description of what had happened to her the day in the garden. Claire soon realizes that she has ignored important signals from other women who have expressed concern about her. Claire's world of ghosts begins to seem more logical than Norman's cynical interpretation of events as her understanding of her past trauma grows.

Spectators are again encouraged to deduce that the apparitions Claire sees are important forms of knowledge in the movie as she analyses her reaction to her daughter's departure for college for her therapist. Claire's psychiatrist Dr. Drayton (Joe Morton) accepts her interpretation of the supernatural events and indicates that only Norman believes she is irrational. As Dr. Drayton probes Claire's opinions on her marriage, viewers are given the first direct indication that something is wrong with the way Norman treats her. Claire explains that she feels that Norman is a "little obsessed with his work" and that it sometimes seems as though he thinks there is "something wrong" with her. Claire demeans her own concerns by commenting that Norman is a "wonderful husband and father," and when Dr. Drayton proposes that this "can't feel good" defensively responds "my marriage is fine." Claire dismisses her doctor's apprehensions by explaining that she wants to instead "deal with" her "empty nest episode," which she insists has prompted her to see "something that wasn't there." Viewers are encouraged here to see Claire's willingness to view her experiences as clinically as Norman. Science, however, does not provide an adequate explanation for Claire's encounters with the spirit world in *What Lies Beneath*.

The final scenes of *What Lies Beneath* confirm that the ghost in the Spencer's house is there to protect Claire, not harm her. It is Norman who wants to hurt Claire and the ghost of Madison Elizabeth Frank has been trying to communicate this. If viewed closely, many of the representations of this ghost have been shown as reflections of Claire so as to facilitate a connection between the two women. For example, in the very first shot of the film, Claire lies in the bath and as

she emerges from the water catching her breath, a shot of the ghost's face dissolves into her features. Almost every time Claire looks into a mirror we see an image of the ghost cut with her face, and when she explains to Dr. Drayton what the ghost looks like she says "like me, only with green eyes." As Norman tries to drown Claire in the same bath that he murdered Madison in he falls and hits his head because he sees his student's decomposing face flicker across his wife's. Claire is even possessed by Madison after she unearths her box of trinkets from the lake and steals a lock of her hair from her mother's home. Claire unleashes Madison's spirit so that they may take their revenge on the man who has attempted to murder them both. Claire's perception of Madison's ghost is at no point rationalized as some kind of hallucination: her encounters with the spirit world are as real as the threat Norman poses in *What Lies Beneath*. Just as we find out that "final girl" Sidney is justifiably paranoid in the *Scream* films, we discover that Claire has been paranoid with good cause when she senses an evil presence in her household.

Many other generic horror products are referenced as Norman attempts to murder his wife and as Claire's relationships with other women are affirmed. Countless "slasher" films are quoted when Norman pretends to call the police but instead dials information, and as Claire finally grabs the phone and it is predictably dead.¹⁸ Another scene visually references *The Stepfather* (Joseph Ruben, 1986): after Norman paralyzes Claire using a drug made in his laboratory, she slowly regains control of her body and uses a piece of this mirror to see behind her while she descends the stairs. Stephanie (Jill Schoelen), the teenaged protagonist in *The Stepfather*, uses an identical piece of shattered mirror to defend herself against her stepfather, Jerry (Terry O'Quinn), a psychopath who murders his families when they fail to live up to his old-fashioned ideals. Women's only reliable source of support is female friendships in *The Stepfather*, and the film concludes as mother and daughter

¹⁸ The film additionally refers to historical horror films, such as *Fatal Attraction* when Norman runs a bath to drown Claire. Other conventional bathroom shots include suspense close-ups on the plughole, Claire's hands clutching the sides of the bath, and a shattered mirror.

symbolically destroy the birdhouse that Jerry had built.¹⁹ *What Lies Beneath* ends with two similar scenes that highlight Claire's connection with Madison Elizabeth Frank. During the film's second-to-last scene, Norman pursues Claire after she flees their home. Desperate to escape, Claire drives the pickup off a bridge and into the lake. Beneath the water the ghost of Madison holds Norman under and slowly drowns him, re-enacting the methods he used to murder her. This allows Claire to rise to the surface and survive her husband's violence. Madison therefore avenges Norman's treatment of women and by doing so saves Claire's life. As Madison's body floats back down into the lake it slowly transforms from a decomposing corpse into an image of the young woman that she was before she was murdered. Madison's spirit can be at peace now that her death has been avenged and her killer is unable to harm more women. The film's final scene depicts Claire visiting a cemetery immersed in winter snow to place flowers on Madison's grave. This represents once more the affinity that exists between the victimized women who fought back.

Conclusion

It is not surprising to find [a] tension between the individual needs and community needs metaphorically represented in genre films . . . the only twentieth century art that has consistently re-enacted the ritual of reaffirmation of group values has been the genre film.

Thomas Sobchack, "Genre Film: A Classical Experience." (109)

Unlike Robert Ray, who proposes that genre films sometimes represent a kind of "outlaw" justice that goes against communal values, Thomas Sobchack

¹⁹ In "*The Stepmother: Father as Monster in the Contemporary Horror Film*," Patricia Brett Erens proposes that this indicates that the women have no need for a patriarchal presence in their home.

suggests that genre films “reaffirm group” values. The “reaffirmation” of “communal needs” represented in many girl power movies at the turn of the millennium, however, complicates Sobchack’s theory in that the “group values” extolled by female protagonists involve feminist tenets. The justice meted out by groups of women in *The Gift* and *What Lies Beneath* (and also the *Scream* movies) involves working outside of the bounds of institutional law. In *What Lies Beneath*, for example, it is Claire and Madison who enact the restoration of justice. Just as Sidney Prescott and Gale Weathers defeat serial killers Stuart and Billy together in *Scream*, Claire and Madison Frank subdue Norman. Like many other “slasher” films, *What Lies Beneath* suggests that while individual women might capably reinstate social order, communities of women can avenge wrongs more effectively. Similarly, the conflict between Annie’s psychic spirituality and local institutions in *The Gift* establishes the significance of a collective feminist knowledge. However, the institutions that represent Brixton’s dominant communal values—the local police force, the American justice system and Christianity—continue to fail individuals in Annie’s world.

Contrastingly, the opposition between Nancy and Sarah in *The Craft* is resolved with the affirmation of patriarchal knowledge. While Nancy relishes her ability to punish men for their wrongs, Sarah learns through her experiences with the coven that authority must ultimately be obeyed. The conflict between Sarah and Nancy ends with the suggestion that the established patriarchal order should not be subverted. Sarah’s journey initially depicts her empowering integration into a feminist Wiccan community but she eventually learns that there is little to be gained in sustaining female friendships. *The Craft*’s conclusion proposes that the safest communal identity Sarah might assume begins within the structures of her patriarchal family. Although *The Gift*, *The Craft* and *What Lies Beneath* depict alternative forms of spirituality, individual and communal values are represented very differently in the three films.

CHAPTER 6

Lesbian Sexuality in girl power movies: *Single White Female* and *Bound*

Because Hollywood films are part of public culture that addresses women, and because they do so through representations of Woman invested with desire, they work with the material— cultural and psychic— that engages lesbian fantasy.

Patricia White, *Uninvited*. (xv)

The question “Is the gaze male?” needs to be combined with the equally pertinent question “Is the gaze heterosexual?” Does the homosexual viewer need to comply with heterosexual positioning?

Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies*. (3)

As a number of film scholars have suggested, girl power movies— especially those from the horror and thriller genres— offer many possibilities for queer spectatorship.¹ The standard character-types associated with horror and thriller films facilitate fluid gender identification progressions, as Chapter One proposes. Clover argues, for example, that “slasher” films interrogate binary understandings of masculinity and femininity, straight and queer by encouraging identification with both monsters and victims. In line with this notion, Straayer and White suggest that early film criticism’s assumptions about spectatorship need further examination. Strayer challenges the heterosexist assumptions of spectatorship theories, such as Mulvey’s “three-tiered male gaze.” *Single White*

¹ See Roberts in Chapter Four. Also, Rhona H. Berenstein’s *Attack of the Leading Ladies* (1996) and Harry M. Benshoff *Monsters in the Closet* (1997) discuss the appeal of horror and thriller films to non-heterosexual viewers.

Female (Barbet Schroeder, 1992) and *Bound* (Larry and Andy Wachowski, 1996) are important to any research into the representation of female protagonists because both films are visually structured around the lesbian gaze.

Unlike many mainstream contemporary films, *Bound* and *Single White Female* deal with lesbian themes. However, queer sexuality is represented differently in each film. *Bound* relies at times on stereotypes, yet the lesbian relationship of Corky and Violet (Gina Gershon and Jennifer Tilly) is represented sympathetically as they concoct a scam to double-cross Violet's cruel mafia boyfriend, Caesar (Joe Pantoliano). *Single White Female*, in contrast, treats lesbian desire as deviant in order to develop its slasher plot. *Single White Female* at first explores the desire that forms the basis of female friendships but eventually focuses on a lesbian character's deviancy. Though protagonist Alison (Allie) Jones (Bridget Fonda) is forced to make sacrifices in her heterosexual relationship, these sacrifices are overshadowed by her queer roommate's pathological desire. In its suggestion that forgiveness and compromises may be acceptable within the bounds of a heterosexual relationship but not in a close friendship between women, *Single White Female* affirms its conservative estimation of lesbian desire. *Bound*, however, challenges the assumption that a scam performed by a lesbian couple is doomed to failure. Contrary to expectations, Corky and Violet succeed in their scheme to outwit the mob.

Whereas *Bound* candidly depicts lesbian desire, *Single White Female* only implies it. Reviews for *Single White Female* demonstrate its reliance on lesbian subtexts:

You can ponder *Single White Female* from a great many angles— as a lesbian power-struggle, or a symbolic depiction of the soul-stealing that goes on in every relationship— but of all the possible alternatives . . . the movie deteriorates into a predictable exercise in melodramatic slasher tactics. (Hal Hinson, *The Washington Post*)

Allie's jealous anxieties about her fiancé's infidelity are presented as normal within the film's logic but her roommate, Hedy (Jennifer Jason Leigh), is

depicted as inappropriately possessive of her female friends. Hedy's desire for Allie is constructed in *Single White Female* as deviant in order for the film's slasher plot to be propelled. Karen Hollinger argues that "if *Single White Female* ends by associating Hedy's eroticization of her friendship with Allie with aggression, the majority of the film is spent associating it with perversion and insanity" (221). In other words, the film portrays heterosexual "soul-stealing" and lesbian desire divergently. Hedy's compulsion to replicate Allie is represented as a manifestation of her longing to reproduce her bond with her deceased twin sister. This is portrayed, moreover, as an outcome of Hedy's inability to find a man to love.

Bound steers clear of the homophobic constructs that permeate the narrative assumptions of *Single White Female*. Reviewer Barry Walters (*The San Francisco Examiner*) maintains that *Bound* could have embarked along the same lines as *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) and *Showgirls* (Paul Verhoeven, 1995) in its representation of sexual deviancy. He contends that the film instead stays true to its experimental approach to noir conventions, in that the triumphant heterosexual couple is replaced with a lesbian pairing. Walters argues that *Bound*'s plot is a "fascinating hybrid—Playboy thriller meets feminist lesbian love story." He concludes that without "pandering," *Bound* "attempts to get everybody off." Though Walters's comments suggest the appeal of lesbian sexuality to heterosexist and pornographic fantasies, he effectively summarizes the manner by which *Bound* shows up the inadequacies of mainstream cinema. Female friendships have sometimes been portrayed favourably in Hollywood products but depictions of women's "deviant" desires for one another have frequently become a vehicle for "slasher" plot-development in the horror and thriller genres.² *Bound* represents a potential conflict created by two women's attraction to each other but the film's action culminates in the strengthening of their relationship. *Single White Female*, in contrast, depicts the violence that is supposedly inevitable when a woman invests too much in female friendships.

² Many films deal with lesbian desire in varying progressions and repressed forms: for example, *Poison Ivy* (Katt O'Shea, 1992) and *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992).

“You’re the Only Friend I Need”

SAM. How many kids do we want?

ALLIE. What’s the statistical norm?

SAM. You and your statistics! 1.2.

ALLIE. 2.2, and I want them to look like you... So is it going to be a real wedding?

SAM. As opposed to a fake one.

ALLIE. You know what I mean, Sam, you’ve already been through the ceremony with 200 people.

SAM. That was the fake one, this is the real one, you can have any kind of wedding you want. . . .

ALLIE. It’s gonna have to be a small one, you know. I haven’t been in New York long enough to know very many people.

SAM. Except me.

ALLIE. Well, you’re invited and my friend Graham upstairs.

SAM. It won’t be long before you know half the people in New York. People like you, you know, but I found you first.

ALLIE. You’re the only friend I need.

Lesbian desire and heterosexual “soul-stealing” are paralleled and contrasted in *Single White Female*. In the film’s opening moments, Allie, a successful New York businesswoman, admits to her fiancé that she wants their children to look like him. Allie’s comments express the narcissism and adulation commonly exhibited in the desire to reproduce oneself and one’s partner in offspring. Hedy, however, at once parodies the mimicry that commonly takes place in heterosexual relationships and oversteps her role as friend as she reproduces Allie. Hedy simultaneously expresses her sexual desire *for* Allie when she acts out her desire to be *like* Allie. *Single White Female* plays out a “predictable exercise” in heterosexual melodrama, as Hinson proposes, by

foregrounding Hedy's violent behaviour and normalizing Allie's overwhelming need to be loved by a man who has treated her as a possession that he "found first." While Sianne Ngai insists that *Single White Female* is primarily about envy, Hinson's suggestion that the film is instead about lesbian desire, female friendships and the permeable boundary between the two is compelling.³

Single White Female normalizes Allie's problematic relationship with her unfaithful fiancé, Sam (Steven Weber), and represents Hedy's desire for intimacy with a woman as deviant. At the beginning of the film Allie is firm in her resolve that Sam has been wrong to be unfaithful to her, but she eventually changes her tune. Allie's actions are portrayed as perfectly logical as she ignores Hedy's warnings and disregards the promises they have shared by taking back Sam halfway through *Single White Female*. Hedy is forced to step down as Allie's confidante and companion once Sam has resumed his position of power in her life. Allie begins to view her closeness to her roommate with repulsion when she takes Sam back, perceiving Hedy's attempts to recover the intimacy they had shared as "clingy" and obsessive. Hedy is the film's villain because she cannot understand that heterosexual romance is a priority that usurps any relationship between women. As such a character, Hedy is doomed to excessive behaviour that will inevitably lead to her own destruction.

While viewers are encouraged to see Hedy as deviant because she craves female companionship, Allie's inability to survive without a man is normalized in *Single White Female*. Allie reveals to her gay neighbour and friend, Graham (Peter Friedman), that she wonders how she will cope facing a future of cooking meals for one. Allie's lack of self-sufficiency in the film is further highlighted by the fact that she must turn to another man for support when things go wrong with her engagement: Graham gives up his bed for her when she admits that she "can't be alone." When Graham offers that, "there are

³ For instance, in "Jealous Schoolgirls, Single White Females, and Other Bad Examples" Ngai argues that in its depiction of Hedy's envy *Single White Female* "seems to offer an especially bad or perverse example of homosocial collectivity, especially since its reaffirmation of singular femaleness depicts the 'social feeling' associated with compound gendered subjectivity as threatening, destructive, and ultimately untenable" (219).

worse things than being on your own,” Allie responds that she suspects it is all a “sign” that she should go home to live with her parents. Moreover, Allie continues her intimate friendship with Graham only because she has reservations about investing trust in women again after her experiences with Hedy. It is significant that Allie’s only trustworthy confidant is a man— however emasculated he may seem as a character.⁴ Allie cannot make crucial decisions about her life without Graham’s help, even when she is obviously in danger. Allie begs Graham to tell her what to do when she uncovers Hedy’s true identity and determines that he has been correct to have expressed reservations about her roommate. It is only because Graham insists that she should call the police that Allie has the strength to attempt to evict Hedy.

Viewers are encouraged to identify with Allie, although she is represented as lacking in self-confidence. Allie’s insecurities are demonstrated during scenes where Sam pleads with her to take him back. Allie listens politely to Sam’s excuses for his infidelities despite his admission that he had forced his way into her apartment in order to see her, and though he confesses that he has been stalking her with unanswered letters and phone calls. Sam downplays his “mistake” by begging Allie to give him “a second chance,” even after she explains that had his ex-wife not called she would still be ignorant of their affair. Allie is convinced by Sam’s appeals and insists that she has not been trying to “punish” him (though this might seem appropriate given the circumstances). Sam implies his real unwillingness to admit his wrongdoing or Allie’s pain by shushing her when she insists that he “really hurt” her. Although forgiving Sam might seem imprudent to viewers, Allie takes him back. Hollinger usefully summarizes the implications of Allie’s forgiveness:

The film’s overall thematic project [is] to convince the female spectator that the only way [Allie] can avoid the dangers of association with

⁴ Though Graham behaves logically and attempts to teach Allie to believe in herself, he is presented as an emasculated character in *Single White Female*. Graham is gay, has “feminine” intuition (he is perceptive about Hedy being a potential threat to Allie) and is incapable of defending himself against the perpetrators of violence (Hedy easily knocks him unconscious after she breaks into his house).

other 'deviant' women is to ally herself with a man, even if that alliance entails forgiving his sexual transgressions in order to keep him. (222)

Allie indicates her lack of regard for female companionship as she explains to Sam that Hedy will understand that she must move out of the apartment she has only just moved into.

Though Allie is portrayed as a professional businesswoman in *Single White Female*, she repeatedly lacks confidence in her business dealings. The film's characterisation of Allie's encounters with the owner of a design company Fontana Fashions reveal that she has low self-esteem and is unable to express her needs to clients. Just as Sam beguiles Allie with his charisma, Mitch Meyerson (Stephen Tobolowsky) persuades her of his business acumen with transparently condescending proposals and sleazy advances. During their first meeting, Meyerson comments on Allie's appearance in a sexist manner, telling her that even though she's late, she's "worth the wait." Allie maintains an air of professionalism initially during this meeting but eventually allows Meyerson to dismiss her right to set her own price for the services she provides. Allie is bullied into accepting Meyerson's deal because her confidence is affected by her split with Sam. Meyerson ridicules Allie's expertise and smugly warns her not to embarrass herself by disputing his fee.

Allie is again constructed as less than capable when Meyerson's understanding of her "worth" turns out to be as sexual as is implied in his initial meeting with her. Because she is as desperate to increase her client list as Meyerson suggests she is, Allie remains oblivious to the sexual nature of his satisfaction with her work. Meyerson insists that Allie must stay behind and explain her computer programmes to him after she completes her final presentation for his company. Even the sexual undertones to his plea ("please, just a taste, something simple") fail to alert Allie to the potential threat he poses. Allie also fails to notice the fact that Meyerson has been leaning closer with every phrase he speaks, and it is not until he begins to massage her shoulders that she finally realizes he has had no intention of treating her as an equal. Though

Allie clearly protests his physical advances, Meyerson persists, explaining that this is her last chance to “play” before she’s an “old married lady.” Allie eventually resorts to kneeing Meyerson in the groin to avoid being raped, and explains to Hedy that she feels humiliated because she “didn’t see it coming.” The film asserts such expressions of rage are not appropriate for a woman when Hedy insists on calling Meyerson to prevent him from “trashing” Allie’s reputation. Allie is as repulsed by Hedy’s desire to “get even” as she is by her own methods for defending herself against Meyerson’s advances. Allie’s discomfort at the implicit anger in Hedy’s threats reveals the film’s position on acts of rape-revenge. Unlike their counterparts in *Freeway*, *The Cell* and *What Lies Beneath*, female protagonists in *Single White Female* are permitted no opportunity to avenge gender crimes.

Allie is never actually portrayed as a powerful businesswoman in *Single White Female*, though Hedy envies her for her job and professional attire. Hedy in fact seems more worldly-wise than Allie, particularly in her understanding of patriarchal culture. While Meyerson’s behaviour is indeed inexcusable, as an astute businesswoman Allie should have a better understanding of the lines her male colleagues must not cross. The film’s representation of Sam and Meyerson’s conduct therefore does not lucidly critique gender hierarchies, and these men are portrayed as misguided souls who have made one “mistake.” When Hedy— a character constructed as deviant and deceitful— criticizes her roommate’s powerlessness with Meyerson and Sam, viewers are encouraged to believe that Allie should forgive them for behaving badly. *Single White Female* indeed focuses on Hedy’s inappropriately envious desire but also normalizes Meyerson and Sam’s dubious behaviour.

“In a Different League”

HEDY. I guess you patched things up with Sam, huh?

ALLIE. Well, I made him suffer.

HEDY. Is that an engagement ring? I'm sure you'll be very happy, very happy, and I'll be alone.

ALLIE. You'll find someone, Hedy, God, I mean if I can.

HEDY. Why don't you look at yourself in the mirror, huh?

Look. You're in a different league. I know that. You have this great personality, you got this great style, you're running your own business. You are always gonna find someone. You'd have to be stupid to think that you wouldn't. Well I guess you and Sam wanna be together, so I have to move out, right?

ALLIE. Well, not right away, I mean, Sam's gonna keep his place for a while and I know you just spent a lot on furniture.

HEDY. Yeah, your timing's great, Allie, it's really great. You promised me this wouldn't happen, exactly this.

When Allie is unable to find a roommate who is worthy of her companionship and therefore settles for Hedy, a mentally unstable stalker, *Single White Female* implies that men make better companions for pretty, “successful” women like Allie. Ngai argues that the film's representation of Hedy's envy indicates that inequalities exist in the women's friendship:

Insofar as it involves converting one's *philic* relation to a thing desired to a *polemic* relation to the subject who possesses it, isn't envy primarily an oppositional way of responding to a perceived disparity? Moreover, isn't it the emotional category defined specifically in terms of addressing this relation? (Anger, for instance is not necessarily directed at disparity, though it does offer one way of responding to it.)

(“Jealous Schoolgirls, Single White Females, and Other Bad Examples” 178)

Though it is initially suggested that Hedy is the support Allie needs after the breakdown of her engagement to Sam, their relationship is not characterized by equality. Allie is the “stylish” one, whom Hedy, having no understanding of image and fashion, wishes to imitate. Ngai argues that this establishes the film’s portrayal of Hedy as “working class.”

Single White Female also suggests that Allie does not need a roommate for companionship but because she has split with Sam. The patriarchal premise that women should not trust one another is affirmed as Allie interviews potential companions in her search for an appropriate roommate. Each woman Allie shows around her apartment is an extreme stereotype. The first woman Allie interrogates is noticeably “butch” (she is dressed in a masculine leather jacket and plaid shirt) and asks Allie if she’s “good with tools.” Allie’s distaste for this woman is portrayed as conspicuously as her reluctance to involve herself with the next interviewee, who appears as a potential threat. Dressed in a tight, short dress, this woman looks Allie up and down with a disdainful expression. The following candidate, who professes to be “an incest survivor,” though she has not yet “remembered the incident,” tells Allie that she has a hatred of “kitchens, cooking, cleaning, anything feminine.” “I think it’s probably my mother’s fault,” she predictably confesses. Allie, evidently exhausted with dealing with women who represent such deviations from her own “normal” existence, and heartbroken by the termination of her relationship with Sam, breaks down in tears when the last applicant leaves. At this point Hedy’s feet appear in the top of the frame and the camera follows Allie’s gaze as she looks up at her face. This visually reinforces the film’s initial suggestion that Hedy will “lift” Allie from the depression and loneliness she is experiencing.

This initial impression of Hedy is continued as the film depicts her concern for Allie’s wellbeing, which is in striking contrast to the other women’s self-absorption. Hedy offers to make Allie a cup of tea, in the process saturating

herself with water from Allie's leaky faucet. As they wait for the clothes to dry, Hedy finds the photo of Sam that had moments before reduced Allie to tears. Allie explains that he's the "reason" she's looking for a new roommate and then dismisses Hedy's concern that her living arrangements might be disturbed should they "patch things up" with the insistence that "nothing's gonna change." Allie expresses her condescending attitude towards Hedy when she asks her to move in by "congratulating" her for "winning" the contest. As Ngai contends, this indicates that there are inequalities in the relationship between Allie— an allegedly sophisticated and professional businesswoman— and Hedy— who is depicted as unemployed and frumpy.

The next scenes depict Allie's growing friendship with Hedy favourably as they become intimate companions. Hinson accurately describes the lesbian desire that develops during these scenes between Hedy and Allie as a depiction of "two strangers . . . falling blissfully, magically in love." However, Hedy's fondness for Allie is only awkwardly reciprocated, and as Hollinger points out, their relationship "is a mockery of sentimental friendship portrayals" (220). During shopping trips together Allie attempts to compliment Hedy but uses obviously forced phrases, such as "I think you look very comfortable." Allie also chooses outfits for her roommate that she believes are "nicer" than the clothes Hedy has chosen for herself. At one point they are both fond of the same pair of shoes and Allie easily succumbs to Hedy's admission that the trendy shoes are more her "style." Allie is quick to assume that it is her taste that is "right." When Hedy borrows Allie's clothes it is implied that she is mimicking her; however, the reverse situation is not to be taken seriously. Allie does not enter Hedy's room to borrow clothes but instead to repossess her own outfits or to investigate her roommate's mysterious identity.

Hedy's compulsion to mimic her roommate's "style" is specifically portrayed as an aspect of her lesbian desire during a scene where she returns from the shower to find Allie in her room. Having just tried Hedy's perfume, Allie looks at herself in a mirror as she holds a pair of her roommate's antique

earrings to her face. When Allie jokes about getting caught in Hedy's room, Hedy replies "anything of mine is yours— share and share alike." Hedy exposes herself candidly to Allie as she responds, at once removing her robe and offering to share everything she has. Hedy's lack of modesty is represented as an uncomfortable moment: Allie is noticeably embarrassed by her roommate's nudity and the apparent sexual subtext to her proposal. Hollinger elaborates on the representation of Allie's gaze in scenes like this in the film:

Rather than use the female gaze as it is employed in so many other female friendship films, to challenge the dominance of the male look, *Single White Female* employs it instead to delineate the normal woman from the insane one. Allie's gaze is associated initially with curiosity when Hedy first moves in, then with concern as Hedy's behaviour becomes more unusual, and finally with terror as she becomes the victim of Hedy's aggression. Her looks at Hedy are never eroticized or connected with lesbianism. Hedy's looks at Allie, on the other hand, are eroticized, associated with insanity, aggression, and evil, and clearly marked as lesbian. (221)

Hedy is portrayed as incapable of understanding the lines that the film suggests female friendship should not cross when she reveals her body to Allie in response to her curious gaze.

This scene also demonstrates the extent to which mirrors play a part in the film's representation of the female gaze. Hollinger traces the importance of mirrors in the film's *mise en scène*:

The film's use of the female gaze is illustrated in the repeated framing of the two women in frontal shots, with their faces reflected in mirrors or mirroring surfaces. The mirror shots not only convey the sense of confinement, duplicity, and instability that characterizes their relationship, but also accentuate the crucial difference between Allie's and Hedy's looks. Allie is always portrayed looking straight ahead at the mirrored surface, while Hedy is often shown gazing at Allie with a mixture of desire, identification and concealed malice. These mirror

shots dichotomize the female gaze between Allie's 'healthy' and Hedy's 'unhealthy' ways of looking and as a result prevent it from functioning, as it does in many female friendship films, as a challenge to the male gaze. (221)

Hedy's deviant looks at Allie are quickly developed as symptomatic of her propensity to commit act of violence in *Single White Female*.

Hedy's misguided attempts to cheer up Allie are the first representation of her "deviant" fascination with her roommate. Hedy buys Allie a dog and insists that "they were just giving them away at the market." Viewers know otherwise because Hedy is shown throwing a receipt away, and somehow this "white lie" begins to signify the duplicity she maintains in order to be closer to Allie. Despite Allie's initial insistence that Hedy must return the dog, she names him Buddy and he is soon involved in their nights at home watching old movies. However, when Allie and Sam reconcile, Buddy quickly becomes the focus of Hedy's loneliness. Buddy begins to highlight Hedy's desire to be more like Allie and to preserve a central role in her affections. Buddy's presence in their home accentuates the inequalities in the women's relationship because he appears to like Allie more than Hedy. Hedy also begins to use Buddy as a substitute for expressing her own longing for her roommate's company, complaining that the dog had cried all night on an occasion when Allie had stayed with Sam. Though Hedy expresses plausible concern at Allie's absence that night by commenting that "things happen" in New York, viewers are persuaded to side with Allie, who contends that her roommate makes her feel like she's "sixteen years old."

Allie's possessiveness of Sam soon begins to seem more adolescent than her roommate's request for her to be more courteous, yet it is Hedy's behaviour that is depicted as pathological in *Single White Female*. Allie returns from the shower one evening and finds Hedy talking to Sam in her underwear, and is noticeably jealous. That night, when Allie wakes and feels a gap in the bed beside her, it is apparent that she is frightened Sam may not be in bed with her. The implication here is that Allie must be happier in a heterosexual relationship

based on these relentless anxieties than alone. The same night Allie also expresses an abject fascination with Hedy's sexuality after she wakes and hears moans originating from her bedroom. Allie is overtaken by curiosity and goes to investigate, becoming so absorbed in observing Hedy masturbate that she is indifferent about the possibility of being discovered. *Single White Female* does not interrogate Allie's voyeuristic fascination during this scene; instead, Hedy's inclination to loudly pleasure herself is presented as another aspect of her deviancy.

Hedy's deviant sexuality is connected to her propensity to commit acts of violence in *Single White Female*. Soon it is suggested that Hedy has thrown Buddy from their apartment window in a jealous rage, and though she attempts to implicate Sam, Allie blames her. Hedy's endeavour to cheer them both up with a new haircut is the point at which Allie is finally forced to admit that her roommate has become obsessive: Hedy emerges from the salon with the same style and colour as Allie. Allie's protestation that she "should've asked first" does little to dampen Hedy's pleasure at their identical appearances.⁵ After searching Hedy's room Allie finds a newspaper clipping that refutes Hedy's claim that her twin sister was stillborn. Allie, at once fascinated and repulsed by her roommate, follows her to a mysterious bondage bar and tells a cab driver along the way that Hedy has "something" of hers. What Hedy has at this point, or at least is attempting to "take," is Allie's identity. This seems disturbing for Allie because Hedy wants to *be* her because she can't *have* her. Hollinger presents a parallel perspective on Hedy's desire for Allie here: "the intimacy so exalted in sentimental female friendship films develops in Allie and Hedy's case into a deadly connection when Hedy insanely demands that the relationship the two women share become total fusion" (220).

The breakdown of the roommates' relationship is paralleled with Hedy's victimization of Sam in *Single White Female*. When Hedy realizes that Allie has called her parents she is desperate and in a parody of conventional

⁵ Barbara Creed describes Hedy as a lesbian "vampire" for her desire to transform herself into Allie ("Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys and Tarts").

cinematic “break-up” scenes even offers to “change” for Allie. Hedy, however, destroys any hope she has of remaining Allie’s companion because she criticizes Sam and suggests Allie has been wrong to reconcile with an unreliable womaniser. Sam does cheat on Allie again, but Hedy is the villain in this story and it is therefore implied that he is her victim. Hedy dresses in Allie’s clothes and performs oral sex for Sam, who realizes far “too late” that it is not his fiancée (of course he does not protest until he has climaxed). Hedy explains her motive for offering him this sexual favour as follows: “I told her guys like you don’t change. You can’t be faithful— now she’ll know.” Sam professes his innocence, despite the fact that he knew it was Hedy when he allowed her to finish the “job.” Though Hedy confirms what the audience is already aware of—that Sam knew and didn’t care—he clarifies that Allie will still not “thank” Hedy for the news of his infidelity. Sam also insults Hedy here, claiming that she is “too needy and always clingy.” Hedy’s suggestion that Sam could “never understand” the things that Allie tells her only provokes him to upset her further and she loses her composure, striking him with her spiked stiletto heel.⁶ Hedy explains to Allie that Sam’s murder was an accident but that he “deserved” what he got.

While the film struggles to re-assert Hedy’s deviancy during its final moments, Allie’s is further constructed as a less than powerful protagonist. The film’s concluding scenes reveal that Hedy’s rage is connected to her somewhat incestuous desire to replace the twin sister she had shared an unequal relationship with as a child. Hedy implicates Allie for Sam’s murder and then imprisons her in her own home, threatening to kill her if she tries to escape. The depth of Hedy’s scheme to stay close to Allie is divulged when she tells her, “You could be in a lot of trouble without me but I’m not gonna leave you, that

⁶ Because Hedy believes she is “punishing” Sam for his infidelities, it is significant that a shoe borrowed from Allie is the weapon used to murder him. That the shoes are a pair Allie had earlier bought on a shopping trip with Hedy is noteworthy. When Hedy tries on this particular pair of stilettos, she passes them on to Allie explaining that they’re more her “style.” This is an indication that Hedy is acknowledging the inequalities in their relationship; that is, Hedy realizes Allie is the “stylish” one, with the well-paid job and “classy” fashion-sense. Given this, while Hedy kills Sam because he threatens her intimacy with Allie, her violent act could also be read as an expression of her angst at their unequal relationship, as Ngai outlines.

wouldn't be right." As Hedy articulates her disappointment with Allie she also begins to refer to her past experiences with other women: "People like you don't care, just like that stupid girl in Tampa. She called my parents too and told them all my secrets." Allie begins to use Hedy's desire against her by referencing her real name, Ellie, once she realizes the nature of her obsession. Hedy, however, understands Allie well and can see through her false concern. Though Hedy forces Allie to write a suicide note that accurately summarizes her shortcomings, her legitimate critique of Allie's passivity is eventually overshadowed in the film's conclusion by her own pathological feelings about her deceased twin, who was "prettier" and let her do "all the work." Hedy's condemnation of Allie seems fair; however, the film eclipses each of her rationalisations with enraged comments that demonstrate her obsessive desire. Allie's view that Hedy's attraction to her is grotesquely deviant is dominant in *Single White Female* because spectators are encouraged to identify with the film's survivor.

However, Allie's lack of confidence and dependency on men ultimately serves to undermine the film's construction of her as successful businesswoman. Though Allie outlives Hedy's homicidal attraction to her, like many female "victim-heroes," she must rely on a man to do so. Allie only overpowers her stalker when Graham regains consciousness and hits Hedy forcefully enough to allow his friend to escape. Allie does eventually defend herself capably but when she describes the ordeal she has suffered in the voiceover that concludes the film she reveals that she is still the dependant person that her roommate had criticized her for being. Allie explains that she "cried the whole week of Sam's funeral" and that Graham is teaching her to "let go." Allie explains that while she is trying to "forgive" Hedy, it is more important that she "forgive" herself. The only relationship with Allie that Hedy eventually experiences is one that she will never enjoy: the lasting impact that her memory will have on Allie's ability to share her life with other women in the future. These final moments serve to imply that Allie will have no desire for female companionship in the future. As Hollinger asserts, *Single White Female* appears to exist to confirm that women should turn to men for advice, companionship and love.

Ngai proposes a crucial reading of lesbianism in *Single White Female* that I must also acknowledge. Ngai argues that Hedy's envy demonstrates that significant conflicts exist between women in contemporary society. Inequalities between Allie and Hedy are for Ngai evidence of the divergent opinions that exist within postmodern feminist scholarship:

The film's dramatization of envy suggests the potentiality for female subjects to form coalitions based on something other than 'similar love for the same object'. . . . What is most surprising and interesting about *Single White Female* with respect to how we approach aggressive conflict within feminism today is how it depicts female compoundness as actively fostered through these disidentificatory and antiproprietary processes. (219)

This account in no uncertain terms posits that *Single White Female* is an important film for feminist analysis. However, Ngai's insistence that *Single White Female* is noteworthy because it highlights the multiple identities that feminism struggles to incorporate today is an optimistic assessment of the power imbalances apparent in Hedy and Allie's lives. *Single White Female* is certainly not a prime example of the dissemination of feminism's diversity in a Hollywood product. It is asserted in *Single White Female* that women have little to gain in close relationships with one another and this homophobia denies one of the very spheres of existence—lesbian desire—that contemporary feminist film theory has struggled to account for.

“Not Some Routine Noir Knock-Off with a Gal Gimmick”

Bound—the debut film of the Wachowski brothers, Larry and Andy—is not some routine noir knock-off with a gal gimmick.

Mick La Salle (*San Francisco Chronicle*).

Bound parodies normative gender roles and heterosexuality by reworking noir and thriller conventions, as La Salle outlines. Barry Walters's review further explains the significance of the film's breakthrough to mainstream cinema: "*Bound* may be the first lesbian/gay crossover hit where characters of the same gender have active sex lives that the camera actually captures, rather than turning away from at the first suggestion of a kiss." As protagonists Corky and Violet develop a trusting relationship in *Bound*, audiences are encouraged to invest in the success of their scheme to double-cross Violet's mobster boyfriend, Caesar. Gay and lesbian characters are frequently punished for their transgressions in Hollywood products, yet Violet and Corky are as successful in their plotting as they are in love. *Bound*, moreover, is visually structured around the desiring gazes of its female protagonists.

Classic noir's conventions are satirized in *Bound*, where women play the characters "femme fatale" and reluctant hero. La Salle explains that *Bound* mimics the heterosexual desire of noir: "Gershon plays a female version of the classic noir hero. She's just out of prison and trying to do right, but she's just smart enough to be stupid. Violet is the mystery woman— sexy, baby-voiced, shrewder than she looks and, possibly, evil." In other words, *Bound* is a queer parody of heterosexual cinematic norms. While parody is not always progressive, the film still challenges spectators' understanding of noir's heteronormative conventions. It is easy to initially suspect that Violet may indeed be untrustworthy, especially since we only witness events as they develop through the eyes of our noir hero, Corky. Though Violet dresses like many noir femmes fatales in revealing, seductive clothing, unlike classic noir's villainesses, she does not deceive *Bound*'s hero.

Corky and Violet seem to represent heterosexual romantic norms in a regressive manner in their stereotypical "masculinity" and "femininity," yet *Bound* refutes these dichotomies by ending with the proposition that the women are not in fact different from one another at all. Much of the dialogue between Corky and Violet initially represented in the film focuses on their "differences":

Violet is a “femme fatale” who wears high heels, short skirts and sleeps with men; Corky is a “butch dyke” who dresses in dirty singlets and denim, does “men’s work” (carpentry and plumbing) and has done time for theft. Before the end credits roll in *Bound*, however, the “differences” between the lesbian characters are refuted. During the film’s final scene, Corky asks Violet “you know what the difference is between you and me?” and when Violet answers, “no,” Corky responds “me neither.” *Bound* disavows the very heterosexual stereotypes it constructs in its ultimate suggestion that the women are not in fact “different” from each other at all.

Bound’s first scenes develop Violet and Corky as lesbian characters existing within noir’s stereotypical gender roles. *Bound* opens with a voice-over spoken by Violet, which presents the moral, “we make our own choices; we pay our own prices.” This message is left for audiences to ponder during the women’s first encounter—a ride in their building’s elevator. Corky, a stereotypical “butch dyke,” displays her sexual orientation as she gazes at Violet’s body. In a parody of classic cinema’s active and “masculine” voyeurism, Corky leers at Violet as she walks away from the elevator. The film slows to a suspended pace as Violet’s stiletto heels echo along a tiled corridor. However, much of the fetishistic voyeurism of this scene is de-constructed because Violet returns Corky’s desiring gaze. These looks of desire are central to the film’s visual structuring, and as Hollinger suggests with regard to lesbian cinema, this type of investment in the lesbian gaze can create and sustain “an active, desiring female subjectivity independent of male control” (153).

Bound’s *mise en scène* further affirms the power of the female gaze in its reliance on visual symbols referencing female anatomy. Corky is depicted clearing a drain in the apartment she is renovating during the film’s opening sequences. The suggestiveness of Corky’s plumbing job is highlighted by a lingering shot on a warning attached to the rod which reads “don’t force the snake— easy does it.” This line foreshadows the slow development of the couple’s relationship and the imagery here is inherently gendered. La Salle

describes the symbolism apparent in this plumbing task: “The Wachowskis take Hitchcock’s preoccupation with drains in *Psycho* and use them as a sly symbol of female anatomy. There’s also more than the usual amount of digging into locks and of shots down the barrels of guns.” Classic noir’s overuse of phallic symbols is reversed in *Bound*, where vaginal imagery replaces the phallus.

Bound goes on to establish its powerful representation of the lesbian gaze in the scenes that follow these opening sequences. Corky and Violet’s first encounters, which are increasingly charged with innuendo, reinvigorate noir conventions by establishing a visual structure around which the women gaze at one another with desire. Violet visits Corky during an early scene in the film to explain that she is having trouble sleeping while her neighbour works in the mornings. The women flirt and exchange desiring looks as their innuendo-charged conversation develops. Violet comments that she finds Corky’s ability to perform the technical jobs her father once did fascinating and describes his hands as “magic.” Violet’s desire is shown to be further heightened by Corky’s “masculine” qualities: she can fix things and drives a sixties Chevy truck. However, while the women’s relationship fulfils the butch-femme stereotype, their bond is portrayed as complex rather than stereotypical.

The couple’s reservations about each other are depicted during the film’s lovemaking scenes, where the two women argue as they struggle to come understand each other’s differences. Violet’s explanation for her sexual relations with men sits at the centre of all conflicts between the lovers. Violet looks upon her relationship with her boyfriend as “work,” but Corky’s experiences persuade her not to trust this explanation. Violet insists that she and Corky are “not that different,” and gives the following explanation for her “work” with Caesar:

You said you made certain choices in your life that you paid for; you said you made them because you were good at something and it was easy. You think you’re the only person that’s good a something? We make our own choices; we pay our own prices. I think we’re more alike than you care to admit.

Corky comes to realize that she and Violet are indeed more alike than she had previously recognized by participating in a scam to outwit the mob. Corky's doubts about Violet's "true" sexual identity are relieved when she overhears Caesar and his mafia colleagues "working" themselves. As the men violently assault a double-crossing business partner next door, Corky is permitted to see Violet's situation for what it is: a job that she cannot easily escape from. Violet explains that Caesar deserves to be set up because he has subjected her to five years of violence and Corky sees that she desperately needs her assistance to escape and create a "new life." Corky therefore comes to see Violet's heterosexual relationships as role-playing or work and comes to trust her.

Bound's explanation for the sexual aspect to Corky's talent for stealing further highlights the similarities between the two women. Corky's response to Violet's flattery implies the sexual sub-text to their plot:

For me, stealing's always been a lot like sex. Two people that want the same thing sit in a room and they talk, they start to plan and it's like flirting, it's kinda like foreplay, because the more they talk about it, the wetter they get. The only difference is, I can fuck someone I just met but to steal I need to know someone like I know myself.

Later this is emphasized again when Corky gives the following explanation for her caution with Violet: "I had a partner. She fucked me." Corky's sexualisation of stealing is analogous to the sexual relationship that she shares with her partners in crime. Violet, however, does not "fuck" Corky as her business partner: this noir femme fatale does not double-cross the hero.

Audience identification is further placed with the lesbian couple when Caesar uncovers their plot to rob him and articulates his homophobia. Caesar calls Corky a "fucking dyke" and asserts that "queers" make him "sick." He also asks Violet what her new lover "did" to her, but his insult backfires when she responds that Corky did "everything he couldn't." Caesar is eventually obliged to see his relationship with Violet for what it has always been for her— a job. Violet ultimately has the gumption to shoot Caesar because she does not share a

true connection with him, as she does with Corky. Though Caesar is the victim of a femme fatale's schemes, he is not our noir hero. Corky *and* Violet are heroes in *Bound* and in this narrative both protagonists “get the girl.”

Bound sums up with a re-working of the classic Hollywood “happy ending.” Violet is promised security and money by a mob-boss, Mickey (John P. Ryan), who offers to “look after” her, but she is determined to escape her past with the mafia and begin a new life with Corky. In the film’s final scene Corky arrives at their apartment building in a shiny red pickup, which, she explains to Violet, is their new “getaway car.” Before the credits roll Corky asks Violet “you know what the difference is between you and me?” When Violet answers, “no,” Corky is satisfied and responds “me neither.” Both women are dressed similarly in black leather jackets— though Violet is wearing a skirt.⁷ By at once setting up and then disrupting the heterosexual stereotypes that are often utilized in the depiction of lesbianism in mainstream cinema, *Bound* portrays progressive girl power heroines. The completion of the women’s scam is eventually portrayed as a victory over the violent, macho techniques of the mafia: as Violet and Corky kiss and drive away, Tom Jones’s “She’s a Lady” plays triumphantly on the soundtrack. This updates conventional noir films’ misogynistic conclusions, in which women are ultimately punished for their attempts to manipulate men. *Bound* reveals the extent to which powerful, queer characters in Hollywood cinema can embody the feminist tenets of girl power.

⁷ Philip Green comments on the significance of black leather in lesbian subcultures in his following comments on the marginality of lesbian characters in mainstream cinema: “When Hollywood introduces us to a lesbian heroine who is one hundred pounds overweight, has a mannish haircut, hangs out in leather bars, and is on the run from malevolent killers because she has come into possession of a secret document that will change the course of history, we’ll know that the code has been overthrown” (Cracks in the Pedestal: Ideology and Gender in Hollywood 54)

Conclusion

It is a truism of film theory that the ideal spectator/subject addressed by classical cinema— with its system of “suture,” its ideological investment in rendering natural and thus reproducing the status quo, its commodity status, its fetishistic structuring of the gaze, its hierarchy of image over sound, its single point perspective, its required suspension of disbelief, its “realism”— is male. Implicitly this ideal spectator or invisible guest is Western, white, and straight as well.

Patricia White, *Uninvited* (xi-xii).

White’s estimation of classical cinema’s racially and sexually motivated exclusions also accurately describes many contemporary Hollywood productions, including *Single White Female*. Though *Single White Female* depicts the struggles a woman might face while searching for sexual fulfilment at the same time as pursuing an eminent career, it ultimately portrays the dangers of female friendships. Allie’s need for female companionship is dismissed when her engagement to Sam is portrayed as a necessary compromise and her friendship with Graham is presented as her one source of solace. Allie is incapable of forming realistic bonds with other women and her experiences with Hedy do little to suggest that she will benefit from such relationships in the future. This asserts the patriarchal premise that women have little to gain in sustaining intimate relationships with one another. Like *The Craft* and *Cruel Intentions*, *Single White Female* reinforces an anti-feminist perspective by suggesting that intimacy between women might only be fraught with jealousy, resentment and competition for men. This additionally goes with the implication that women need men’s encouragement and love in order to feel complete. Moreover, Hedy’s lesbian desires reinforce the film’s portrayal of her developing insanity. The homophobic tone of the film implies that women like Hedy who do not adhere to the “rules” of normative femininity are sexual deviants beyond rehabilitation.

Mainstream cinema persistently portrays feminine sexuality in binaries, such as “deviant”/“normal,” in this manner. Straayer argues that the construction of normative gender roles and heterosexual binaries in Hollywood products disavows lesbian and gay subjectivities:

By denying evidence of sexual continuums and conceptually precluding a more complex sexual variance in favour of a system of binary oppositions, arbitrary and enforced standards for assignment of both sex and sexual behaviour are made to seem adequate, primary, and natural. If we understand male and female sexes as constructs, we must ask ourselves what investment empowers them. Certainly, within classical narrative film, the language/expression/momentum of heterosexual desire relies precisely on this particular system of binary opposition. (8)

Bound, unlike *Single White Female*, illustrates that Hollywood can produce successful movies that effectively capture fluid sexual identities. *Bound* questions cinema’s preference for presenting heterosexual relationships as “natural” in its depiction of a lesbian couple that parodies “binary heterosexual oppositions.” Violet, a noir femme fatale, is stereotypically constructed as excessively feminine; however, she is eventually revealed to be an astute schemer. Corky is the antithesis of the typical Hollywood heroine in her masculine appearance and outspoken attraction to women. Violet and Corky’s journey demonstrates that old cinematic formulas can be re-worked so as to question Western culture’s “investment” in power-laden heterosexual stereotypes. Like the *Scream* films, *The Gift*, *What Lies Beneath* and *Freeway*, *Bound* further implies that contemporary girl power movies are inviting women to identify with communities of women onscreen who work together to rebel against established patriarchal structures. That is, when Violet and Corky triumph over the mob, female spectators are invited to take pleasure in their transgressive scam to double-cross powerful men. *Bound* demonstrates that the differences feminism has come to celebrate might be expressed positively in a popular format that utilizes girl power themes.

CHAPTER 7

The Mother-Child Relationship: *The Others*, *Panic Room* and *The Deep End*.

For complex reasons, feminists have focused on the Mother largely from the daughter position. . . . The Hollywood cinema is as responsible as anything for perpetuating the oppressive patriarchal myths. Relatively few Hollywood films make the mother central, relegating her, rather, to the periphery of a narrative focused on husband, son, or daughter.

E. Ann Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's *Stella Dallas*." (125-7)

While many critics have theorized the mother in Hollywood cinema, recent films with positive maternal-protagonists have been somewhat neglected in media scholarship.¹ *The Others* (Alejandro Amenebar, 2001), *Panic Room* (David Fincher, 2002) and *The Deep End* (Scott Mc Gehee and David Siegel, 2001) all place the mother-child relationship at the centre of narrative development and are therefore important films in any study of girl power movies. There are few Hollywood films that depict both mothers and daughters as powerful, or that depict mother-daughter relationships positively. For example, *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976) is a prominent example of the horror genre's fascination with the monstrous mother. The character Margaret White (Piper Laurie) in *Carrie* indicates the extent to which a daughter's maturing

¹ Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine* analyses the depiction of mothers in an array of horror films, including *The Exorcist* and *Alien*. Shelley Lindsey's "Horror, Femininity, and Carrie's Monstrous Puberty" examines the character Margaret White in *Carrie*. In "The Steppfather: Father as Monster in the Contemporary Horror Film," Patricia Erens contemplates the positive mother-daughter relationship shared between the characters Stephanie and Susan. Linda Williams's "Something Else Besides a Mother: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama" analyses the mother-daughter relationship in Vidor's remake of the 1925 film by Henry King.

sexuality is seen as threatening to her mother.² *The Others*, *Panic Room* and *The Deep End*, however, depict strong maternal protagonists who eventually perform proficiently in extreme circumstances, and without the assistance of husbands.³

E. Ann Kaplan outlines the maternal stereotypes that have dominated Hollywood's portraits of motherhood since cinema's early days:

1. The Good Mother, who is all-nurturing and self-abnegating—the 'Angel in the House.' Totally invested in husband and children, she lives only through them, and is marginal to the narrative.
2. The Bad Mother or Witch—the underside to the first myth. Sadistic, hurtful and jealous, she refuses the self-abnegating role, demanding her own life. Because of her evil behaviour, this mother often takes control of the narrative, but she is punished for her violation of the desired patriarchal ideal, the Good Mother.
3. The Heroic Mother, who suffers and endures for the sake of the Husband and children. A development of the first Mother, she shares her saintly qualities, but is more central to the action. Yet, unlike the second Mother, she acts not to satisfy herself but for the good of the family.
4. The Silly, Weak or Vain Mother. Found most often in comedies, she is ridiculed by the husband and children alike, and is generally scorned and disparaged. ("The Case of the Missing Mother" 127-8)

Though Kaplan refers to classical Hollywood cinema, many of these maternal stereotypes have persisted in popular culture. *The Others*, *Panic Room* and *The Deep End* play upon cinematic, literary and mythological maternal stereotypes, but are girl power films in the extent to which they depart from established patriarchal paradigms in the characterisation of mothers.

² Perhaps the most (in)famous literary example of this is Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Tension between Juliet and her mother supposedly indicates that Mrs. Capulet is anxious about her daughter's coming of age.

³ There are also horror films that represent fathers as absent but still capable single parents. The *Scream* films, for instance, portray Sidney's father, Mr. Prescott as an important (if unimpressive) character. While *Scream* and *Scream 2* appear to portray Mrs. Prescott as a monstrous infidel, *Scream 3* develops the relationship between Sidney and her mother more positively. Mrs. Prescott is in due course depicted as a sympathetic character.

Motherhood is represented positively in *The Others*, *Panic Room* and *The Deep End*, and maternal characters are in each film contrasted with less favourable depictions of fatherhood. These thrillers reinvent many stereotypes about the female victim. All three films portray single-parent families capably led by women— Grace, Meg and Margaret (Nicole Kidman, Jody Foster and Tilda Swinton). Though they are not represented as perfect women, audiences are encouraged to understand the tasks these mothers must perform to protect their families from the evils of the world. Grace, Meg and Margaret go to great lengths to protect their families from harm and gain the respect of their children. For example, the struggle between a girl's perspective and a woman's worldview in *The Others* is a metaphor for the wider feminist battle to overcome generational differences. Men in the three films, however, are proven as incapable in intimidating scenarios as their wives are competent. Fathers in *The Others*, *Panic Room*, and *The Deep End* fail their wives, leaving them in situations that require extreme measures.

“She Expects Us to Believe Everything Written in the Bible”

We all live in a house with our family. The family is usually made up of parents, children and their grandparents. We must be obedient and kind towards other members of our family
Grace, The Others.

MRS. MILLS. Why, you shouldn't believe everything that you read in books.

ANNE. That's what our mother says. She says that all this stuff about ghosts is rubbish and then she expects us to believe everything written in the bible.

MRS. MILLS. And don't you believe it?

ANNE. I believe some things but, for example, I don't believe that God made the world in seven days.

Grace is a character with traditional values who is determined to inform her offspring about the bible, God and conventional familial structures, as the above lesson read to children in *The Others* demonstrates. Grace endeavours to discipline her children rigorously while surviving on their remote estate on a British colony, the Jersey Isles. Having been widowed when her husband disappeared during World War II, Grace struggles to live the life her religion dictates. One of Grace's significant woes (which is also an effective plot device employed to keep her house in constant darkness) is that her children suffer from a rare skin disease, "photosensitivity." Those suffering from "exoderma pigmentosum" (the modern term for this condition) rarely survive past childhood due to their extreme sensitivity to sunlight. Grace is confined to her home because light could damage her children's skin irreparably. Compounding this is the fact that Grace's devotion to her strict religious beliefs has caused her servants to leave suddenly, which has imprisoned the family in their home.

Just as *The Gift* represents the conflicts between Annie's spirituality and that of her small town's institutions, *The Others* centres on the conflict between a mother's beliefs and her daughter's. Grace continually punishes her daughter Anne (Alakina Mann) for her rebellion against ideological religious knowledge. Anne wishes to understand the supernatural events that have been occurring in their home and therefore researches such phenomena herself. In the process, Anne acquaints herself with knowledge that exists outside of her mother's institutional doctrines. Anne challenges Grace's Christian worldviews and intelligently points out inconsistencies in her mother's teachings. The mother and daughter are reconciled, however, when Grace is forced to relinquish her disciplinarian tactics and fanatical religious beliefs. Anne teaches her mother about alternative spirituality and by the end of *The Others* Grace has accepted her daughter's flexible and open-minded understanding of reality. In this respect, *The Others* is comparable to more progressive films from the horror genre, such as *The Stepfather* (Joseph Ruben, 1986), where a rebellious teenager Stephanie (Jill Schoelen) realizes long before her mother (Shelley Hack) that there is

something disturbing about her stepfather, Jerry (Terry O'Quinn). The mother-daughter bond that exists between Grace and Anne in *The Others* is similar to that depicted between Susan and Stephanie in *The Stepfather*. *The Stepfather* concludes with a shot that represents the mother-daughter bond as “natural and healthy” and *The Others* ends after Grace and Anne’s intimacy has been re-established.⁴ Both films assert the feminist tenet that women of different generations have much to learn from accepting and respecting each other’s worldviews.

As the film’s opening credits begin, we overhear Grace telling her children a story about the world’s creation, which like all of the fables she reads is derived from the bible. Grace explains to Anne and Nicolas that “thousands of years ago . . . none of the things we can see now . . . existed, only God existed and so only he could have created them, and so he did.” *The Others* then cuts to a close-up that contrasts with the peacefulness of this bedtime story: a shot of Grace awakening in the morning, screaming in fright after having endured a nightmare. The sense that all is not well is accentuated as Grace welcomes three new servants to her home— Mr. Tuttle (Eric Sykes), Mrs. Mills (Fionnula Flanagan) and Lydia (Elaine Cassidy). Grace immediately communicates her feelings about living in such isolation to her hired help by remarking that they will “soon find out there are times when this house is not exactly an ideal home.”

Grace also provides an explanation for her home’s perpetual darkness, and her perspective on this matter is worth quoting at length because it conveys her obsessive attitude toward her children’s health:

In this house no door must be opened without the previous one being closed first. It’s vital that you remember this. It is not as easy as it seems. There are fifteen different keys for all the fifty doors, depending on what area of the house you are in at the time . . . most of the time you can hardly see your way, it’s often very difficult to make out if

⁴ Patricia Erens proposes that Susan and Stephanie’s reconciliation indicates that mother-daughter relationships might be represented positively in the horror genre.

there's a chair, a door, a sideboard or one of my children playing hide and seek.

Grace's dark home also lacks electricity and is silent (she refuses to install a telephone, radio or "anything else that makes a racket"). Later in the film Grace explains that the silence and fog contribute to the "darkness" of their life: "I'm beginning to feel totally cut off from the world. . . . Even the seagulls have gone quiet." This darkness had caused Grace to "lose her way" several days earlier, when she suffocated her children in their sleep. The film does not divulge this fact until its final scenes, where Grace is forced to give up her devout Catholic faith and admit that she knows little about the afterlife that she and her children are to experience.

A struggle between Anne's reality and Grace's is at the centre of the film's narrative. Unlike her mother and brother, Anne is not in denial about her family's past and remembers the night that her mother "went mad." Though Grace is adamant that she doesn't "like fantasies" or "strange ideas," and that her daughter is inventing deceitful narratives about the past, Anne emphatically articulates her rebellion by insisting that "it did happen." Anne significantly defies her mother's beliefs when she is being taught the story of Justice and Pastor. As Grace recounts that Justice and Pastor were beheaded for refusing to renounce their Christian faith, Anne indicates that she is reluctant to accept the moral within her mother's religious parable. Anne laughs and suggests that "those children were really stupid" because "they said they only believed in Jesus and then they got killed for it." After being asked if she would instead "deny Christ," Anne explains, "inside I would have believed in him but I wouldn't have told the Romans that." Grace is shocked to discover that Nicolas agrees with his sister and asks them "where they would have gone" in the after life. Nicolas reveals that his mother's Catholic teachings are formidable when he replies that children go to "Limbo," one of the "Four Hells." Grace's description of limbo suggests that she believes there are frightening punishments in store for disobedient children: "The centre of the earth where it's very hot, that's where children go who tell lies. But they don't just go there for a few days, oh no,

they're damned, forever." Anne does not take her mother seriously here, and while she imagines limbo light-heartedly remarks that she is getting dizzy.

Nicolas is occasionally reassured by his mother's religious doctrines but Anne is not so convinced. Grace has a disciplinarian approach to education and insists that her children learn lessons from their books by heart in separate rooms, even when Anne claims that she and her brother "get scared" if they are separated. Nicolas enquires as to what they should do if they "see a ghost" when forced to study by himself as punishment for his insubordination. Grace displays her mistrust of her daughter by asking Nicolas if his sister has been telling "one of her stories," asserting that all he need do whenever he feels afraid is hold his rosary tightly and say "our father." If he does this, Grace contends, his fear will dissipate. When Nicolas argues that this won't work, Grace eases his trepidation by vowing that whenever the Lord is with him he has no need to be afraid. The children, however, continue to encounter an otherworldly presence in their home in *The Others* and Grace's beliefs are progressively revealed to be misguided. The children continue to have experiences that are not explained by their mother's religious teachings and Grace unremittingly accuses her daughter of attempting to scare Nicolas with stories of the supernatural that go against what is taught in the bible. Anne, however, protests her innocence, maintaining on several occasions that she has indeed seen something unusual. When Grace witnesses the unexplainable phenomenon of a door opening, shutting and locking of its own accord, she stubbornly lectures Mrs. Mills and Lydia on the matter, protesting that her "children's lives are at stake." However, Grace is forced to concede that her religion does not provide a rationalization for everything as her family continue to experience the presence of "intruders."

By continuing to describe the ghosts she has encountered, Anne does not simply challenge her mother's religious beliefs, which prohibit superstitions, but also attempts to frighten her brother— another affront to her mother's wishes. For example, as the family eat dinner one evening, Anne reads at the table (in defiance of her mother's rules) and explains to Nicolas that she was

telling the truth about having seen a boy, Victor, open and close a door in the music room. Nicolas asks if Victor was a ghost and Anne clarifies that “ghosts aren’t like that—they go about in white sheets and carry chains.” Later that night Anne takes her rebellion further when she wakes Nicolas in order to show him that Victor has been opening the curtains in their bedroom. Contrary to what his mother had promised, the Lord does not alleviate Nicolas’s fears during this scene and he resorts to hiding under his blankets. His resulting scream wakes Grace, who instructs Anne to stand in the hall and read aloud from the bible the next morning as punishment. Anne assumes that her retribution is over once she is done but Grace orders her to ask “the virgin for forgiveness.” Their ensuing argument demonstrates Anne’s refusal to be intimidated by her mother’s beliefs. Anne maintains that she will not “ask for forgiveness” for something she didn’t do and deflects her mother’s threats about limbo by asserting that she has researched the matter and found that “limbo’s only for children who haven’t been baptised.” Anne stubbornly shows Grace a picture she has drawn which details the number of times she has seen each of the intruders and continues to counter her mother’s disciplines by detailing her ghostly encounters to Nicolas. Anne illustrates here that she will not blindly take on her mother’s faith; rather, she is motivated to study philosophies on the afterlife and form her own opinion.

A conflict between Grace’s institutional religious beliefs and Mrs. Mills’s more open-minded spirituality also begins to surface as the plot advances. Grace slowly realizes that her religion cannot explain the supernatural happenings in her home. Mrs. Mills questions Grace’s harsh punishments for Anne and forces her to justify her disciplinary tactics. Like Anne, Mrs. Mills admits that not everything may be explained by traditional (patriarchal) beliefs. Mrs. Mills explains that “sometimes the world of the dead gets mixed up with the world of the living” when she comforts Grace after a paranormal experience. She also relates to Grace that, “there isn’t always an answer for everything.” Grace’s response to this possibility demonstrates that she is still unable to overlook her biblical knowledge. Grace assuredly tells Mrs. Mills, “It’s impossible, the Lord would not allow such an aberration: the living and the dead,

they will only meet at the end of eternity, it says so in the bible.” Such is the strength of Catholicism’s teachings for Grace that she stubbornly continues to believe in her rational explanations, which are tested time and time again. Grace, however, finds as Nicolas had that the feeling of the Lord being with her is not comfort enough in unfathomable situations.

The return of Grace’s husband, Charles (Christopher Eccleston), further tests her steadfast belief in Catholic doctrines. After she finds a “Book of the Dead,” which contains post-mortem photos of their home’s previous occupants, Grace decides that their home must be blessed. On her way to calling a priest Grace gets lost in the fog and eventually finds Charles, who is supposedly on his way home from war. Rather than express surprise at finding the husband she was told to give up for dead, Grace simply thanks God for his return, explaining that she had “prayed for this” every night and that she had “begged God” to bring him back. Charles’s strange responses do not seem to worry Grace and she simply remarks that he is “different.” Her faith in her prayers renders her incapable of admitting to the peculiar aspect of her husband’s return. Anne, however, immediately notices that it is strange that her father has come home and expresses her concern by inundating her mother with questions about war. Although Anne is eventually banished to her bedroom for asking her mother too many confrontational questions, she is comforted by Mrs. Mills. Mrs. Mills tells Anne that she has also seen “the intruders” Grace refuses to acknowledge. Mrs. Mills explains that Grace is stubborn and comments to Anne, “there are things your mother doesn’t want to hear— she only believes in what she was told.”

Grace and Anne’s mother-daughter relationship reaches a point of crisis in *The Others* when Anne is depicted trying on her communion dress. Anne is delighted to feel as though she “looks like a bride” in her white communion dress and promises not to dirty it if she may wear it for a while as she plays. However, when Grace returns to Anne’s room she finds her sitting on the dirty floor, playing with a puppet. Grace is about to scold her when she notices that it is an old lady’s hand that is holding the puppet. Grace tears off the veil and

violently shakes Anne until Mrs. Mills intervenes. This scene apparently mirrors the morning when Grace had suffocated her children and Anne, remembering her mother's previous act of aggression, tells Mrs. Mills "she won't stop until she kills us."

Grace's perspective is also questioned by her husband, which is portrayed as significant since Mrs. Mills insists that he is having trouble simply deciphering where he is himself. Charles makes it clear that he accepts Anne's interpretation of events and asks Grace about the day she had suffocated the children. Grace tells him her version: "I don't know what came over me that day. The servants had left during the night. They hadn't the courage to tell me to my face. They knew that I couldn't leave the house." Grace asks Charles for forgiveness but he simply insists that he must say goodbye because he is expected at "the front," even though the war is over. Grace responds by expressing her anger at his desertion of the family, implying that by leaving her alone in a remote location with children who cannot travel he has confined her to a prison. The film's *mise en scène* emphasizes Grace's entrapment as she mourns Charles's departure: her face is framed with the bars of a gate as she stares out their front entrance. Charles's presence in the film serves to emphasize the difficulties Grace faces as a mother caring for two sick children in an isolated setting.

Grace is forced to assume the patriarchal role of protector of her children after Charles abandons his family again. Grace is also compelled to believe her daughter's interpretation of events in their struggle against the "intruders." As the threat from "the intruders" persists, Anne is unable to continue living in their house without explanations for these supernatural events. She escapes out her bedroom window one night so as to read inscriptions on nearby gravestones. Anne discovers that Mrs. Mills, Mr. Tuttle and Lydia are in fact the ghosts of servants who had worked in the house almost a century ago. Grace simultaneously discovers her servants' true identities as she reads a "Book of the Dead."

The remaining scenes in *The Others* serve to reunite Grace and Anne. The final conflict that is resolved in these scenes, however, is that between two maternal figures: Grace and Mrs. Mills. While Grace is a literal mother in the film, Mrs. Mills is a symbolic mother, a concerned spirit who is there to help Grace and her children come to terms with their own deaths. Mrs. Mills explains to the family that the living and the dead must learn to “live together” and Grace finds that her children have been communicating with the living occupants of their household, who are holding a séance upstairs. “The intruders” leave only once Anne bravely faces them and tells them about the night her mother killed her. Grace proves to her children that she is abandoning the religious beliefs that had earlier alienated her from her own daughter as she explains what she believed happened the day that she murdered them:

At first I could not understand what the pillow was doing in my hand and why you didn't move. Then I knew . . . I'd killed my own children. I got the rifle, I put it to my forehead and pulled the trigger— nothing. Then I heard your laughter in the bedroom. You were playing with the pillows as if nothing had happened and I thought the Lord and his great mercy was giving me another chance, telling me, don't give up, be strong, be a good mother, for them. But now, where are we?

Mrs. Mills comforts Grace, who now accepts her guidance, realizing that she has no more knowledge than her children of the afterlife. Grace recognizes that her Christian understanding of events has been inadequate, and when Anne asks if they are now in limbo responds, “I'm no wiser than you are. But I do know that I love you. . . . No one can make us leave this house.” The film concludes with a shot of Grace holding her children as the three repeat, “this house is ours.”

Though it might seem that Grace is a “monstrous” mother who has killed her own children, spectators are in fact invited to sympathize with her. Viewers witness the extreme circumstances that Grace has had to endure raising her children alone. The film does not encourage us to condemn Grace for her murderous actions because we are shown things from her lonely and confused

perspective. Instead, the development of a strong bond between Grace and Anne in *The Others* implies that women must trust one another in order to survive in this world. Anne and Grace's struggle to experience intimacy and understanding is a metaphor for the wider feminist battle to overcome generational differences. The relationship between Anne and Grace portrays the generational conflicts that exist within feminism but also implies that these conflicts might be resolved.

“Dad’s Rich, Mom’s Just Mad”

From the perspective of ideology, analyses of stars . . . stress their structured polysemy, that is, the finite multiplicity of meanings and affects they embody and the attempt to structure them so that some meanings and affects are foregrounded and others are masked or displaced. The concern of such textual analysis is then not to determine the correct meaning and affect, but rather to determine what meanings and affects can legitimately be read in them.

Richard Dyer, *Stars*. (3)

It is significant that Jodie Foster— an actor known for playing women who independently fight injustice— performs as Meg Altman in *Panic Room*. Foster's roles in previous films, such as *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), *The Accused* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988), *Little Man Tate* (Jodie Foster, 1989) and *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), contribute to meanings available to contemporary spectators in her performance as Meg Altman in *Panic Room*. Central to these meanings are the intersections between Foster's star persona and the roles she plays in films. Foster grew up portraying hardened young urbanites as a child star (for instance, her character in *Taxi Driver*), all the while nurturing an off-screen persona as a dedicated and diligent performer.⁵ Foster frequently

⁵ Foster is also a rumoured lesbian and her sexual ambiguity perhaps adds to the characterization of Meg's resourceful self-sufficiency. Meg's daughter Sarah (Kristen Stewart) is also represented as androgynous and tough. Clover has argued that the slasher genre's androgynous “final girls” are depicted as significantly more capable than their excessively feminized peers.

plays tough female protagonists who rebel against established misogynistic practices. Meg Altman's resistance in *Panic Room* is informed by Foster's previous performances as quietly capable women who fight institutionalized violence. *Panic Room* also utilizes horror conventions to depict Meg's attempts to overcome the men who invade her home and take her daughter hostage. Like Clover's "angry women" and Roberts's girl power heroines, who fight inventively in order to subdue the threat that faces their communities, Meg is smart and has foresight. Meg and her diabetic daughter, Sarah (Kristin Stewart), articulate a repressed rage in their fight for survival. Sarah Altman pertinently conveys that it is their anger that ensures their survival when she explains to the intruders that her mother is "just mad."⁶

Panic Room introduces the mother and daughter as they are shown around a nineteenth-century brownstone in Manhattan following the aftermath of Meg's unpleasant divorce from Sarah's wealthy father. Meg's friend, Lydia (Ann Magnuson), who arranges the meeting with a disagreeable real-estate agent, urges her to make an offer on the brownstone "immediately" because of its rare amount of space. Though it is revealed that Meg is rich from her husband's fortune and smart (she is going back to school at Columbia and is the only client to notice the space that the home's hidden panic room takes up), the real estate agent treats her condescendingly. When Lydia explains to Meg about the home's deceased owner, Sydney Pearlstein— an eccentric millionaire whose fortune has reputedly "gone missing"— the agent quips, "I hardly see how family gossip is germane to selling the property." He is later proved wrong when this very piece of information becomes crucial in the home invasion that traps Meg and Sarah in the brownstone's panic room. The estate agent is also wrong to contradict Meg's concern that the room is a "safety hazard." Meg is proven to have well-founded concerns about the room: its motion detectors later fail and one of the film's villains has his hand caught in the heavy steel door. Like female slasher protagonists who have the unique ability to sense the violence to come in

⁶ Because Meg Altman is at once hero and grieving single parent, audiences viewing *Panic Room* post-"9/11" would perhaps have read references to those widowed after the terrorist attacks.

their communities, Meg has an uneasy sense of the troubles this room will cause her.

The ensuing scenes in *Panic Room* develop Meg and Sarah's mother-daughter relationship. Meg has a tenuous grasp on the practicalities of surviving on her own with her daughter. Meg proudly calls out to her daughter that she has "hooked up the phone" during their first night in the brownstone and Sarah displays her contemptuous attitude by sarcastically remarking, "Good for you, Mom." Underneath her adolescent cynicism, however, Sarah exhibits a fondness for her mother. Sarah shows signs of her underlying loyalty to her mother as she exclaims "Fuck him. Fuck her, too" while discussing Meg's ex-husband and his new girlfriend. However, Sarah's desire to become more independent is apparent as they contemplate how she will travel to her new school. Meg is reluctant to confront her daughter's growing need for freedom, and tells her "It's disgusting how much I love you." Once Sarah is asleep, Meg lies in her new bath stifling tears and swigging wine. Both mother and daughter are struggling to come to terms with the divorce. It is only once they have survived a home invasion through their combined resources that they are truly comfortable with their new life together and can stop grieving the past.

Meg falls into a deep sleep after her first night in their new home and viewers watch as three intruders enter the brownstone, unaware that it is already occupied. When they discover that two women are asleep upstairs, one of the burglars, Junior (Jared Leto), explains that they need not worry about subduing a father. "Daddy's not coming home. Daddy's banging some fucking B model," he tells his collaborators. It is soon revealed, however, that had Sarah's father been present he would not have been useful to the two women. It is Sarah and Meg who have the requisite survival skills for the task of enduring this home invasion. The thieves agree to carry out their plan because there is no father present but are soon discovered when Meg gets out of bed to check on the house. Thinking quickly, Meg wakes Sarah and together they attempt to reach the front door via the elevator. Sarah suggests that they try and make it to the panic room when this

is not possible. Once safely shut away in the panic room, however, they realize they are trapped. The room has a separate phone line from the rest of the house, which Meg has not yet hooked up. Patriarch Sydney Pearlstein's paranoid plans to protect his fortune have effectively trapped Meg and Sarah in their own home.

Technologies frequently fail protagonists in "scary movies," placing characters in danger, and in true horror form the intruders in *Panic Room* are able to utilize the home's security commodities to their advantage.⁷ Outside the panic room, one of the intruders, Burnham (Forest Whitaker), further complicates the Altmans' entrapment by explaining that he works for the company that built the room. Burnham simply mimes that he knows they do not have a phone when Meg politely tells them over the home's PA system that "the police are on their way". After Meg counters, "take what you want and get out," Burnham replies, "what we want is in that room." Having comforted Sarah, clarifying that the men cannot get into the panic room, Meg wisely asks them what they know about the home's security mechanisms. She is disappointed to witness Burnham holding up a piece of paper reading "more than you." In one last attempt to exert her resolve, Meg shouts through the PA, "we're not coming out and we're not letting you in. Get out of my house." For further effect, Meg repeats her threat, using the word "Fuck" at Sarah's urging. Though Junior suggests that because "she's a woman" Meg needs "security," she refuses their reassurances and insists instead that their "conversation" is over. Meg implies that such stereotypical ideas about "what women need" are inconclusive.

Sarah's attempts to cheer her mother up inside the panic room indicate that their mother-daughter relationship is characterised by mutual maternal support. Meg reveals her fear of small spaces inside the appropriately named room.⁸ Sarah successfully manages to get her mother to think instead of what the burglars are plotting by explaining that people only used to get "buried alive"

⁷ In *Poltergeist*, for instance, technological commodities, particularly televisions, become possessed and work according to their own rules.

⁸ Meg also suggests that she is claustrophobic during the tour of the house when she begs Lydia and the real estate agent to open the door while locked with them in the panic room.

about “twenty, thirty years ago.” Though she continually maintains that her daughter must “stay calm,” it is obvious that Meg herself is likely to “wig out” (as Sarah puts it). Just as Anne teaches her mother about accepting non-institutional ideas in *The Others*, Sarah in *Panic Room* establishes her strength when she relieves her mother’s claustrophobic fears.

Meg and Sarah fight back resourcefully together as the intruders begin their attempts to break into the panic room. Initially Sarah and Meg call out to their neighbours through a ventilation pipe on the floor of the panic room; however, as this is New York the street noise and rain muffle their cries for help. Later Sarah ingeniously uses this same pipe to flash “SOS” calls out to a man in the opposite apartment, but this also proves ineffective when he simply wakes and pulls his blinds in annoyance. Their ingenuity and will to survive are further demonstrated when the intruders pump gas into the panic room. Meg orders Sarah onto the floor while she attempts to stop the flow of gas that is choking them: firstly by taping up the vents and secondly by setting fire to the gas. Meg shows the intruders that she and her daughter may be a formidable match when the gas bottle outside explodes, severely burning one of them.

Meg is also resourceful when she seizes an opportunity to escape while the intruders discuss their shares of the money. Meg explains to Sarah that she is going to get her cell-phone, which is on a charger beside her bed. Though she successfully retrieves the phone and makes it back to the panic room, it won’t function because the room has a steel-encased exterior. Unfazed by the phone’s uselessness, the mother and daughter instead manage to connect the panic room phone using wires from an outside jack. The intruders realize that the main phone junction is still active just as the women get a dial tone, but before they make it downstairs to disconnect the phone, Meg manages to call “9-1-1.” As Lydia explains, however, the panic room’s chief function is to provide “security” because state-run enterprises are not reliable: the operator at “9-1-1” puts Meg on hold. Meg hangs up on “9-1-1” and calls her ex-husband, Stephen, insisting

that his new girlfriend put him on the line. However, the intruders cut the phone connection before Meg can explain their predicament.

The panic room does not provide the homeowners with security but instead eventually provides the intruders with a space to take hostages. Meg is again tested when Sarah's blood-sugar levels start to drop dramatically and she is forced to consider how to stabilize her daughter's insulin levels. Meg promises Sarah she will "figure something out." when the panic room supplies prove to contain no sugar. Meanwhile, the intruders have an altercation, which results in one of their deaths, and Sarah sees her father arrive downstairs and goes into shock. Meg decides in desperation that she must go outside to get insulin shots and while she is gone the intruders lock themselves into the room with Sarah. Meg is faced with the realization that if she leaves the house to get help they will kill her daughter.

Sarah and Meg take on patriarchal and matriarchal roles in their family as they fight in their own defence and comfort Stephen during the film's final scenes.⁹ While locked out of the panic room, Meg finds Stephen tied to a chair, incapacitated: his attempt at saving his daughter and ex-wife has been unsuccessful.¹⁰ Stephen begs Meg to "do what they ask" and to avoid doing "anything stupid" but she wisely explains that the intruders will kill. Though Stephen warns Meg not to provoke the intruders, he has in fact endangered them all by calling the police, who arrive and unsettle the burglars upstairs. Meg persuades the police to leave by explaining that she had only played a desperate prank on her ex-husband and is therefore responsible for ensuring that the intruders do not leave the house with her daughter. Next, Meg overcomes the trespassers through a series of acts of self-defence: she tapes up Stephen's broken arm so that he can hold a gun, smashes the surveillance cameras (which the intruders have been using to their own advantage) and mirrors (in order to

⁹ Although Burnham eventually rescues the family from his sadistic associate, Raoul (Dwight Yokam), he also demonstrates that he has protective urges when he returns to shoot Raoul.

¹⁰ This is an interesting narrative component of the film, given that America's patriarchal government also failed to protect the "home front" in September 2001— just a few months before *Panic Room*'s theatrical release.

obscure all routes of escape). Stephen, however, misses on every attempt to shoot the intruders, and it is ultimately Meg's determination that protects Sarah, who also fights capably by stabbing one of the men with her insulin needles. Just as the women finally subdue the worst of the intruders, Raoul, the police arrive.

The final scene in *Panic Room* depicts Sarah and Meg's newfound intimacy as they recline together on a park bench, reading over advertisements for apartments in the paper. Sarah is lying with her head in Meg's lap, while her mother affectionately strokes her hair. Just as the *mise en scène* of the final shot of *The Others* reflects the restoration of Grace and Anne's intimacy through the use of finely filtered light, this scene in *Panic Room* is illuminated naturally.¹¹ This positive outlook is reinforced when Sarah reads aloud a description of a "flat" that is "bright and cheery." Meg agrees that she "likes the sound of that one" and the camera tracks back slowly. This scene concludes with the suggestion that their bond has been strengthened by their experiences.

"She's a Mother, Not a Moron"

The Deep End is a remake of *The Reckless Moment* (Max Ophuls, 1949), which, as Lucy Fischer outlines, "has been examined by Mary Ann Doane for its conjunction of maternal melodrama with the film noir mode" (*Cinematernity* 17). *The Deep End* re-invigorates the narrative of *The Reckless Moment* in its depiction of Margaret Hall's story. Margaret is a Lake Tahoe homemaker whose teenage son, Beau (Jonathan Tucker), has become entangled in Reno's gay underworld. The character Margaret also re-works what Kaplan terms as the figure of "the Heroic Mother." However, as a character Margaret subverts this Hollywood stereotype because her determination to protect her family disturbs the stability of the world of several men from Lake Tahoe's organised crime networks. The maternal aspect of Margaret's fight to protect her

¹¹ This is of course in contrast to the rest of the film, which was shot on an unusual film stock. *Panic Room*'s *mise en scène* is deliberately drab, giving the film an eerie quality that is characteristic of David Fincher's films. The interior of the Altmans' brownstone is dim and exterior shots of New York City have a silvery-grey quality. This sets the film's tone by accentuating Meg's depression and the threat that the outside world presents to her family.

son from the cruel world that threatens to impinge upon his existence is emphasized by her affinity with Lake Tahoe.

Water is frequently coded as feminine and maternal in mythology and Jacinda Read's analysis of *Sleeping with the Enemy* (Joseph Ruben, 1991) indicates that this is also frequently the case in film:

The prominence of elemental imagery, particularly fire and water, in *Sleeping with the Enemy* not only adds credence to my arguments about the influence and importance of fairy-tales in the film, but works to highlight the film's theme of gender antagonism. As Ruth G. Bottigheimer observes in her study of *Grimms' Tales*: 'In this dualistic world . . . water (or at least certain kinds of water), appertains exclusively to women. Wells, springs, brooks, and streams seem peculiarly under feminine sway.' (*The New Avengers* 61)

Margaret is persistently connected with the lake in *The Deep End* and water is utilized within the film's *mise en scène* to accentuate growing tension as she struggles to conceal a homicide she believes her son has committed. Margaret finds her son's lover impaled upon an anchor on Lake Tahoe's foreshore and hides his body in the water when she comes to suspect that it was Beau who killed him. Margaret shares an affinity with water that is best exemplified when she retreats towards the lake's edge for refuge during a scene where she is threatened by a blackmailer, Alek Spera (Goran Visnjic). Here the feminine aspect to the lake is emphasized when the action fades into another scene where Margaret attends her daughter's ballet—a performance of *Swan Lake*.¹² Just as the water and the swans upon it are coded as feminine in the ballet *Swan Lake*, Lake Tahoe is connected with Margaret's maternal struggle to keep her family intact in *The Deep End*.

The lake is also menacingly ambivalent for Margaret. Margaret seeks solace in the lake but it betrays her by rejecting her son's lover's body, which is quickly discovered by the police. Nature in *The Deep End*— at once coded as

¹² *Swan Lake* is the story of a young maiden who is turned into a swan against her will by a magician who desires to keep her for himself.

feminine and threatening— symbolically expresses the extent to which we construct motherhood as abject. Creed argues in response to Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* that abject femininity “fascinates desire” but also “self-annihilation” (“Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine” 71). Margaret's abject maternal desire to rescue her son from his fate is accentuated by her connection with water in *The Deep End*. This connection also symbolizes the fluidity of the roles “mother” and “father” and the permeability of the boundary between mother and son in *The Deep End*.

The Deep End represents Margaret's enclosed middle-class existence as an extreme contrast to the world her teenaged son has been exposed to via his much older boyfriend, Darby Reece (Josh Lucas). This contrast is depicted in the film's opening scenes, which see Margaret visit Reece's nightclub, “The Deep End,” to ask him to stay away from her son. Margaret is treated with scorn by a doorman at Reece's club, who calls out, “someone's Mom's here to see you.” However, the lengths that Margaret is prepared to go to so as to shield her son from harm are portrayed as admirable. Reece's patronizing attitude towards Margaret is quickly undermined by her resolve when she demands that he stay away from her son. Margaret is in fact a resourceful woman and Reece utters one of the most predictive lines in the film when he tells Beau that “she's a mother, not a moron.”

Margaret's tenacity during this scene in Reno is echoed in the following scenes, where she arrives home and swiftly solves all manner of domestic problems that have occurred during her absence. Once she has settled her family's dilemmas, Margaret attempts to confront Beau about the car crash he had been involved in with Reece a few nights prior to her visit to Reno. Beau shrugs off her concern by dishonestly stressing that Reece is his “friend” and “that's all.” Beau refuses to believe his mother when she suggests that Reece may not be the friend he thinks he is because he had offered to stay away from him for five thousand dollars. However, when Beau disobeys his mother's orders and meets Reece in the family boathouse that night, he is forced to acknowledge

that she had been right. Reece admits that he had indeed offered to take money in exchange for staying away from his young lover, and the two are involved in a scuffle. Reece falls off the jetty to his death after Beau flees. Margaret discovers the body early the next morning during her routine lakeside walk.

Suspecting that her son had pushed Reece onto the anchor that had impaled him, Margaret goes to great lengths to conceal the crime. She wraps the body in a tarpaulin, drags it into their dinghy and drops it overboard in a deserted cove in the lake. Margaret quickly regains her composure after pausing for a moment, and realises that she must get home in time to see the children off to school. As she farewells the children, Margaret notices Reece's car parked down the street from their house and realizes she must take the boat out in the lake again to retrieve the car keys. Though she has to make several attempts to reach the keys in Reece's pocket at the bottom of the lake, and though the water is icy, Margaret persists. She retrieves the keys and drives the car into Tahoe, where she even remembers to wipe it clear of fingerprints before abandoning it.

Margaret is portrayed as calm and resolved as she simultaneously completes all manner of domestic chores and conceals what she believes to be her son's crime. Margaret jogs home to prepare her family's dinner and meet the children after school the day she hides Reece's body. Beau, however, reveals his adolescent self-involvement when his mother confronts him with questions about the night before. He asks Margaret if she intends to tell his father, but in reality has no cause for concern: Mr. Hall is the captain of a naval ship and it is impossible for Margaret to contact him. (Margaret implies that she is unable to communicate effectively with her husband when she goes on to delete an email recounting the story of Beau's accident, which she had intended to send him). Margaret decides that she is best to work through familial difficulties without her husband's help.

Margaret's skills as a parent are tested further when the police find Reece's body in the cove where she had dumped it and she is approached by a

blackmailer who knows of her son's relationship with the murdered man. While Beau naively refuses to realize the danger he could be in when he reads about his boyfriend's death in the local paper, Margaret must quietly deal with the consequences of his actions. Margaret is paid a visit by Alek Spera, who tells her that he knows Reece was coming to see Beau on the night he was killed. Though Margaret contends that Beau's "done nothing wrong," Spera asks her why she hasn't contacted the police and insists that he be taken seriously. He outlines that Reece owed him money and forces Margaret to watch a pornographic tape of Beau with his lover in order to convince her that she must pay him fifty thousand dollars by five o'clock the next day. When Margaret asks how she is expected to get the money in twenty-four hours and questions Spera's insistence that this is the only copy of the tape, he simply replies, "That's not our problem— that's the position you're in." Margaret staunchly demands that Spera not return to her family home again and they agree to meet the next day at the post office.

In between juggling domestic chores and driving her children to extra-curricular activities, Margaret attempts to raise Spera's fifty thousand dollars. However, her bank will not sign over money without her husband's signature and when she asks her father-in-law, Jack (Peter Donat), for a loan he misunderstands her request, offering her just eighty dollars. Margaret never goes to meet Spera at the post office and he eventually finds her at home administering CPR on Jack. In an attempt to prove his masculinity, Jack has overextended himself to the point of cardiac arrest while trying to lift a heavy water bottle.¹³ Spera helps Margaret keep Jack alive and lingers in the family's home after loading them all into an ambulance, wistfully examining dinner cooking in the oven and family portraits lined up in the living room.

Just as Jack's failed attempt to carry the water container symbolises his emasculation, Spera's failure to blackmail Margaret is outlined by his business partner, Nagel (Raymond J. Barry), who mocks him for his incompetence. At

¹³ During this scene the film's use of water as a visual symbol is extended. Jack's emasculation is signalled by the heart attack he suffers when he attempts to lift a large canister of water. When the cylinder smashes on the floor, Jack lies in a puddle of water as his heart arrests.

Nagel's insistence, Spera returns to the Hall residence several times to get the money, but Margaret insists that fifty thousand dollars is not "something everyone can just go out and get." Margaret's response when Spera suggests that she should contact her husband and "try harder" articulates the everyday battles that mothers face:

Tell, me, how would you be really trying if you were me? But you're not me are you? You don't have my petty concerns to clutter your life and keep you from trying. You don't have three kids to feed or worry about the future of a seventeen year old boy who nearly got himself killed driving back from some sort of nightclub with his thirty year old friend sitting drunk in the seat beside him. No, these are not your concerns—I see that. But perhaps you're right, Mr. Spera, perhaps I could be trying a little harder. Maybe sometime tomorrow between dropping Dylan off at baseball practice and picking up my father from the hospital, I might find a way to try a little harder.

Spera does not have a rational counter to Margaret's logic and allows her to persevere with her monologue: "Maybe I should take a page from your book, go to the track, find a card game, maybe I should blackmail someone, or maybe you have another idea . . . of how I might try a little harder to find this \$50,000 you've come here to steal from me." Spera is speechless when Margaret asks him what kind of "a heartless man" he is and can only ask if she ever gets time away from her family. Margaret refuses to answer this question and Spera offers to talk to Nagel. However, Margaret does not express gratitude at this offer and instead asks Spera to leave, warning him not to involve her family further. Though Spera attempts to intimidate Margaret during his scene, she maintains the upper-hand as she details the difficulty of her position.

The film's final scenes depict Margaret single-handedly transforming a corrupt con-artist (Spera) into a selfless man who understands the work of a woman with a family. Spera has a complete change of heart and contacts Margaret to clarify that he no longer wants his half of the money but that Nagel will make things "ugly" for her family if he doesn't get his share. Margaret

therefore travels to Reno to sell her jewellery, while Spera pursues her to bring the news that someone else has been arrested for Reece's murder. Spera convinces Margaret to forget all of this" because she has "the life of her family" to think of, though she initially insists that an innocent man should not be imprisoned for a crime she committed. Spera's newly found understanding of maternal responsibilities is developed further in the film's final sequences, where he kills Nagel in a brawl in order to protect Margaret and her family. Spera's protective instincts fail him, however, when he deceives Margaret by driving away with Nagel's body: he crashes his car and dies in her arms. As he apologizes to Margaret for the disruption he has caused in her life, Spera asserts that she should flee the scene, taking the blackmail money and tape. Margaret and Spera share a moment of intimacy and forgiveness here that transcends their divergent existences.

The Deep End concludes as Margaret and Beau re-build the trust lost when he became entangled in a world of adult desires and corruption. Mother and son are reconciled as they walk home together from the crash site. Beau comforts his mother when they arrive home and Margaret requests that he simply lie with her. Beau expresses his newfound appreciation of Margaret's capabilities when he admits that he doesn't "know what to say." Margaret replies that it's "not important" and therefore indicates that she now accepts her son's maturity and independence. Like *The Others* and *Panic Room*, *The Deep End* finishes with a close up: here the mother-child bond is affirmed in an intimate shot of Margaret's face as Beau holds her. While *The Others* and *Panic Room* depict the mother-daughter bond as natural and healthy for women, *The Deep End* portrays the mother-son relationship as significant and positive.

Conclusion

The boundaries between genres are fluid . . . therefore . . . in the process of redefining mothering it is also necessary to redefine genres and their conventions.

Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy (qtd. in *Cinematernity*, 8).

As Lucy Fischer points out, there are many levels of maternal/familial metaphors apparent in genre films. *Panic Room*, *The Others* and *The Deep End* are structured around thriller conventions and all three films are dependent on the reputations of stars known for their performances within generically specific roles. Each thriller, moreover, relies on the performance of a woman who is a mother in “real life”: Jodie Foster was pregnant while filming *Panic Room*; Nicole Kidman is the mother of two adopted children; and Tilda Swinton is also a mother of two. For instance, stories of Kidman’s “strength” as she continued on with her life after the breakdown of one of Hollywood’s most prominent marriages were circulated in global media during the months in which *The Others* was filmed and released. These “real life” narratives influenced the interpretations of Grace’s character that were available to contemporary viewers. Stars’ not-so-private lives might be said to influence viewers’ enjoyment of all three films: Kidman’s public confessions about her lonely life as a divorcee endow Grace’s isolation as a single mother with layers of meaning; Swinton’s famous portrayal of the androgynous and eponymous protagonist in *Orlando* (Sally Potter, 1992) is an interesting predecessor to Margaret’s implementation of the roles of both mother and father in *The Deep End*; and because Foster is typecast as “tough” female protagonists, viewers might see that Meg’s understated vulnerability in *Panic Room* belies her ability to survive her home’s invasion.¹⁴

As with characters in many other girl power movies, these mothers are also given little support from institutions in their communities. Grace’s religion provides little solace and when she needs a priest she is unable to find one. Meg is put on hold when she calls “9-1-1” and by the time the police arrive the intruders have already taken her daughter hostage. Local police endanger Margaret’s son’s future and threaten the stability of her family. Like most girl

¹⁴ Swinton’s performance as the domineering matriarch, Sal, in *The Beach* (Danny Boyle, 2000) might further inform audience interpretations of her depiction of Margaret

power protagonists, Grace, Meg and Margaret successfully protect their families without the help of society's institutions, and in the process reconcile with their children.

Mother-child relationships and pseudo mother-child relationships in *The Others*, *Panic Room* and *The Deep End* additionally imply that maternal and paternal roles are fluid. Grace, Meg and Margaret are "redefinitions" of conventional maternal protagonists because they indicate that roles for women in film are changing in order to more faithfully depict the realities of parenting today. Not every child is brought up in a traditional patriarchal family and women have always been capable of raising children alone. Grace, Meg and Margaret struggle to be good mothers at the same time as performing the roles of absent husbands. Because these mothers also perform their maternal responsibilities with great effort, all three films depict mothering as socially constructed. The maternal characters Anne, Sarah, Burnham, Spera and Beau also indicate that while parenting roles might continue to be coded as "feminine," they should no longer be confined by biological functions. Just as genre boundaries are becoming more and more permeable, mothering is represented as an adaptable occupation in many contemporary films. The gendering of parenting responsibilities is becoming an increasingly problematic practice in contemporary film, where the boundaries between mother and child, and mother and father are becoming increasingly permeable.

CONCLUSION

Girls and Group Spectatorship: *Josie and the Pussycats* and *Legally Blonde*

The most appropriate and politically expedient form feminist film theory can take today is not one that attempts to separate feminist film from mainstream film, the political from the popular, but one that attempts to theorize the relationship between feminism and film, the political and the popular, the contextual and the textual. The influence on the development of feminist film theory of text-based structuralist analyses and ahistorical psychoanalytic theories has, however, left it ill-equipped to analyse such relationships.

Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers*. (247)

I will begin with a quote from John Fiske because it encapsulates my interest in the contradictory possibilities available for the development of a politicised and gendered subjectivity in contemporary media spectatorship. Though Fiske examines Madonna's significance for her fans in the eighties, his summation of her expressions of sexuality has universal significance:

Adolescent girl fans find in Madonna meanings of femininity that have broken free from the ideological binary opposition of virgin:whore. They find in her image positive feminine-centered representations of sexuality that are expressed in their constant references to her independence, her being herself. This apparently independent, self-defining sexuality is as significant as it is only because it is working within and against a patriarchal ideology. (*Reading the Popular* 104)

As Fiske's analysis of Madonna rationalizes, media commentators often take it for granted that women in general and girls in particular are indiscriminate

cultural consumers. It is often assumed, Fiske contends, that women and girls choose to watch or listen to certain texts simply because it is what is offered to them by those with economic power in media industries. Fiske refutes this notion, explaining that an account that does not take the agency of fans into consideration is inadequate because it presupposes that consumers are “cultural dopes . . . able to be manipulated at will and against their own interests” (*Reading the Popular* 96). While Madonna is indeed an example of coercive capitalism at work, Fiske proposes, young women choose to enjoy products in ways that those in positions of power may not always understand or maintain control over (96). Madonna’s fans actively buy products associated with her rather than with anyone else and this demonstrates that there are aspects of her star persona that evade ideological control (Fiske 96). Madonna’s fans, that is, derive meanings by making connections between her image and their own specific social subjectivities. Fiske’s idea that girl fans use media images to formulate identities that exist within and against dominant paradigms is built upon his point that Madonna is a site of “struggle between the forces of patriarchal control and feminine resistance, of capitalism and the subordinate, of the adult and the young” (96).

This dissertation has analysed the potentials of different films for facilitating the development of negotiated feminist subjectivities that work within and against patriarchal cultures. By investigating the representation of young women in *Josie and the Pussycats* (Harry Elfont and Deborah Kaplan, 2001) and *Legally Blonde* (Robert Luketic, 2001), I will conclude the dissertation by proposing some ways of reading the portrayal of girl power in films. The complex solidarity of groups of young women in *Josie and the Pussycats* and *Legally Blonde* demonstrates that, as Read offers, we must think of new ways of conceptualising the feminine and feminist experience of film viewing. While girls and women in both films have distinct ethnic and socio-economic identities, their experiences of “sisterhood” suggest that films targeted at female audiences today are beginning to more explicitly target diverse groups of female viewers, rather than individual spectators. Because early feminist film scholars often theorize spectatorship as an individual experience rather than a

communal one, the important revelation that female audiences might identify *in* groups *with* groups portrayed in the media has been largely overlooked.

Just as Fiske considers the dynamic processes that fans partake in when they choose to consume images associated with Madonna, Clover explains the progressive implications of women as active protagonists in film. Though she writes primarily of the horror genre, Clover summarises the depiction of female protagonists in film in a manner that identifies wider shifts in gender politics. Clover's theorisations are therefore applicable to the genre of women's films to which *Josie and the Pussycats* and *Legally Blonde* loosely belong. According to Clover, one of the feminist movement's main contributions to popular culture is the image of a woman angry enough to be imagined as a credible perpetrator of the kinds of action on which the status of protagonist rests (*Men, Women and Chain Saws* 17). The cinematic predecessors of both *Josie and the Pussycats* and *Legally Blonde* are the "angry girl" films of the nineties, where, as Roberts argues, a teenage girl's frustration with the patriarchal status quo is articulated specifically as a weapon against gender crimes. While *Josie and the Pussycats* and *Legally Blonde* certainly do not belong to the rape revenge genre that Clover, Roberts and Read have in mind, there are sentiments that characterise the attitudes of female protagonists in both films that have much in common with "angry women" in the girl power movies discussed in this thesis.

As Read outlines, however, Clover's use of psychoanalysis has limited her readings of these films. Read suggests that feminist film theory—including Clover's study of rape revenge films—has traditionally fallen into two broad categories, "the theory of feminist films and film theory informed by feminism." For Read, both categories limit the scope of studies on spectatorship:

The first has tended to concentrate on constructing and analysing a canon of feminist films, the second on producing feminist critiques of classical Hollywood cinema. . . . The evolution of these two types of feminist film theory can largely be traced to the influence of Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' Here Mulvey used an analysis of the patriarchal construction of femininity in classical Hollywood film to call

for the development of a politically and aesthetically radical avant-garde that would challenge the basic assumptions of mainstream film. The distinction Mulvey's analysis drew between mainstream film (as a site where normative femininities are constructed and reproduced) and a feminist avant-garde cinema continues to inform the work of feminist film theorists today. (246)

Though Clover's study of the rape-revenge genre challenges the masculinist assumptions of Mulvey's "three-tiered male gaze" it still asserts a hierarchical distinction between mainstream and "exploitation" films. Read argues that Clover "continues to draw a subtle distinction between depoliticized, feminine mainstream film and a politicized, feminist alternative" (246).

Though Mulvey and Clover's contributions to feminist film theory have been invaluable, both propose hierarchical film categories that fail to account for the pleasure that women experience viewing "commercial" cinema. It is the aim of this dissertation to provoke further investigation into these pleasures. The sense of group solidarity that many recently produced women's films convey is central to women's pleasurable identification with the heroines of mainstream cinema. As Roberts contends, girls today may conceptualise their identities differently from older feminists but one of the most important principles of early feminism—group camaraderie—is expressed in many contemporary portrayals of women in girl power films. Though contemporary feminist thought theorizes the multiple subjectivities of contemporary women based around sexual preferences and socio-economic, ethnic, racial, regional and national differences, much of feminist theory still asserts that women have much to learn from understanding each other's experiences. It is the representation of shared feminist aims that epitomizes the possibilities demonstrated in *Josie and the Pussycats* and *Legally Blonde*.

"Friends First and a Band Second"

While still maintaining a respect for the spirit of feminist community, *Josie and the Pussycats* foregrounds its status as an expensive marketing

machine.¹ However, the central theme of the film is that career, wealth, family and romance must not be prioritised over female friendships. *Josie and the Pussycats* contrasts the girls' friendships with the bickering and pettiness that undermines relationships between the members of a boy band, "Du Jour." The film's opening scenes depict a public appearance of "Du Jour," a band famous for their suggestively titled hit "Backdoor Lover." Addressing a female fan wearing a wedding dress, a "Du Jour" band member indicates their awareness of the importance of young women as consumers when he tells her, "keep buying the records, baby." However, despite the boys' collective insistence that "Du Jour" means friendship, family and teamwork, they appear incapable of valuing each other and survive as a band only due to the intervention of their rather dubious manager, Wyatt (Alan Cumming). The boys are seemingly left to perish in a plane crash after they express concern to Wyatt about subliminal messages in their music. Wyatt escapes in a parachute and lands outside Riverdale, the town where Josie (Rachel Leigh Cook), Valerie (Rosario Dawson) and Melody (Tara Reid) live and perform in a band, "The Pussycats." The girls' struggle to be appreciated as an all-female band ends once they are "discovered" by Wyatt while busking on Riverdale's main street. As they fly away in his private jet, they agree to keep their Riverdale bus passes (which feature a photo of the three of them together) to remind them where they came from. Josie remarks as they leave their small-town, "we will always be friends first and a band second."

Josie contrasts the girls' active defiance with the boy band's apathy. Though they democratically accept his offer of a recording contract, the girls are suspicious of Wyatt's hasty estimation of their potential. "The Pussycats" are puzzled by Wyatt's surreptitious explanation for the recording device they are using— the "Mega Sound"— as they record their first song. Valerie and Melody's suspicions are further aroused when they meet the head of Mega Records, Fiona (Parker Posey), at a party thrown in their honour. The girls are right to have reservations about Fiona and Wyatt as they are leading a multi-national corporation's scheme to brainwash teenagers. It is suggested in *Josie*,

¹ The presence of endorsed products in *Josie* is accentuated and the film's title smuttily refers to the voyeuristic appeal of images of teenage girls.

however, that consumers, as Fiske would have it, are not “cultural dopes.” In other words, “The Pussycats” and their fans eventually resist corporate manipulation.

The threat that Fiona and Wyatt pose to the girls’ friendships is ultimately depicted as more significant than any threat on their lives. The executives at Mega Records place subliminal messages underneath a demo-track they give Josie and these mantras brainwash her into treating her friends badly. When Josie awakens from her hypnotised state and uncovers Fiona and Wyatt’s plot, she immediately expresses her rebellious attitude by exclaiming, “I’m nobody’s pimp.” Before agreeing to perform solo in order to save her friends’ lives, Josie tells Valerie and Melody that nothing else matters so long as they remain together. Though “Du Jour” intervene at this point to offer the girls their assistance (having mysteriously survived both the plane crash and a Metallica concert), they immediately botch their attempt and the girls are left to fight to save their own lives. Josie defends herself aggressively when Fiona insults her friends and Valerie and Melody easily subdue Wyatt. As “The Pussycats” play to a sold-out concert Josie introduces their music by explaining to her fans “it’s cool if you like it, it’s cool if you don’t, just decide for yourselves.” This scene concludes the film by demonstrating the band’s desire to be appreciated for musical talent, not the ability to sell products. The film’s conclusion re-establishes the girl-band’s devotion to each other above all else: though their first stadium concert is interrupted by Josie’s love interest, she is only distracted from their performance for a moment until she is reminded that her primary role in the film is to create music with female friends.

Josie affirms the importance of female friendships and feminist solidarity but does not efface Valerie’s “difference” as the band’s only dark-skinned member. Valerie’s “otherness” is highlighted throughout the girls’ rise to fame and her exclusion ranges from being initially refused an invite for Fiona’s party to being left behind on the street as the band’s limousine pulls away without her. Wyatt refers to Valerie’s difference when he struggles to explain to Fiona how she fits into the band. He describes “The Pussycats” as

“Christina Aguilera times three, except one of them’s incredibly tan” and then, when this does not seem to fit, as “TLC with two white chicks.” Because *Josie* at once promotes the importance of female companionship and the recognition of differences between women it implies new possibilities for the popular expression of feminist ideas.

“I’ll Show You How Valuable Elle Woods Can Be”

Like *Josie*, *Legally Blonde* focuses on the development of its protagonist’s female friendships. *Legally Blonde* additionally concedes that the socio-economic and geographical differences that exist between women are significant. The song “Perfect Day” plays as the opening credits for *Legally Blonde* roll, suggesting that protagonist Elle Woods’s existence as a West Coast sorority president is fulfilling. The rationale behind this soundtrack is revealed as Elle (Reese Witherspoon) and her sorority sisters discuss an imminent date with her boyfriend, Warner (Matthew Davis): they are expecting him to propose to her that evening. Elle’s fantasies of marital bliss are soon exposed as such, however, when Warner announces during their date that they must part ways. In order to be a senator by the time he’s thirty, Warner explains to Elle, he must find someone “serious.” At this Elle sinks into a deep depression and her girlfriends take care of her; however, it is apparent that they see marriage as the most important aspect of a woman’s life. One of Elle’s friends explains that they always thought she’d be the first one “down the aisle” but now that Warner has left her she’s “adrift.” Though Elle initially decides to focus her life on getting accepted into law school in order to re-kindle her relationship with Warner, she eventually proves to her friends that being “adrift” has nothing to do with the prospect of marriage.

Despite her parents’ disapproval and her guidance counsellor’s doubts, Elle is accepted into Harvard and learns that law school will function more as a self-discovery process than as an opportunity to gain the attention of her conceited ex-boyfriend. When Elle is introduced to Warner’s snooty East Coast fiancée, Vivian Kensington (Selma Blair), she is forced to reconsider her

decision to become a lawyer in order to “win” Warner back. The first step in this process for Elle is the establishment of her friendship with a working-class beautician, Paulette Bonafonte (Jennifer Coolidge). Though Paulette doesn’t foresee it, her advice is what allows Elle to thrive at law school and to discover that Warner is not worth her attention. Elle similarly allows Paulette to achieve her dreams: that of retrieving custodial rights over her much-loved dog from her ex-boyfriend and that of expressing her feelings to a courier she has a crush on. Elle’s time with Paulette is represented as her one reprieve from a miserable introduction to Ivy League life.

The difficulty of fitting in at law school is further conveyed in the film through Elle and Vivian’s competitiveness in class as they both strive to impress Warner and their Professor, Callahan (Victor Garber). It is Elle’s encounter with Warner at a party, however, that is a turning point in the film. Elle vows that she’ll show him how “valuable” she can be when Warner confesses to her that he thinks she is not going to get the grades to qualify for one of Callahan’s internships because she’s “not smart enough,” and insists that she could do “something more valuable” with her time. Here Elle promises to convert the commodity value of her body to what she considers to be a more valuable currency— legal knowledge. This is highlighted by the fact that Elle is wearing a Playboy “bunny-suit” as a costume during this scene. Elle accentuates her desire to transform her life when she leaves the party to buy a laptop wearing this sexually provocative outfit. Elle’s intellectual triumphs over Warner are eventually represented as the most significant moments in the film.

Elle’s intellectual and feminist development is portrayed as she successfully represents a murder defendant and “sorority sister,” Brooke Windham (Ali Larter). Though Warner doubts her abilities, Elle is chosen by Professor Callahan as an intern and discovers during her first day at work that Brooke is the defendant in the murder case. While Elle’s legal colleagues at first assume Windham is a “gold-digger” who has murdered her rich husband for his fortune, Elle explains that her sorority sister has made a lot of money herself from fitness programmes. Callahan, however, insists that Brooke must be guilty,

and just as he refuses to trust his client, Elle continues to serve her well. When Callahan discovers that Elle is refusing to “break the bonds of sisterhood,” that she will not divulge Brooke’s secret alibi, his response— “screw sisterhood”— reveals his lack of ethical integrity. After a fellow intern insists that they’ll lose the case without Brooke’s alibi, Elle replies “then we’re not very good lawyers.” This suggests that she already has a more intelligent grasp of her moral obligations as Brooke’s lawyer than Callahan. Warner also maintains that she should disclose the alibi and his ex-girlfriend and fiancée are both shown how selfish he is. Elle and Vivian become friends when they begin to see Warner’s self-centredness and realize that they share feminist principles.

The girls’ friendship initially hinges on their contempt for Warner and Callahan, and it is therefore easily threatened when Vivian witnesses the Professor making a pass at Elle. Though Elle bravely rebuffs Callahan’s advances, Vivian misconstrues the situation and acerbically inquires of Elle if she is also willing to “sleep with the jury” so that they may win the case. At this Elle doubts her abilities as a lawyer and decides to leave Harvard. It is only because of the intervention of another woman that Elle resumes her legal career. As she laments that Callahan saw her as “a piece of ass like everybody else,” Elle’s comments are overheard by a lecturer from Harvard, Professor Stromwell (Holland Taylor), who had thrown her out of class on her first day at school. Stromwell tells Elle “if you’re going to let one stupid prick ruin your life, you’re not the girl I thought you were” and gives her the confidence she needs to resume her work. During a climactic scene in court, Brooke fires Callahan as revenge for his harassment and appoints Elle as her new lawyer. Having thrived in the courtroom without relinquishing her own style and flair, Elle realizes she no longer desires Warner, and tells him “If I’m gonna be a partner in a law firm by the time I’m thirty, I need a boyfriend who’s not such a complete bonehead.”

Legally Blonde concludes with Elle’s graduation speech, in which she challenges the patriarchal dictums of education. Elle’s triumphs, however, are paralleled with her placement within a hetero-normative future. Elle questions Aristotle’s premise that “the law is reason free from passion” with the suggestion

“passion is a key ingredient to the study and practise of law and life.” The inter-titles and music that accompany this scene, however, express the limits to any reading that purely sees the film as a space for viewers to experience Elle’s challenges to the patriarchal status quo at Harvard. Though the inter-titles firstly outline that Vivian and Elle are now best friends, they also explain that Paulette married the courier and that Elle has been dating Callahan’s teaching assistant, Emmett (Luke Wilson). The final inter-title of the film reads, “Emmett is proposing to Elle.” Because the same song that accompanied the film’s opening scenes (“Perfect Day”) plays once again on the film’s closing soundtrack, it is evident that Elle’s success as a lawyer must be accompanied by marriage in order for her life to be seen as “perfect.” *Legally Blonde* therefore concludes with its female protagonists safely situated within heterosexual relationships.

Conclusion

We need to find a model of feminist theory and pedagogy that acknowledges and attempts to negotiate the contradictions between [a] lived experience of femininity/feminism and academic feminism. . . . We also need to acknowledge . . . the way in which, with the decline of the movement of feminism and the increasing cost of higher education, popular culture has become one of the primary ways in which feminism is now lived and experienced by the majority of women. This would mean, then, not presenting popular culture as simply a debased feminine realm, but as a realm in which popular understandings of feminism are constructed and circulated, received and negotiated.

Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers*. (251)

I will finish by summing up each chapter’s argument, while once more acknowledging and critiquing Hollinger’s definitions for the “anti-female friendship film” and the “female friendship film.” According to Hollinger, “anti-female friendship films” depict women’s friendships as plagued by jealousy and

competition over men. These films, she contests, teach women to “beware of and fear one another” (207). “Female friendship films,” which Hollinger insists are relegated to the genre of “women’s films,” depict female companionship as taking precedence over heterosexual romance. Hollinger asserts that these movies are far less commonplace than those which focus on conflicts between women. *Legally Blonde* and *Josie* demonstrate that the role female friendships play in mainstream Hollywood products is more complex than Hollinger allows for.

In both *Legally Blonde* and *Josie*, conflicts between women are accentuated only in order for the importance of female friendships to be affirmed in concluding scenes. However, both films contend that heterosexual relationships are just as important in a woman’s life, which demonstrates that normative sexuality might comfortably exist alongside feminist solidarity in popular fiction. Female friendships are represented positively in *Legally Blonde* and *Josie*, yet hetero-normativity is dominant in each narrative. On a more positive note, both women’s films imply that feminist identities are being “constructed and negotiated” in popular cinematic formats, as Read argues. The fact that communities of diverse women are portrayed in economically successful media products suggests that the feminist ideologies circulated in film are being received by groups of diverse spectators who identify with the female protagonists on offer.

Scream, *Scream 2*, and *Scream 3* do not suffer the same limitations as *Josie* and *Legally Blonde*. All three films are progressive to the extent that they are fascinated with the iconographic meaning of female stars, and also with the narrative possibilities provided by active female protagonists. The *Scream* movies were also unique at the time of their release because each film encourages female viewers to identify with two women, rather than with an individual protagonist. By having such a focus, the three films facilitate identificatory processes that allow female spectators to view images in solidarity. This version of spectatorship is increasingly becoming a central aspect of girl power movies.

Just as Sidney Prescott and Gale Weathers defeat serial killers Stuart and Billy together in *Scream*, other girl power films with occult themes, such as *What Lies Beneath*, *The Gift* and *The Craft*, experiment with female characters that work together in groups to challenge the homogeneity of institutions. When Claire and Madison Frank subdue Norman Spencer in *What Lies Beneath*, it is revealed that communities of women might avenge wrongs more effectively than an individual woman. Similarly, the conflict between Annie and her town's institutions in *The Gift* results in the affirmation of her psychic experiences. Annie's "gift" is eventually represented as crucial to her community, especially its women. Annie also allows men in her town to come to understand a deeper sense of feminist responsibility than their institutional occupations and educations can allow for. In *The Craft*, however, the oppositions that are developed between Nancy and Sarah are resolved through the affirmation of patriarchal ideologies.

Similarly, the dominant messages proliferated by horror "teenpics" are often asserted through the depiction of less than autonomous female protagonists. The experiences of female characters Rachel and Stokely are subordinate to those of male protagonists in *Disturbing Behaviour* and *The Faculty*, though both characters actively propel the films' plots in many scenes. This demonstrates that Hollywood films are the ideologically contradictory texts Mary Ann Doane labels them as, in that they might at once value resistance and rearticulate power-laden conventions. The ideologies of Hollywood filmmaking are more understated in *Ginger Snaps* and *The Hole*. Like many horror films, both girl power movies problematically revel in the transgressiveness of monstrous teenaged girls, and what Ginger and Liz have in common is their sexual deviancy. While *The Hole* at times criticises the stereotypes of beauty that women encounter in the media on a daily basis, it ultimately concludes that friendships between women are not important and that feminine sexuality is dangerous. Moreover, the narrative ambiguity that permeates the final scenes of *Ginger Snaps* emphasizes the binaries that continue to code feminine sexuality.

Not one of these “teenpics” presents any tenable possibility for feminine sexual maturation.

Mainstream cinema persistently depicts feminine sexuality in binaries, such as “deviant”/“normal,” in this manner. By portraying a lesbian couple that shows up binary heterosexual oppositions as the constructs that they are, *Bound* questions cinema’s tendency to “naturalise” heterosexual relationships. Violet and Corky’s journey, however, demonstrates that old cinematic formulas can be re-worked in order to question Western culture’s investment in power-laden heterosexual stereotypes. Like the *Scream* films, *The Gift*, *What Lies Beneath* and *Freeway*, *Bound* implies that contemporary girl power movies are inviting women to identify with communities of women onscreen who work together to rebel against established patriarchal structures. Conversely, it is asserted in *Single White Female* that women have little to gain in close relationships with one another. *Single White Female*’s homophobia denies one of the very spheres of subjectivity—lesbian desire—that contemporary feminist film theory has struggled to account for.

Wild Things and *Cruel Intentions* consider the facades that women must construct in order to conceal their deviancy. The difference between the two films lies in the extent to which Suzie and Kathryn are successful at fooling their communities with clichéd performances. *Wild Things* is a complicated film in which the tenets of girl power are affirmed as a female protagonist profit from her masquerade. Suzie performs within normative gender roles in order to profit economically and to enact revenge against men. *Cruel Intentions* contrastingly asserts that conforming to the constructs of normative femininity is the only tenable possibility for girls like Cecile, Annette and Kathryn.

The isolated existences of women are thematically central to *Freeway*, *The Cell*, *The Others*, *The Deep End* and *Panic Room*. Whereas Kathryn Mertuiel is punished for her transgressions in *Cruel Intentions*, *Freeway* depicts Vanessa Lutz emphatically articulating her oppression and angrily asserting her resistance. However, unlike Catherine in *The Cell*, whose professionalism has

been validated within her workplace, Vanessa is unable to function within social institutions. Catherine has gained the respect and admiration of her colleagues and an ongoing friendship with Novak, but Vanessa is left with nobody to share her life with. Grace, Meg and Margaret in *The Others*, *The Deep End* and *Panic Room* also lead isolated lives as mothers. However, by inventively performing the roles of their absent husbands and struggling to be good mothers, Grace, Meg and Margaret gain the respect of their children. The intimacy restored to mother-daughter relationships in *The Others* and *Panic Room* implies that generational conflicts between women might be overcome. With their developing maternal urges, the characters Anne, Sarah, Burnham, Spera and Beau demonstrate that while parenting roles might still be gendered in film, they are no longer confined by biological functions.

Active female protagonists represented in many of these recently produced girl power movies reinvent the binaries that code our cultural understandings of women-as-consumers and women-as-consumed-objects. Though few films analysed in this thesis directly depict any real intersections of “difference,” they still deal with the complicated relationships that exist between women. Such films should be considered crucial to feminism’s struggle to analyse the contradictory aspects of the social construction of gendered subjectivities in popular culture. Films aimed at attracting female consumers carry meanings that appeal to the spectators who watch them and should therefore be taken seriously by feminist scholars. Mainstream films that depict communities of diverse women who provide each other with emotional support and friendship reveal, as Read suggests, that feminist tenets are being articulated progressively more often in popular formats. The circulation and negotiation of feminist ideas in the lived experiences of women and girls will be ignored should academia dismiss mainstream films as valid expressions of feminism. The fact that young women are being catered to so significantly in films today attests to the necessity of further in-depth studies of recent portrayals of female protagonists and girl power philosophies in popular culture.

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- Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Dir. Don Siegel. Republic Pictures, 1956.
- Josie and the Pussycats*. Dir. Harry Elfont and Deborah Kaplan. MCA/Universal, 2001.
- Kids*. Dir. Larry Clark. Vidmark Entertainment, 1996.
- Kiss the Girls*. Dir. Gary Fleder. Paramount, 1997.
- Last House on the Left*. Dir. Wes Craven. Hallmark Releasing Corp., 1972.
- Legally Blonde*. Dir. Robert Luketic. MGM, 2001.
- Little Caeser*. Dir. Mervyn Le Roy. MGM/UA, 1931.
- Little Man Tate*. Dir. Jodie Foster. Orion Pictures Corp., 1989.
- Night of the Living Dead*. Dir. George Romero. Continental Distributing Inc., 1968.
- Orlando*. Dir. Sally Potter. Sony Pictures Classics, 1992.

- Others, the*. Dir. Alejandro Amenebar. Dimension Films, 2001.
- Panic Room*. Dir. David Fincher. Columbia Tristar, 2002.
- Poison Ivy*. Dir. Katt O'Shea. New Line Cinema, 1992.
- Pretty in Pink*. Dir. John Hughes. Paramount, 1986.
- Psycho*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. MCA/Universal, 1960.
- Rear Window*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. MCA/Universal, 1954.
- Reckless Moment, the*. Dir. Max Ophuls. Columbia, 1949.
- Rosemary's Baby*. Dir. Roman Polanski. Paramount, 1968.
- Scarlett Street*. Dir. Fritz Lang. Film Classics Inc., 1945.
- Scream*. Dir. Wes Craven. Miramax, 1996.
- Scream 2*. Dir. Wes Craven. Dimension Films, 1997.
- Scream 3*. Dir. Wes Craven. Dimension Films, 2000.
- Showgirls*. Dir. Paul Verhoeven. MGM/UA, 1995.
- Silence of the Lambs*. Dir. Jonathan Demme. The Criterion Collection, 1991.
- Single White Female*. Dir. Barbet Schroeder. Columbia, 1992.
- Sixteen Candles*. Dir. John Hughes. MCA/Universal, 1984.
- Sleeping With the Enemy*. Dir. Joseph Ruben. Twentieth Century Fox, 1991.
- Star Wars*. Dir. George Lucas. Fox Video, 1977.
- Stepfather, the*. Dir. Joseph Rueben. New Century Vista Film Co., 1986.
- Stella Dallas*. Dir. King Vidor. Embassy, 1947.
- Switchblade Sisters*. Dir. Jack Hill. Miramax, 1975.
- Taxi Driver*. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Columbia Tristar, 1976.
- Texas Chainsaw Massacre, the*. Dir. Tobe Hooper. Bryanston Films Ltd., 1974.
- Thing, the*. Dir. John Carpenter. MCA/Universal, 1982.

Vertigo. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. MCA/Universal, 1958.

What Lies Beneath. Dir. Robert Zemekis. Dreamworks Distribution, 2000.

Whole Town's Talking, the. Dir. John Ford. Columbia, 1935.

Wild Things. Dir. John Mc Naughton. Columbia, 1998.

Appendix.

1.1 Pages 65-83 of Chapter 2 are to appear in the online gender studies journal *Thirdspace* as “‘Something’s Wrong, Like More Than You Being Female’: Transgressive Sexuality and Discourses of Reproduction in *Ginger Snaps*” (May, 2004).

1.2 Certain excerpts from pages 207-214 (Chapter 7) are to appear in the forthcoming anthology *Commodity Terrorism: The Selling of 9/11* as “Terrorism and Hollywood: David Fincher, *Panic Room* and Home Invasion.”