

**The American Film Industry's Obsession with  
and Sexualization of the Teenage Girl**

by  
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A THESIS

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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This thesis will analyze the ways in which the United States entertainment film industry has sexualized and exploited the feminine teenage body by discussing the origin of the term “teenager” and its consequential subject study in film within the United States post-WWII, as well as the beginning of the obsession over the teenage girl in cinematic media through Stanley Kubrick’s 1962 film adaptation of the novel *Lolita*, originally written by Vladimir Nabokov. It will also dissect the satirization of the genre of “coming of age” starring female protagonists, such as *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004), *The DUFF* (Ari Sandel, 2015), and *Easy A* (Will Gluck, 2010). It will then contrast these representations of female protagonists against those of boys coming of age as another means of highlighting how teenage girl life portrayal in Western cinematic media is used for the ridiculing and othering of real teenage girls. Next, it will go into how mental illness in young girls is portrayed and romanticized, both through original directorial intent and unintended audience perceptions, with films such as *Girl, Interrupted* (James Mangold, 1999) and *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 2000)<sup>1</sup> which focus on deteriorating mental health in young women. Finally, this thesis will explore a newer wave of veridical

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<sup>1</sup> Note that all release dates in references are based on their continental U.S release and not their first ever premiere.

representation of being a teenage girl, such as *Lady Bird* (Greta Gerwig, 2017), *The Edge of Seventeen* (Kelly Fremon Craig, 2016), and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (Marielle Heller, 2015), why this new wave is a huge positive change in media representation, and how we can continue this trend. My goal for this thesis is to function as an academic work that can be used to stimulate new filmic products which carry a focus of depicting teenage girls and their intricate ways of life without satirization, dramatization, or unnecessary sexualization.

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## **Introduction: Importance**

Film as an art industry existed for seven years before the Hays code, a “moral set of guidelines,” was put into place in 1934. During those seven glorious years, American movies depicted women as people, who enjoyed drinking, smoking, sex without being objects of sex, and being in power above men. After the establishment of the Hays code, which was used by Hollywood studios from 1934 through 1968 and prohibited things such as profanity, nudity, suggestive body movement and language, discussion of sex, and graphic/realistic violence, film became more inherently political and tied with the politics of sex. After 1968 the Hays code was replaced by the MPAA (Motion Picture Association) film rating system, which is the system we know today that shows the rating of the film before the picture plays. This includes “G” for general audiences (suitable for all audiences), “PG” for parental guidance (generally fine but may contain materials parents don’t want their children seeing), “PG-13” for parental guidance and teenager (has material unsuitable for pre-teenagers), and “R” for restricted (must be 18 or older to view).

One example of the unfortunately rich history between the film industry and sex as politics in exchange for success would be Shirley Temple, who had performed in 29 films by the age 10 and in most of these films she is dressed in uncomfortably exposing clothing and handled by grown men and was pedophilically described by reviewers. When she met with producers for movie roles, they would attempt to coerce her to perform sexual deeds, such as Freed’s inappropriate exposure (Handy, 2014).

Since the establishment of film as a sexually political industry, it has been important to the men running it that the female body must be put down and controlled. This urge for control really came into its own established subcategory of sexualization of the young and teenage girl

with Stanley Kubrick's 1962 adaptation of the Russian born writer Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*. Since that creation, there has been a steady trend of the sexualization and ridiculing of the teenage girl which still bleeds into today's cinema. It is especially important now to understand how those who are in positions of power within the industry, such as (but not limited to) producers or directors, do this in order to dismantle this system which is growing worse by the day.

With the American presidential election of 2024, men have felt more comfortable with speaking in ways that encourage and support violence against women. If the long-lasting trend of sexualization intertwined with violence of women in film continues, both filmic depictions and real actions of violence will only grow worse as the people in charge grow bolder in their hatred for women. It will continue to reflect and worsen societal views of women. The more we as people see negative representation of women, the more people believe it to be true, especially young women who have not had a chance to be someone yet, to see how great they can be. We cannot change the link between film and politics, but we can change how the politics work. I believe that changing the narrative into something empowering and positive for young girls can help us battle these future years of misogyny by creating a space where it is safe to share, authentically, the female experience.

## Literature Review

In film scholarship, there is an abundance of literature reviewing the basic sexual nature of watching film, as well as gender and sex theory naturally displayed within film. To understand the processes and habits of the sexualization of young girls within film, it is helpful to know how it is done in society and then translated over to film. Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay book, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, upholds a large portion of gender and sex theory that is still commonly taught. Most importantly, Mulvey developed the theory of the male gaze (841), which is the perspective of a typical heterosexual male in Western society becoming embodied in the audience for film and is meant to objectify and sexualize the female body. Similarly, the term scopophilia (835), also referred to as looked-at-ness, is the concept that one can either gain pleasure from looking or from being looked at, especially through the male gaze. Within scopophilia, there is the act of voyeurism (840), a concept originally coined by Sigmund Freud, in which one gains pleasure from looking. Then there is phallocentrism (833), the concept that there is a privileging of the masculine in our patriarchal society, and this is done by introducing the phallus-less woman to reassure the power of the man. In society, the phallus is power, so in Western society the identifying part of the male body, the penis, is proof of phallus. The concept of castration, that is losing one's phallus, combines phallocentrism and voyeurism to create the mirror phase (836). The mirror phase is the point of childhood in which the child recognizes the figure in the mirror as the "self" and begins comparing it to others, most importantly their mother figure. In comparing the self to the mother figure, the child realizes they either reflect their mother's body and are phallus-less or notice the difference between self and mother and has phallus. The latter then grows castration anxiety (840) from this visual trauma and feels they must protect their phallus by sexualizing the other (female) body. E. Ann Kaplan further builds

upon Mulvey's theories in her 1983 book *Is the Gaze Male?* It is within this text that she pushes the critical theories developed by Mulvey further into the realm of film as the embodiment of the male gaze and implied sex from films looked-at-ness. Cynthia Carter and Linda Steiner's collection *Critical Readings: Media and Gender* also builds off of critical feminist theory, mostly explored above in Mulvey's text, and how it has shaped phallogentric, that is male run, society in the Western world. The analyses in this thesis, are based on the theoretical framework of these three fundamental studies.

## Origin of the “Teenager”

### The Teenpic

Post-WWII Hollywood was struggling to stay afloat. As suburbia grew rampant throughout the United States, people had less and less initiative to drive out to theaters. Hollywood had to find ways to reel them in, and one such way said reeling was done was through the creation of the teenager and the 1950’s genre of the “Teenpic.” A new established genre created a whole new culture of targeting and isolating youths that would continue to thrive well into modern society and was also extremely pertinent as to how “new” films would be made. The early films of this genre presented youths amongst each other, participating in school dances, social gatherings, smoking, drinking, listening to unruly music, and ultimately at odds with their parents or other authority figures in their lives. With films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), *The Wild One* (László Benedek, 1953), and *Rock, Rock, Rock!* (Will Price, 1956). Hollywood had effectively created and singled out a new audience that became captivated by the onscreen representation of their wild emotions and behaviors.

Having received positive feedback from their new audience, Hollywood continued to produce the Teenpic. With the new age category of “teenager” cemented into American culture, the term officially coined by advertising executives (namely Eugene Gilbert) eager to sell to a new audience (Digital Public Library of America) in the 1940’s, a new sort of mirror phase (Mulvey 836) occurred. Once again, a confusion surrounding what the “self” is had occurred, and teenagers began to try and find pieces of themselves in pop culture, which heavily relied (and continues to rely) on entertainment systems, namely Hollywood. Teenagers were inspired by films made about and for them, and they began to take on the personalities presented in such

films. What they did not realize, however, is that the bodies and experiences being constructed in these films are rarely ever someone's reality. Cynthia Carter and Linda Steiner's collection *Critical Readings: Media and Gender* presents the argument that "The media are instrumental in the processes of gaining public consent. Media texts never simply mirror or reflect 'reality' but instead construct hegemonic definitions of what should be accepted as 'reality'" (Carter and Steiner 2). Essentially, Carter and Steiner make the argument that media, in this case films, create a reality that is just believable enough so that the consumer, or viewer, believes that the fictitious truths presented to them must be applicable to their own lives. There is a purposeful duping occurring so that those controlling the media can ultimately influence or control those consuming.

American teenagers felt a new sense of independence and individuality through rebellion, sexual dancing, and driving fast cars (Wiseman 9). What teenagers failed to realize that they did not create that individuality themselves. Rather, it was purposely constructed by Hollywood in order for entertainment institutions to have new ways to create a revenue. Carter and Steiner further argue that these manipulations are not perfect; rather, "There are ideological seams through which leak out evidence of flaws in the system and of the politically constructed nature of hegemonic ideology" (Carter and Steiner 3). So, yes, Hollywood did create the concept of the teenager and shaped their behavior. Eventually, though, these teenage consumers took it a step further. Rather than learning from the lessons presented in Teenpics, such as perseverance and communication, teenagers found themselves to be more than hopeless and misunderstood, leading to an era of isolation and misbehavior. The situation of the teenager was deemed so dire that the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation at the time, J. Edgar Hoover, published

an FBI report<sup>2</sup> stating, “the nation can expect an appalling increase in the number of crimes that will be committed by teenagers in the years ahead” (Thompson, 2018). This is an unintentional side effect created by Hollywood, an unconscious reaction from the teenagers in a misguided attempt to feel a release from negative emotions and a very new disconnect from a society that now says they are ill-willed – something that had not been experienced by previous generations – with seemingly no solution. While this effect was, again, unintended by Hollywood, it also provided an opportunity to create a solution: further control and isolation through the sexing of media.

It is important to understand that a majority of the Teenpics created throughout the 1950’s were based around male protagonists who could be partnered with female romantic and sexual interests. These films were being created for a semi-non-sexual male gaze (Mulvey 841), or rather a male experience that can involve, but is not centered around, romance and sex with the opposite sex. Similar connections could be made with same-sex relationships, but these must remain implicit as the Hays Code forbade “sex perversion,” an outdated terminology for homosexuality. Such an example can be seen in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) between the characters Jim Stark (James Dean), Judy (Natalie Wood), and John ‘Plato’ Crawford (Sal Mineo) in which Jim and Judy grow romantically and sexually attracted to each other while Plato, although never explicitly stated, grows a romantic infatuation towards Jim. Plato is, of course, killed at the end of the film, leaving Jim to mourn their intimate friendship born from their connection of being rejected by their families.

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<sup>2</sup> The official article is not currently accessible by the general public.

With teenagers perceived to be quickly growing out of control, thanks to Hoover and President Dwight Eisenhower's echoing of Hoover's claims, Hollywood needed to create another way to shape and guide teenagers to keep them as a valued consumer. Although the Hays Code was still in motion, Hollywood grew increasingly creative in order to keep the attention of their pubescent audience. While Teenpics did contain the male gaze (Mulvey 841), as it is complicit with the heterosexual male experience – again, the only acceptable sexual experience of the era – , it was time to take it a step further and once again base films around the gaze and not just male experiences, that is to base a teenage depiction in film through a phallogocentric scopophilia (Mulvey 833 and 835).

## **Lolita**

On September 15<sup>th</sup> of 1955, Russian born novelist Vladimir Nabokov officially published his work *Lolita*, following the twisted obsession of Humbert Humbert towards the 12-year-old daughter, Lolita/Dolores (henceforth referred to as Lolita for convenience), of his latest marriage. The book describes Humbert as a clear-cut pedophile who is attempting to hide his dark perversion through his merit as a poet, describing and defending his attraction with flowery language. The opening lines read: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta. She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores in the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita” (Nabokov 1).

Although Nabokov was looking to publish *Lolita* in the United States of America, publishing houses rejected his novel as most found the content to be controversial and repulsive considering the moral censorship that was in place during the era. He eventually worked with

Olympia Press, a Paris based publishing house with a reputation for publishing sexual and borderline pornographic literary works. It is important to note that, at the time of making a contract, Nabokov was unaware of the Olympia Press' reputation (Bauman Rare Books, 2013). The novel was received with mixed reviews, with some considering it obscene, some considering it a tragic tale, and some considering it a masterpiece. Nabokov himself stated that *Lolita* is a tragedy that clearly displays child abuse and child sexual assault. In fact, Nabokov wrote to Maurice Girodias<sup>3</sup>, “Lolita is a serious book with a serious purpose. I hope the public will accept it as such.”

Vladimir Nabokov himself was a victim of such perversion. He recalls uncomfortable moments with his uncle Vasily Rukavishnikov (commonly referred to as Ruka) in his memoir *Speak, Memory*<sup>4</sup>: “When I was eight or nine, he would invariably take me upon his knee after lunch...fondle me, with crooning sounds and fancy endearments, and I felt embarrassed for my uncle by the presence of the servants and relieved when my father called him from the veranda...” (Nabokov 68). He describes that these sort of behaviors from Ruka continued for another four years and, although the term of abuse was never explicitly stated, it is understandable and widely believed by literary academics that the attraction his uncle had towards Nabokov can be described as pedophilic. Later within the memoir, Nabokov describes how he picked up Ruka from a train station at age 11, only to be received by the words “How sallow and plain you have become, my poor boy.” Once Nabokov was 15, Ruka declared him to be his heir and then coldly sent him away, no longer displaying any attraction. Nabokov would

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<sup>3</sup> The man who suggested Nabokov use the Olympia Press, as well as the founder of said publishing house.

<sup>4</sup> First published in 1951 and then revised and republished in both 1966 and 1979. The 1966 version is referenced here.

be unable to enjoy his newfound richness due to the Russian revolution of 1917, completely devaluing the ruble and forcing Nabokov into exile.

These events are paralleled within *Lolita*; Humbert finds Lolita once again when she is 17, and she is married and pregnant. Humbert describes her to be pale, unattractive, and leaves her with a large sum as a gift for her marriage. Soon after, Lolita dies in childbirth. Because Lolita was no longer a child when he rediscovers her, Humbert cannot find an attraction towards her, solidifying his status as a pedophile. With this context, it is clear to see Nabokov wrote this book as an exposé and forsaking of pedophilic attraction and to bring awareness to the victims, such as himself, of such perpetrators. While *Lolita* is not the only or first time Nabokov has addressed child abuse and child sexual assault, it is the most acknowledged example and, consequently, the most misunderstood and misconceived.

Such misunderstandings would only become more common with Stanley Kubrick's 1962 adaptation of the novel. Highly acclaimed by critics, Kubrick's adaptation misses the point of the original novel and replaces the condemnation of pedophilia with the normalization and even acceptance of it. Kubrick had read the original novel and proclaimed it to be a masterpiece, but he described it as such: "To me, 'Lolita' seemed a very sad and tender love story." Kubrick was inspired and set about adapting the novel, asking Nabokov, who previously rejected any offers for adaptation, to write the script for him. After certain rights were negotiated, Nabokov complied.

The first draft was a 400-paged script of which Nabokov took great pride in, but Kubrick requested that it be cut down for a much shorter runtime. Kubrick took the edited script and entered production for a two-year period in which almost all communications between him and Nabokov were essentially defunct. In fact, the next time Nabokov was to learn about the film adaptation

was during its 1962 premiere in New York, and he was left disappointed in the result as only scraps of his script were used. While Nabokov was rewarded with the title of screenwriter, very little of what he actually wrote influenced Kubrick's final piece.

Along with the general rejection of Nabokov's script, Kubrick made two other large changes to *Lolita* (1962). First, he changed Lolita's age from 12 to 14, making Humbert a hebephile rather than a pedophile since Lolita is experiencing puberty. Second, he removed all explicit sexual scenes, although the film maintained an "R" rating. Both of these changes would become exceedingly detrimental for the understanding of Nabokov's original *Lolita*.

Again, by changing Lolita's age to 14 rather than 12, Kubrick turned her into a girl late into puberty rather than pre-pubescent as described by the novel. By removing her status as pre-pubescent, Kubrick also removed the potential danger associated with depicting a pre-pubescent girl in a sexual nature on-screen. Thanks to the era of the Teenpic that took place shortly before the movie was made, the idea of a sexualized teenage girl was no longer foreign, and thus Lolita being 14 and being the center of someone's sexual desires, even if it is an adult man, also becomes less taboo. Similarly, in the Teenpic, girls experiencing puberty also desire sexual experiences themselves and experience scopophilia, as seen with Judy's character in *A Rebel Without a Cause* as she dresses sexually to garner attention from her father and later replaces that need with attention from Jim. Although this trope is established through a male gaze, it nonetheless set a precedent for future films that move outside of the category of the Teenpic. Kubrick taking advantage of this development and sets a new precedent, one in which the body of the teenage girl can and will be the object of desire for heterosexual men, the new center of the male gaze in films exploring racy themes.

Similarly, the removal of explicit sex scenes between Lolita and Humbert minimizes the damage done, although this was partly in compliance with the Hays code. In Nabokov's *Lolita*, these scenes are explicit as they are important in highlighting the violence of sexual assault against children. These scenes, in the novel, are not romanticized, they are not insinuated, but rather they are told directly from the point-of-view of the assaulter with his actions remaining clearly violent. His kidnapping, brainwashing, and repeated sexual assault of his stepdaughter are not ignored but rather told like they are an achievement. The descriptions of Lolita also remain important here, especially the physical descriptions to remind the reader how small she is and how damaging the abuse thus is. In fact, little about Lolita is shared except for the ways in which Humbert wants to and does abuse her. Although Humbert tends to use flowery language, the reader, ultimately, can still clearly see the unyielding brutality committed by him. Because the scenes remain explicit, the actions can be condemned and clearly placed into the category of violence. In Nabokov's script, Humbert's acts against Lolita are explicitly claimed, but Kubrick ignores these bites of vicious reality. Once Kubrick had removed these explicit examples of sadism, it becomes possible for Humbert to defend it because the viewer is not totally exposed to his evilness. Humbert becomes a narrator with a romantic notion, a sexual attraction towards Lolita that, in his eyes, is responded to very well by the victim herself. It is insinuated that the scenes still occur, but without any depictions of violence, it becomes easier for the viewer, and Humbert himself, to separate the act of his assault from being a violent act. If it is not explicitly shown, he cannot be explicitly accused. Thus, the viewers almost become inclined themselves to defend him, influenced by previous sexualizations of teenaged bodies and setting in stone the fate of the female teenage body, both depicted on screen and the body in real life.

Sue Lyon, the face of *Lolita* in Kubrick's adaptation, was also 14 when filming was conducted. When the film premiered in theaters, Lyon was 15 and was unable to watch it herself because of its "R" rating. New York Times journalist, Bosley Crowther, reviewed Lyon in the film as such: "She looks to be a good 17 years old, possessed of a striking figure and a devilishly haughty teenage air" (Crowther, 1962). It was obvious that those who watched Kubrick's *Lolita* did not view Lyon's same-named character as a young child, but rather an older girl, although still underaged, who could handle a sexual affair. Again, her body, or rather the teenage female body, had become the main object of the male gaze in the entertainment industry. Similarly, the photo-op for the film, in which she is wearing a bikini and heart shaped sunglasses while sucking on a lollipop, fueled the fire for male objectification of pubescent bodies and further absolved guilt of hebephilia. This photoshoot was directed by Kubrick and his producer James Harris. Although nothing final has been determined, it has been insinuated by multiple on-set reports that Harris and Lyon spent a lot of time alone together during the filming of *Lolita* and the other later projects. In 2020, childhood friend of Lyon and singer of The Mamas and The Papas, Michelle Phillips told journalist Sarah Weinman that Lyon and Harris had engaged in a sexual relationship since the start of *Lolita's* filming (Fenwick 1787). Harris has denied these claims and Lyon had died the year previous to the interview. While Lyon, obviously, could not speak on this, she did state in 1996 that, "My destruction as a person dates from that movie. *Lolita* exposed me to temptations that no girl of that age should undergo. I defy any pretty girl who is rocketed to stardom at 14 in a sex nymphet role to stay on a level path thereafter" (Marianne Macdonald, 1996). Lyon, after being forced to become the face and body of a new wave male gaze, condemns the normalization of the teenage body, especially the teenage female body, as a sexual object and a ploy in film.

Nabokov's novel *Lolita* is a tragic piece that unveils the inherent violence of pedophilic lust, a topic many did not think about or were too afraid to discuss. While the novel remains an important work, its meaning and importance has become skewed and, time and time again, removed from its context as an original work by Nabokov. Kubrick's adaptation and romanticization of the novel shifted attention away from the violence of pedophilia and towards a romanticization of hebephilia, playing into the male gaze that the Hollywood industry was built on during the shift into teenage plots. What we are left with is a newfound publicized attraction to teenaged bodies in an attempt to control teenagers, especially female bodies.

## Coming of Age

### Satire

With the female teenage body cemented in the center of the male gaze in the 1960's, it is not subject just to sexualization, but to objectification and ridicule. In order to keep the gender balance of the male gaze in order, the entertainment industry could not solely depict these youths as sexual objects, lest they take advantage of their scopophilia to abuse a sexual power over the phallogocentric society they are performing for (after all, sex is power). The idea of ridiculing the teenage girl thus emerged, and films centered around female protagonists and made to appeal to a female audience grew. While, in film, these female protagonists are not always sexualized, they often face trivial hardships that are set up in a way that ridicules the female teenage population thus deriving an association between teenage girls and petty problems that take up their entire worlds.

Such problems, however, are not presented as simple or petty. Rather, they are presented as integral influences and motives on the girls' life, their importance so dire that the plot of the film the girl exists in could not progress without them. While the address of "petty" is used, it is important to note that, over time, issues surrounding one's own body, its relations, and bodily performance have been pushed to be viewed as important and normal in a girl's life, and if young girls do not engage in these topics, then they are not existing in the realm created for them.

Problems surrounding the female body, its functions, and its relationships to push plot motives most commonly function under the lens of romance and sexuality, especially from the years 1980 through the 2020's<sup>5</sup>. The teenaged girls are depicted in an angsty existence in which

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<sup>5</sup> As is the year range for the films discussed in this section.

they are troubled by family relations, female bullies, and crippling attraction to the boys who exist just outside of their immediate social realm (as perceived by them and which may or may not come to fruition) while somehow remaining an implicit sexual object in their natural being. There are very little plot functions outside of these three within films that satirize and dramatize the existence of teenage girls to the same extents, and it is thanks to these specific plot functions that the concept of the teenage girl is so commonly ridiculed as such topics are, to other social groups, considered trivial. What is curated is a worry of the body and its appearance or performance in relation to how it is perceived and interacted with by others rather than by the self; a girl in such films considers physical change in order to be received better by others, not to be received better by herself. Films which depict young girls worrying over fat percentage, facial features, how to make a boy attracted to her, how to deal with other girls putting her down, etc. place those worries into the minds of young girls consuming these films, establishing a media influence over young girls. Thus, a bubble is created in which the girls that consume films surrounding such plot functions simultaneously are forced to operate in a similar manner, as these films and their pop culture influence become the main and sometimes only influence for teenaged girls, and be ridiculed because of outsider views on these functions. Teenage girls are set up to be a practical joke from the moment the world acknowledges them to be such and are effectively trapped in a social constraint that solely exists for public ridicule and isolation.

For example, films such as *10 Things I Hate About You* (Gil Junger, 1999), *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004), *Easy A* (Will Gluck, 2010), and *The DUFF* (Ari Sandel, 2015) are all films that maintain a teenage female (and American) protagonist who maintain strong personalities that are exaggerated to isolate them, and in specific cases paint them as socially hostile. These

strong personalities are then faced by friendship issues, and the lives of the protagonists are further complicated by topics of love.

Take *10 things I Hate About You* (1999) first: Kat (Julia Stiles) is the shrewd sister of Bianca (Larisa Oleynik) who holds a true hatred for men in the world; she is a modern raging feminist. This places her role in the narrative as unsatisfactory and unsexable by the opposite gender and thus poses a problem for the men of the film. Although Kat is not necessarily the sole or main protagonist of the film, her self-agency presented allows her to be perceived as protagonist enough, and so she cannot exist outside of a romantic realm. Patrick (Heath Ledger) then, of course, must romance her to soften her personality so that she no longer poses a threat to the narrative. While the film is an adaptation –adaptation being key here– of Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew* (1592), it remains relevant to the cultural views of its making; that is, both sisters of the film end up coupled with a male counterpart. Kat’s peers in the film ridicule her for her lack of performance under the male gaze. For example, when Kat disparages Hemingway, her classmate and ultimate antagonist of the film, Joey (Andrew Keegan) refers to her as “a bitter self-righteous hag who has no friends” (00:06:06 – 00:06:10). Similarly, the entire plot can only continue because Cameron (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) desires Bianca so desperately that he hires Patrick to woo Kat, believing that Kat could not serve any aid without being tricked into participating in the male gaze. Even later, when Cameron and Bianca are working together to find out what Kat liked to help Patrick woo her, they are surprised to find she has black underwear which, to Bianca, suggests she is looking to engage in sex eventually. Kat eventually succeeds in her own smarts and does maintain some spunk, but she ultimately is tamed by Patrick’s romance, both as a farce and as true affection. She could not remain outside of the male gaze, so she must be pulled into it in order for the plot to succeed for Cameron.

In another vein, *Mean Girls* (2004) focuses on Cady (Lindsay Lohan) as she makes her social debut into high school after growing up in the African savannah. Because of her 'exoticness' of not being used to contemporary American social lives, many people grow attracted to her platonically. While she gains friends, she quickly learns that female bonds are biting and are not to be trusted. She infiltrates the popular girl's group and quickly adapts to sexual dressing, importance of makeup, dumbing down oneself in the presence of or even at the thought of boys, using one's words against themselves and others, and the dangers of being fat. While Cady feels iffy indulging in these newfound habits, she becomes radicalized when Regina (Rachel McAdams) takes back her ex-boyfriend Aaron (Jonathan Bennett) despite knowing that Cady likes him. Cady thus becomes the ultimate sabotaging mean girl and, in the process, ruins her own non-lethal friendships and romantic ties to Aaron all while bringing attention to how every female bond is complicated and double-edged. She views the whole process of her change, in retrospect, as silly, reflecting the views of the culture.

Girls, to other girls, are posed as threatening, a concept made up by patriarchy and its applied male gaze in order to foster anger and competition between women in an attempt to better appease the male gaze and continue functioning under male control. The female teenage experience becomes wholly ridiculed both by outsiders and its direct participants.

### **Female Protagonists**

Touched on briefly while discussing the films *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) and *Easy A* (2010), a female protagonist is most often not even oriented to achieve a goal for herself, but rather has a plot involving a love interest of sorts, as if there can be no story without her finding love or being in love. It has become necessary for a male to be part of her existence, no matter her original role, for she cannot exist alone without being threatening to the male gaze

(Mulvey, 1975). While this remains the basis for female-oriented films, teenage characters are often split into (not exclusively) three archetypes: the Mean Girl, the Prude, and the Unsexed Girl.

Beginning with the Mean Girl, she is one that makes it her goal to “ruin” others’ lives and engage in backstabbing and messy gossiping. This is seen with Regina from *Mean Girls* (2004) and Marianne (Amanda Bynes) from *Easy A* (2010). They are typically the antagonist, the villainess in the other female protagonist’s life. However, they are not solely depicted as an enemy, but can shift in and out between the roles of enemy and friend. For Regina, she began as a friend to Cady but slowly shifted into enemy, displaying her power as a popular girl over Cady to make her submit to her. With Marianne, she acts, at first, as an enemy to Olive (Emma Stone) because of Olive’s perceived sexual degeneracy, but once Olive’s shaky friendship with Rhiannon (Aly Michalka) falls apart, she swoops in to take on the role of best friend. Of course, Marianne reverts back into enemy once she hears the rumor that Olive slept with her boyfriend and gave her chlamydia; Olive has reverted back into a sexual enemy and thus becomes a person of competition. These girls function to be a perceived common enemy between protagonist and audience, a girl to blame and/or hate to detract some of the negative attention away from the male villains within the films.

Then, you have the Prude. This is the girl who prefers to stay away from men and sexual topics, either because they are displayed as a radical feminist (and thus unsexable, as seen with Kat) or to be an exaggerated version of a religious girl (as seen with Marianne). They are, throughout the movie, objectified and sexualized despite their abstinence; in fact, it is the fact that they are abstinent that fuels their perceived sexuality. This further stimulates the concept that no form of the teenage girl is safe from the sexualization of the male gaze, because all bodies can

and are ultimately sexed by it. In the case of Kat, the men of the film discuss her as a body to be conquered, because if her body can become desecrated and introduced to the “pleasure” of sex, then her mind and raging personality can consequently be tamed. With Marianne, her role as a religious girl is satirized by the childish dressing of her. She is displayed with a baby face, pigtails, and large breasts. While her mind is presented as holy and chaste, the male gaze dresses her body in mock-religious sexuality, a body that surely cannot function outside a world of sex. Furthermore, the other girls of the film mock the Prude for her chastity, forcing her to become isolated by her own sex and further playing into the concept of female co-competition.

Finally, there is the Unsexed Girl. This role tends to overlap with the treatment of the Prude and covers a decent amount of the female protagonists, especially in the early era of female-oriented teenage films of the 80’s. The Unsexed Girl functions outside of main social circles and is often either unknown to her peers or is unrecognized by her peers as a girl. She looks and acts unassuming or tomboyish, preoccupied with her own daily troubles until a sudden encounter with a sexually viable male. See, for example, Andie (Molly Ringwald) of *Pretty in Pink* (Howard Deutch, 1986) in which she lives alone with her father, poor, with a best friend who is wholly in love with her. One day, out of sheer boredom, Steff (James Spader), a popular boy from her school, grows an attraction to her but struggles with this attraction because of her low social status. Similarly, the character Samantha (Molly Ringwald) of *Sixteen Candles* (John Hughes, 1984) is practically invisible at school and, somehow, invisible at home as hectic happenings overlap. She faces an attraction towards Jake (Michael Schoeffling), a popular older athlete at her school, and enters his radar when a letter about such attraction is passed to him rather than being passed to Samantha’s friend. Because of this coincidence, he also grows an, extremely fast, attraction to her because of her newfound visibility. These two films also engage

in the concept of the makeover film, in which the Unsexed Girl is transformed into a realm of feminine gender performance and thus becomes a sexual object.

Another important character in this role is Bianca (Mae Whitman) of *The DUFF* (2015), although she overlaps slightly with the Prude as well as sub-categories “nerd” and “tomboy.” She is the friend of two popular and beautiful girls, while she remains essentially invisible and forgotten by her peers but maintains a strong tomboyish personality. This is a heavily played into gag that reoccurs throughout the film to reemphasize the ridiculousness of a teenage girl lacking femininity and ultimately being unsexable because of lack of gender performance. She is described, by her childhood male friend Wesley (Robbie Amell), as the DUFF (Designated Ugly Fat Friend) of her friends, and she becomes crushed. Even after attempted to engage in femininity in face of her crush, she is ultimately used, her attempt at sexuality ignored, and Wesley swoops her off her feet in the end.

While the Mean Girl, the Prude, and the Unsexed Girl are not the only character classifications for teenage girls within film, they seem to be the most repetitive and easily applicable. Since these are the most repeated archetypes in films centered around teenage girls, they are the archetypes that vulnerable young girls are exposed to the most often. Again, such archetypes and their associated tropes create a bubble in which teenage girls copy the actions and behaviors of the characters they see in these films, and that bubble forces an unstable existence.

Films such as the ones just explored create a common idea of a beauty standard and social norms that do not accurately reflect the way the everyday people, especially everyday teenagers, look and act. However, because satirical and dramatized pieces of media are what teenagers are consuming, there becomes an implication that the standards and norms represented in film are what should be replicated. Of course, teenagers are going through puberty

and experience changing bodies, uneven skin, and much more. Needless to say, the average teenager does not look like Lindsay Lohan after a team of makeup artists dress her up. This should not be a bad thing, but with tropes like the makeover of the Unsexed Girl, it becomes increasingly impossible for teenage girls to feel good about their looks because they are told, in these media, that if they are not fitting in with the beauty standard or not embracing a set idea of femininity, then they are unlovable and unsexable and need to change themselves in some way (Marston 7). This mindset is extremely mentally damaging and fosters unhealthy relationships with one's own body, encouraging depression and eating disorders to take root in these vulnerable girls who are already more prone to negative emotions due to the puberty they are experiencing (Somerville, Jones, and Casey 124).

Similarly, there is a fostering of uneasiness surrounding female friendships in one's teenage years. Again, *Mean Girls* (2004) depicts a spiderweb of relationships, and the friendships held between teenage girls are shaky and deceptive. Time after time, the girls in these films are shown to be gossiping about one another, giving backhanded compliments, sabotaging each other's lives, and competing against each other to gain the romantic and sexual attraction from a boy they both like. A similar thing occurs in *The DUFF* (2015), where Bianca claims her two ex-best friends are now her enemies because they are pretty and thus competition for her to be socially recognized. These movies force girls to be the enemy to one another rather than recognize the patriarchal society that they live in as the enemy, creating a layer of anti-feminism through media influence. That is to say, in the Western patriarchal society, in female social circles, your peers are your enemy because you all wish to perform under the same gender and social expectations but better than others. This further creates the mindset that not only are other girls the enemy, but oneself is also an enemy and thus oneself must be critical in their own looks

and actions in order to perform with the highest social sensitivity (Somerville, Jones, and Casey 129).

Furthermore, with the re-making and revival of such films (i.e. the *Mean Girls* musical being made into a movie and other consequential sequels), there has been a heavy integration of film advertising and merchandising through modern social media. This means TikTok's, Instagram accounts, YouTube videos, and other social media promoting or even simple sharing of films. Which the integration of these films and their messages into social media, another layer of influence becomes applied to the lives of teenage girls. While there may be teenagers out there who never saw these movies outright, if they use social media, they are more likely to be exposed to such promotional content and more inclined to go see the movies. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2024, 87% of the teenage girls interviewed reported they used YouTube, 66% reported they used TikTok, 66% reported they used Instagram, 57% reported they used Snapchat, and 15% reported they used Twitter. With such a decently sized chunk of the female teenage population online, it becomes easier to expose them to these films and their tropes, whether the films are being re-made or not.

### **Male Protagonists and Characters**

Whether they are a male character in a female-centered film or the main protagonist of their own media, boys are presented to approach life by their own means, able to hold power in the scene, get up to mischief, and actually enjoy things. This does not mean that male-centered plots are devoid of love or sexuality, though. Rather, in teenage male oriented plots, there is often a girl involved who is the main attraction to either the protagonist male or his group of friends, and she is often, in some way, conquered by them. While boys may receive a kiss or relationship from girls, it is just an added reward to their plotline and does not control their plot.

Similarly, there is an emphasis on male bonds or competition (as needed) and a lack of plot centered around being a teenager.

For example, films such as *Stand By Me* (Rob Reiner, 1986) or *The Sandlot* (David Mickey Evans, 1993) focus on groups of young boys whose friendships grow stronger by spending time together and having adventures. In *Stand By Me* (1986), the boys are roughly 12 years old and just about to enter their teenage years, and in *The Sandlot* (1993) the boys' ages range from 12 to 14, right at the start of their teenage years. Leaning into the later years of being a teenager, *The Outsiders* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1983) follows a similar angst of growing up and leaving behind childish naivety and wonders that was expressed in *Stand By Me* (1986). However, in *The Outsiders* (1983), the ages range from 14 to 18. Despite the character statuses as teenagers, these films do not revolve around that the way that the previously mentioned female-centered films do. While there is an emphasis on leaving behind childhood, their entering into being teenagers does not completely alter their personalities and ways of functioning in social settings, as seen in the 80's films centered around teenage girls. Rather, these films all end with an emphasis on humanity, or rather shared identity. The boys within the films just described do not feel isolated from one another because they know they have all experienced the same, or similar, events and feelings, and thus know they are not alone and share some sense of identity and community with one another.

There are more recent films centered around teenage boys, but they follow a similar vein of "growing up" with a shift more towards embracing the classic phrase "boys will be boys." For example, films such as *Superbad* (Greg Mottola, 2007) and *Project X* (Nima Nourizadeh, 2012) follow young male protagonists eager to live life, get up to no good, and engage in sexual debauchery. For example, *Superbad* (2007) follows the three teens Evan (Michael Cera), Seth

(Jonah Hill), and Fogell (Christopher Mintz-Plasse) – with a heavier focus on the friendship between Evan and Seth – as they attempt to get alcohol and attend a party where they have the potential to engage in sexually explicit activities with their respective girls of interest. Of course, things go awry, with Fogell being assaulted by a robber during his attempt to buy alcohol while Seth and Evan get mixed up in all sorts of trouble. While Evan and Seth often bring up wanting to have sex with girls from their school, the film in its entirety is not solely based on their sexuality; their sexual desire is just a matter of fact that continuously pops up in humorous ways, and it is not used to exploit their role in the film. In fact, most of the focus of the film surrounds the staggering friendship between Evan and Seth and the troubles that may shake it. There is no competition between the two males, their sexual interests do not overlap, and the only thing that may come between them is the prospect of being far away from one another.

*Project X* (2012) follows birthday boy Thomas (Thomas Mann) and his friends Costa (Oliver Cooper) and JB (Jonathan Daniel Brown) while their peer Dax (Dax Flames) records Thomas' special day. The first section of the film is devoted to promoting the party that they are throwing for Thomas' birthday and is filled with uncultured pranks and spoken sexual deviancy, playing perfectly into the concept of "boys will be boys." As the party unfolds, Costa convinces Thomas and JB to just relax and enjoy themselves as the chaos of hundreds of people consumes and destroys Thomas's home. They do relax, fully enjoying the drugs and alcohol available to them while also engaging in sexual proclivity, although the latter puts Thomas in trouble with his childhood friend and longtime crush Kirby (Kirby Bliss Blanton). In the end, with the home caught on fire and totally destroyed and the trio in legal trouble, Thomas' father still displays a semi-proud attitude because of the sheer amount of people and destruction his son brought to their home.

In both of these films, the boys encourage one another and are even encouraged by other older males to engage in chaos and sexual deviancy because these acts, for boys, are viewed as appreciable and funny, and, in the end, the boys will not face any long-lasting negative damage to their reputation. In fact, the larger of mess these boys create, the more they become celebrated by their peers. This is the direct opposite of the treatment of girls of the same age, and it is because these characters are not girls that they can be celebrated. For example, when Cady in *Mean Girls* threw a party, it ended up being disastrous for her in the sense that she ruined her friendships, ruined the potential for movement in her romantic relationship with Aaron, and was punished by her parents for having the party. Despite her party being far less destructive than Thomas', only one is punished in all possible ways because of their gender role and the tied consequences to said gender role.

Something else that is important to point out is that in spite of their debauchery, the boys still depicted in film, somehow, end up with a wholly positive relationship with their sexual interests, with little to no repentance for their actions. However, for the female protagonists previously discussed, most are found to have repent in some way – with Cady it was a public apology and a total restructuring of her personality, with Olive it was another public apology and explanation of previous actions – before they can even begin to rebuild a relationship to the men they are attracted to. Again, the characters gender roles structure the way they are treated by their peers and by the consumers of the media they exist in: the boys can be forgiven for almost anything as they are merely participating in “boys will be boys” behavior while the girls must be penalized and rehabilitated for situations that they often did not put themselves in, but were rather forced into.

The obvious difference in treatment of the teenage male and teenage female protagonist has remained consistent since the evolution of the Teenpic. While the former does not place a focus on sexuality but does use it as a means of accomplishment, the latter uses engagement of sexuality as a means to receive punishment and isolation while simultaneously sexualizing the punished. This mistreatment of the teenaged female body has been and continues to be pushed by the male gaze even when the female body is replicating the actions committed by the male body. Boys are allowed to engage in their sexuality because they are holding the power in a position of sex, while girls cannot engage in sexuality, but can only be engaged with. Functioning outside of being engaged with will lead to some sort of punishment for the girl, often social, while the boys are either not presented with any consequences or can easily recuperate damaged social bonds.

## Teenage Girls and Mental Health

Beginning in the late 90's, a new wave of romanticizing teenage girls started through the depiction of mentally ill girls. Films began to follow the challenges of what it is like to be a teenage girl, the minuscule details that have been previously glossed over in past media representation. They home in on specific problems as well as everyday life: making stupid decisions, a realistic lack of romance during high school, complications with romance and dealing with the male gaze in everyday life, dealing with sexual assault, dealing with negative body image and dealing with gender and race discrimination, all during what is considered "the most important/best years of your life." Such films help show that it is difficult to consider a certain era of one's life to be the best when everything is so miserable, an accurate representation of life. There appears to be a general lack of these films, and many of the films that do exist surrounding topics of mental health are directed by men that continue to project an image of teenage girl life as something romanticized and perfected, a sort of art that nobody really knows how to perform, and how girls should conform to these expectations by performing through their struggles. Through all this, a desire to be sad is born within young girls.

One of the more well-known examples of this would be *Girl, Interrupted* (1999) which follows the protagonist Susanna (Winona Ryder) and her stay at a psychiatric hospital after a suicide attempt. In this institution, she makes friends with other troubled girls: pathological liar Georgina (Clea DuVall), anorexic Janet (Angela Bettis), schizophrenic Polly (Elisabeth Moss), OCD-ridden and self-harmer Daisy (Brittany Murphy), and sociopath Lisa (Angelina Jolie). A widely diverse group of women representing a community previously unexplored and underrepresented, and while the intent of such representation was to make the public aware the real mental troubles people, especially young girls, experience and the ways they may handle

mental illness in all of its destructiveness, this film has, unfortunately, been forced into a new form of stereotyping and sexualizing girls.

Again, *Girl, Interrupted* (1999) has achievements in the sense that it exposed a main public to the mental health crises experienced by youth, a topic briefly touched upon in the Teenpic of the 50's before being swiftly dropped. What greatly aids this achievement is the fact that the film is adapted<sup>6</sup> from the memoir of Susanna Kaysen and the recounting of her personal experience in a mental hospital while she was 15 after a suicide attempt, and that director James Mangold held up communications with her during production. With both memoir and film enthusiastically received, with the former by young women experiencing mental illnesses and engaging in self-harm and the latter by a wider, more diverse audience, the taboo surrounding mental health for young women had begun to lift.

However, this accomplishment would be followed by a severe drawback. Kaysen, after the publishing of her memoir, was approached endlessly by young women claiming ““You wrote this book for me”” (Merrigan, 2018), crowding her with personal tale of struggle with mental illness, and even show off their self-harm scars to her (Merrigan 2018). Since her memoir was one of the first female-published works discussing female mental health, its readers felt an intense connection to both the memoir and Kaysen with no outlet for their feeling of being understood other than of forcing it upon her. A similar occurrence took place after the film adaptation was released, albeit an extremely delayed occurrence, as the film had long sense escaped the small bubble of young women battling with their mental health's and entered the general public domain of an audience.

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that the key word here is “adaptation”; several characters and key events in the film have been fabricated to better aid the plot and were not originally in Kaysen's memoir.

Around the late 2000's, following the social media boom, there was a newfound obsession with aesthetics, especially aesthetics based on physical media that were mass-consumed. This newfound fascination surrounding aesthetics was especially prominent on the sites Tumblr<sup>7</sup> and Myspace<sup>8</sup>. While the latter has become unusable with nearly all its media pre-2016 having been purged, Tumblr is still popularly used especially for engaging in and sharing aesthetics. According to Business Insider, in 2014 38%, the largest demographic, of active users were aged 16-24, while users aged 25-34 came in close at 32% (Hoelzel, 2014). The site reached its heyday in the early to mid 2010's, which is also when aesthetics surrounding feminine behaviors and looks derived from physical media began to emerge and be shared through user-uploaded images paired with tags such as “#girlhood”, “#thechicdiet”, “#girlinterrupted”, “#girl”, “#beautiful”, “#coquette”, “#lolita”, and other similar feminine based tags. A majority of these tags were paired with images that depicted extremely skinny girls (as this era witnessed a new peak of wide-spread eating disorders and negative body images due to a new wave of cyberbullying), girls in frilly clothing, girls with a size difference to their male counterpart (the former smaller and shorter than the latter), girls crying, and still images from films and TV shows.

As of August, 2025, the Girl, Interrupted tag has 60,000 followers with the top posts depicting a common mindset in which girls do not find themselves to be good enough, do not find themselves to be pretty enough, wish to be isolated from society, wish to avoid sexual interaction, and find themselves trapped by their own sadness. Similar to the way those young women became attached to Kaysen, the young girls on this site find comfort in the fact that

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<sup>7</sup> Founded by David Karp in 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Founded by Chris DeWolfe and Tom Anderson in 2003.

enough people feel so similar to the point it can be considered a new genre of girlhood. And thus, the aesthetic of the suffering teenage girl had been solidified thanks to social media and its ability to connect people all over the world. If one were to look into the early days of the Girl, Interrupted tag, specifically before 2016, one would find a plethora of gifs and still images from the film, mostly of the characters Daisy and Lisa during their fits of depression and mania. The aesthetics of these two characters specifically were highly popular due to their unabashed representation through the eyes of Susanna, and young women felt comforted by the fact that teenage girls could experience such rages of fit and sadness and still be viewed as icons in their own twisted ways.

Fits of manic depression and manic anger had been romanticized by the population that *Girl, Interrupted* (1999) was representing because it was a widespread and beloved representation. Teenage girls felt that if they could starve themselves the way that Daisy did or burst out against anyone who speaks against them like Lisa did, they could, somehow, gain back power over their lives and their sadness. They become girls represented, yet lost in the sea of others who feel that they are a character in their sadness. These girls lose themselves in a community of others just like them – and even those not suffering from mental illnesses – in which they promote a lifestyle of self-harm and depression with no effort to leave it since they are at least a part of a prized aesthetic.

A nearly identical phenomenon occurred surrounding the aesthetics of *The Virgin Suicides* (2000), which was released mere months after *Girl, Interrupted* (1999). The film follows the Lisbon sisters Lux (Kirsten Dunst), Mary (A.J Cook), Therese (Leslie Hayman), Bonnie (Chelse Swain), and Cecilia (Hanna Hall) through the eyes of the semi-anonymous collective of neighborhood boys. These girls face isolation, sexual repression and engagement,

depression, and suicide. While both *The Virgin Suicides* (2000) and *Girl, Interrupted* (1999) deal with teenage female depression and other mental illnesses, what ultimately makes them different is the ways they are presented. *Girl, Interrupted* (1999) is based on the memoir written firsthand by a woman recounting her own teenage years, meaning it is not originally posed in a male gaze, but both the film and novel form of *The Virgin Suicides* (2000) are told through the perspective of a male, with the former being told through the eyes of neighborhood boys obsessed with the sisters and the latter being written by a man, Jeffrey Eugenides. Because of this form of observation of the teenage girl by the male gaze, *The Virgin Suicides* (2000) becomes a story that becomes detached from the characters suffering, pushing the suffering Lisbon sisters to be characters viewed and observed with no free agency and detached from interior understanding, an opposite from the agency seen with the intimate and personal story told from the perspective of a girl suffering as seen in *Girl, Interrupted* (1999).

The collective of boys from the neighborhood in *The Virgin Suicides* (2000) inherently romanticizes the girls and their suicides because they are telling the viewer about said suicides – and what led up to them – through a story telling format that is detached from the girls’ firsthand experience. The film begins with one of the boys doing a voiceover: “Cecilia was the first to go... Everyone dates the demise of our neighborhood from the suicides of the Lisbon girls. People saw their clairvoyance in the wiped-out elms, the harsh sunlight, and the continuing decline of our auto industry...we find ourselves going over the evidence on more time. All to understand those five girls, who, after all these years, we can’t get out of our minds” (00:01:26-00:03:31). To these boys, the tragedy of what happened to these girls is mythicized, a story to recount over and over again to both keep the girls alive in some way, but also to exploit the girls.

The boys keep track of the mental decline of all the girls, especially Cecilia and Lux, and make sure to emphasize the ways in which the girls perform to keep up airs of being peaceful, sound-of-mind, religiously good girls. In Cecilia's case, their obsession is less sexual and more morbid, as she committed suicide so quickly into the film. Their descriptions align more with the ways in which she expresses her depression and antisocial behavior, with the most vivid descriptions being of her first attempt, her parents pushing for recovery, and her ultimate death. For the others, though, is done through descriptions of their clothing, notably the dance scene in which the girls are made near-identical dresses by their mothers that ultimately hides their figures, their social encounters, and their sexual encounters, with an extra focus on Lux's sexuality. The boys focus solely on the way these girls perform in public and provide no insight to their behavior when alone or any interior thoughts. Without these, the girls are nothing else but characters in the boys' lives, having no traits personal to them besides what can be outwardly observed, leaving them hollow and all that more mysterious.

It is because of this that the collective, and others, are allowed to obsess over the girls in such a way. Outside of the collective, for example, Trip Fontaine (Josh Hartnett) becomes obsessed with Lux and puts in the utmost effort to sway her and her parents in favor of him after Cecilia's suicide. He selects 3 boys who measure up to the Lisbon's expectations to provide dates for her sisters so that he himself may take Lux to the school dance. After the dance, Lux and Trip have sex in the football field. After this, Lux falls asleep and Trip promptly abandons her, finding no more use in her now that she has been "used" and thus removed from the pedestal he had previously placed her on. Lux ultimately misses her curfew, and the Lisbon sisters are promptly put under house arrest, pulled from school and not allowed to leave or have guests.

During this time, Lux finds solace in inviting boys (and adult men) to the house and having sex with them on the roof, which the neighborhood boys' enjoyably watch.

This further pushes the voyeuristic male gaze which takes both pleasure and pain in the sexual engagement of teenage girls. On the one hand, the boys are fascinated by Lux's sexual promiscuity, engaging in sex in plain view (although slightly hidden by the nighttime shade). They watch her together through a telescope, engaging in direct scopophilia (Mulvey 835) and turning her into a pornographic character by describing the actions she is committing. In this moment, the boy's mindset flip from simply being attracted to Lux to viewing her as a solely sexual object with little else to offer. They feel correct in this opinion because of the way the men she does have sex with treat her, verifying her role as sexual relief who does not need to be cared for in any other way. On the other hand, because of the intense switch from sister to sex object, she is ultimately reduced from sister to sex object and is simultaneously punished, although not physically or overtly, for this reduction. While she engages in such activities to gain some power back over her life, she ultimately still craves for just one person to understand her on a deeper level, a wish that would never be granted, forcing her further into a depression and shallow performances.

The other sisters are generally forgotten by the boys, since they don't offer sexual relief the way Lux does, until their suicides: Mary puts her head in the oven, Therese drugs herself with sleeping pills, Bonnie hangs herself in the basement, and, finally, Lux leaves the car running with the garage door closed. The boys feel the strongest sense of loss with Lux since they became the most attached to her but still mourn the other sisters because they witnessed their bodies firsthand, having been invited over the night they committed suicide. The film ends with another voiceover in which the boys state: "It didn't matter in the end how old they had

been, or that they were girls. But only that we had loved them, and that they hadn't heard us calling, still do not hear us calling..." (01:30:44-01:31:00). The collective manages to place themselves in the role of victim, feeling lost at the thought that the girls had never understood their feelings toward them. Their claim that their age and gender did not matter is also contradictory to the very reason they faced such attraction toward the girls. By being the opposite gender and of similar age in a heteronormative story, these girls were doomed from the start to be things to be looked at with perverse and exploitative eyes that never saw beyond surface level gender and societal performances.

Similar to the way the aesthetic of *Girl, Interrupted* (1999) became romanticized, *The Virgin Suicides* (2000) was another hot topic on Tumblr. If one were to look at posts with the tags "The Virgin Suicides" or "Lisbon Sisters" before 2016, one would find various still images in which the sisters would look sad or depict the scene of their suicides. In said sadness, the girls are either completely by themselves or only with their sisters; they are never depicted with anyone besides their sisters, creating an emphasis on the isolation that pushes their sadness. One may also find images not from the film itself, but rather various random teenage girls attempting to emulate the dress style of the sisters, with flowy dresses, embroidered underwear, and rolled up uniform skirts. They edit such photos to appear color washed and over exposed, replicating the color grading of Coppola's film.

These girls not only want to copy the aesthetics of suffering in the film, they want to be the girls suffering, and they achieve such status by committing to eating disorders, mildly distraught expressions, and subtle sexual performance. These girls have seen the way the Lisbon sisters were romanticized by the neighborhood boys, and they begin to think that if they become like those sisters then they too might become romanticized by either boys or their peers. Once

again, the aesthetics of suffering trumps one's own health and individuality as users find comfort in a collective experienced sadness, with no efforts to get better in hopes of being rewarded for their copied performances.

However, this romanticization does not end with the original female audience. The concepts of the virginal coquette student, the sad and sexual lonely girl, and the ultimate manic pixie dream girl have all become well-known sub-categories that girls and boys alike overuse to describe the atypical teenage girl who is visibly (genuinely or performatively) depressed. Again, for the teenage girls, these categories are a desired performance and description to achieve. These categories are simultaneously over-sexualized and over-romanticized by the teenage boys who witness them. This, in a way, forces the girls who are performing under such sub-categories to be on a pedestal, sinfully idolized and further isolated from their peers. Being sexualized is inherent to these sub-categories because of their origins, and years of culture shifts has not and will not change that.

## A New Era

While there has been a consistent history of sexualizing the teenage girl in film, there has been a new wave of American film in which female directors and writers band together to make films that present ways of life of the teenage girl that is both accurate to the generalized experience of the teenage girl and denies the male gaze pleasure of superfluous sexualization. What has helped this new wave be received as an accurate depiction of feminine teenage life is the way that most films produced are semi-autobiographical, with screenwriters and directors (often the same person) pulling from their own experiences from their teenage years. These films also apply the focuses of the modern fourth-wave feminism<sup>9</sup>, which focuses on sexual abuse, harassment, violence, and workplace sexism, and the historical second-wave feminism<sup>10</sup>, which focused on sexual liberation, ending cyclical abuse, and challenging traditional gender roles.

While this recent era, from around 2015 to the present day, has not yet been described as a true film movement, it has been clear to see that this sort of film is more dedicated to protecting teenage girls from the heavy hand of the male gaze, but also does not coddle them or reward them for dramatized or sexualized gender performance. These films are often very raw and refuse to sugarcoat the intense emotions and sexual confusion that teenage girls experience. In a word, these films are real. They do not shy away from explicit abuse or cycles of sexual assault, they embrace the confusion surrounding oneself in such formative years, and they place the teenage girl clearly in sexual acts without painting her as a sexual nymphet.

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<sup>9</sup> Inspired by Tarana Burke's activist work and establishing of the #MeToo movement in 2006 and further defended by feminist author Laura Bates in 2012.

<sup>10</sup> While a single origin is debated, this era was heavily inspired by the feminist American writers of the 50's and 60's such as Angela Davis, Bell Hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins), and Betty Friedan.

An example of such film is *Lady Bird* (Greta Gerwig, 2017). The film is loosely based off of Gerwig's relationship with her own mother and the feelings she experienced as a teenage girl. It follows Lady Bird (Saoirse Ronan) as she tries to get a handle on the complicated relationship with her mother (Laurie Metcalf), discovering who she is and what she wants to do with her life, the harsh reality of the world, and love and sex. She is quick to sadness and anger, as seen when she jumps out of a moving car when arguing with her mother, and wants nothing more than to feel like she has a place where she belongs with people that are fond of her. She pushes her way into the theater program and meets Danny (Lucas Hedges), and they share a close bond until she discovers that he is gay. She slowly abandons her best friend Julie (Beanie Felds) for the popular girl Jenna (Odeya Rush) in an effort to pursue popular and mysteriously moody boy Kyle (Timothée Chalamet). She eventually has very disappointing sex with Kyle, is slowly uncovered to be a liar, and is rejected by her new friends until she reunites with Jenna.

*Lady Bird* is by no means perfect, and she also does not receive a fully happy ending. Instead, she receives a realistic ending. Lady Bird and her mother continue to fight to the point they do not say goodbye to one another when Lady Bird moved to New York to attend an (unnamed) university. She gets far too drunk at a welcome week party. She finds herself alone and looking wrecked at a church, the only familiar spot in her otherwise new and scary world. The film ends with her calling her parents, accepting the name they had given her, Christine, and thanking her mother.

Gerwig makes little to no attempt to make Lady Bird a fully loveable character, because real people are imperfect and hold traits that are more difficult to love. Lady Bird made countless stupid decisions in the film, such as lying to her new friends about where she lived and her economic status and admits regrets to many of her own decisions. She expresses her

disappointment and frustration with how she and Kyle had sex, how horrible sex felt for her, and about how frustrated she was the only one losing their virginity. She continuously picks fights with her mother and pushes for the things she knows they cannot afford. Ultimately, Lady Bird is annoying but redeemable because of the striking similarities between her and a real person.

A similar character is developed in *The Edge of Seventeen* (2016) with Nadine (Hailee Steinfeld). She grows up under the shadow of her brother Darian (Blake Jenner) and battles negative self-image, the death of her father (Eric Keenleyside), and battles with her mother (Kyra Sedgwick) with the help of her best friend Krista (Haley Lu Richardson). Nadine is very quick to anger, feeling that every action her brother and mom do are to spite her, and feels that nothing in the world works out for her. Once her best friend and her brother sleep together, that feeling becomes amplified for her.

Throughout the film, Nadine can be interpreted as an entitled and annoying character. Her behavior is constantly damaging her social relationships until she finds she is completely alone. The only character that seems to “tolerate” her the entire film is her teacher, Mr. Bruner (Woody Harrelson), who finds no difficulty in chastising or mocking her behavior and whom Nadine finds solace in. However, despite such a negative image of Nadine being curated, the audience is still experiencing sympathy for her because of the way her mental health deteriorates from this isolation and the ways she expresses her deep sadness in her life. Similarly, she is not written to act this way just to be the antagonist of her own life; she herself is frustrated with the way she acts and wishes she could change. In fact, she even says to Krista: “You know, ever since we were little, I would get this feeling like... Like I’m floating outside of my own body, looking down at myself... And I hate what I see. How I’m acting, the way I sound. And I don’t

know how to change it. And I'm so scared... That the feeling is never gonna go away”  
(01:29:13-01:29:45).

Similar to Gerwig's development of Lady Bird, Kelly Craig has Nadine mature throughout the film, although not entirely, to the point of apology to the people in her life that she had a strenuous relationship with. However, that awareness of one's own action is what sets Nadine distinctly apart from Lady Bird. While Lady Bird feels a sense of injustice in her life, she does not, or rarely, accept that she has created her own problems. Nadine is overtly aware of the way her behavior affects her relationships, but she feels too frustrated about the perceived injustices to change that behavior until the end. This self-awareness is also what sets her apart from other protagonists who are their own antagonists in other films. For example, Cady's descent into mean girlhood is what ruins her own relationships and what destroys her personality, but it is only until the end that she is made aware, with the help of others, that her behavior is the issue. This allows Cady to be perceived as a self-antagonist and is thus allowed to be shunned by the audience and the characters around her. Nadine, on the other hand, is the redeemable self-antagonist because her awareness allows the audience to feel sympathy for her and her emotions, ultimately allowing the audience to connect with her on another level. That feeling of knowing your emotions and the actions caused by your emotions are irrational but being too caught up in that emotional state to act differently is a very common human experience and furthers the realism of the presentation of the teenage girl. Emotions, especially in one's teenage years, are always rapidly changing to the point that the body experiencing them does not and cannot always understand why such changes are happening. What the body does know is that they are tired of the way they are acting but cannot change.

Another thing that pushes the realness of this film is the relationship between Mr. Bruner and Nadine. Neither one is very kind to the other, but it is because of this that their relationship can wholesomely exist. Mr. Bruner is constantly telling Nadine the things she is doing wrong, but also never rejects her when she needs the space to express her emotions and frustration with whatever situation she is caught up in. Although he is blunt, he is not dismissive. When Nadine comes in claiming she is going to kill herself, Mr. Bruner makes a joke that he was writing his own suicide note, but then still, subtly, gets Nadine to tell him why she is feeling that way and what she could do to possibly feel better. There is also absolutely no threat of the sexualization of their relationship. Rather, Mr. Bruner takes on a more fatherlike role towards Nadine by his offering of advice and always picking her up when she is down. He also does not shame her for her awkward expressions of sexuality towards another student, even if it is still awkward for him to hear. While she panics over it, he encourages her to take time off to relax and if she is feeling hopeless or recklessly upset, he tells her to let him know and offers his number.

Of course, Nadine does not function totally outside of the realm of sex, but instead engages with it in a way that she has power over the situations of sex she finds herself in. The film does not push her to be a sexual character or to be sexualized by being in any situation with a boy but instead allows her the authority of having failed sexual relations and expressing the complete awkwardness of flirting as a teenager. Her classmate Erwin (Hayden Szeto) has an obvious crush on Nadine, and she entertains it shortly, not out of her own romantic interest toward him but more so because she no longer has any friends in her life. However, when things go too far and Erwin agrees to sex with her in his pool after she quotes from *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), Nadine sets a boundary and expresses she only views him as a friend. Erwin is upset over this, claiming “You don’t say that stuff to a man” (00:57:49-00:57:50) and then plays

a song calling Nadine a “dickhead”. Nadine does not apologize for making Erwin feel upset, but instead holds her ground, protecting her agency over her own sexuality and laughing at the situation.

At the same time, she is managing her own crush on the school bad boy Nick (Alexander Calvert), whom she feels an unwavering sexual desire for. She appears at the Petland he works at to get his number and eventually texts him claiming she would like to engage in sexual activities with him. He accepts and invites her out on a date. Of course, no date is really to be had as he picks her up in his car and then parks in a parking lot, ready to be serviced by her. The situation quickly progresses, moving from making out, to fondling, until Nick is on top of her and ready to have sex. Nadine feels uncomfortable and unsafe and retracts her consent. When Nick does not listen to her, she forcibly pushes him off, and he kicks her out of his car. Nadine is left, cold and wet from the rain, crying from the embarrassment of being shamed for rejecting sex forced upon her and from the rejection of her emotional vulnerability. Once again, she is dealing with the extreme complexities of sex and the uncontrollable rapid change of emotions. However, she still remains in control of her own sexuality, even if it left her feeling bad, and is thus safe from sexual projection of a male gaze (Mulvey 841).

Another film that works with control over one’s sexuality paired with the sexual exploration of teenage years is *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (Marielle Heller, 2015). The film, set in San Francisco in the 1970’s, follows 15 year old artist Minnie (Bel Powley), her mother Charlotte (Kristen Wiig), and her mother’s 35 year old boyfriend Monroe (Alexander Skarsgård). More specifically, the film follows the affair between Minnie and Monroe and explores the dynamic of sexual hierarchy and purposeful performance for the male gaze (Mulvey 841) through the perspective of Minnie.

The early parts of the film depict when Minnie and Monroe are first left alone together in a bar, engaging in inappropriate physical contact that is not explicitly sexual. Minnie is shown biting Monroe's arm while he claims he can't even feel it, until Minnie takes his finger into her mouth, sucking on it while the two hold eye contact. Monroe removes his finger and sits down, now avoiding eye contact, and Minnie's expression visibly shifts from happiness to worry, her mood dampened by that slight rejection. When Monroe then states he was hard, slightly uncomfortable before laughing, Minnie grows happy again while Monroe places her hand into his pants. The feeling is new for Minnie, and she is more curious about what the penis feels like rather than feeling full arousal. This event leads to their first time engaging in explicit sexual relations, solidifying their affair.

The way Minnie describes everything happening is like that of a child making observations. She expresses her curiosity, her wonder towards the feelings, and the words she uses to describe their acts imply that it is all new for her and she is wholly inexperienced in the realm of sex. While they do not have sex that night, Monroe expresses a want to have sex with her, and Minnie is comforted by this. She finds happiness in knowing that she is sexually desirable to someone. Of course, for anyone new to feelings of arousal and new to the discovery of their own sexuality, being reaffirmed that those feelings are not shameful and being rewarded for those feelings then encourages that person to continue to engage with those feelings.

This is exactly what Minnie does. She finds solace in her relationship with Monroe, feeling like she is in control of her sex life through the engagement with and affirmation from Monroe. Of course, unlike Lady Bird and Nadine, she cannot be in control of her sexuality because the relationship she is engaged in naturally has a power imbalance, ultimately leaving her to be exploited by Monroe. Though, there is a difference between the exploitation of Minnie

compared to the exploitation seen with Lux and is more aligned with the exploitation seen with Lolita. She is swept up by said comfort, but is not in control.

When she has sex with Monroe for the first time, she calls her friend to share the news, but is not met with the same level of excitement. Instead, her friend says: “He’s so old. Ew, ew, ew. Minnie, he sleeps with your mom... Don’t you kind of feel like he’s taking advantage of you or something” (00:16:21-00:16:31). Unlike the relationship in *Lolita*, an outside view explicitly observes the unbalanced power dynamic and means of exploitation. There can not be an equal relationship, especially not an equal sexual relationship, between an adult and a minor<sup>11</sup>, even if the minor feels excited or explicitly states they want to engage in sexual relationship with someone who is older.

This power imbalance becomes more obvious and more dire as Minnie grows desperate for affection and approval from Monroe, feeling negative toward herself when that affection is deprived from her. Monroe has effectively placed his control over Minnie through the power of sex, utilizing his position as an experienced adult over an inexperienced girl to keep her hooked and to keep her quiet. She knows that if her mother were to discover their affair, that sexual affection would be stripped from her and she would be left empty and alone. Minnie also worries that her mother may blame her for the affair and thus parental affection would also be stripped. This scares Minnie deeply, so she continues to keep it secret and aims to keep Monroe, and her mother, happy with her in order to ensure he does not leave her.

Minnie soon finds herself wanting more from Monroe, wishing to engage on a romantic level rather than a purely sexual level. When she sees her mother and Monroe cuddling on the

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that, in the 70’s, the age of consent in California was 18, 3 years older than the age Minnie is depicted to be in this film.

couch, for example, she feels bitter and left out. Being forced to keep their relationship private has also stripped her of the opportunity to be loved wholesomely, without sexual contact, furthering her position as a sexually exploited object; she served no purpose for Monroe outside of sex. When Monroe encourages this concept by calling her a Nympho, Minnie gets upset, calling him disgusting and feeling angry towards herself. Slowly, she begins to understand that this relationship has not been built upon love and cannot produce any love, that she can only be approved by Monroe through sex on his terms. She maintains no power.

In order to change this, Minnie attempts to engage in sex with a boy from her school, but he claims her excitement for sex has scared him. She is left, sexually rejected, and feeling shame over her own sexual desires. She begins to feel isolated, fearing attempting any romantic or sexual acts with other people, and begins to think something is wrong with her. This is all a result from the affair experienced with Monroe. By never having any control over her own sexuality, when she is left to her own devices she does not know how to properly engage it and instead feels shame and disgust toward herself. Ultimately, Minnie's love for Monroe is rejected by him, and she feels wholly unlovable and hopeless. She sees that she was used as an object of sex and that their relationship never had any hope because Monroe knew

Unlike Kubrick's adaptation of *Lolita* (1962), *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* does include explicit sex scenes. This, again, plays into the power dynamic present between Minnie and Monroe. The male gaze and its abusive intent cannot hide behind implied sex, but is rather laid bare with the acts itself. While it is important for teenage girls to know that their feelings of sexuality is normal and not shameful, they also need to know that they are always at risk of being used, especially by older men. This film works beautifully in ways that Kubrick's *Lolita* failed, expressing the harmful intent of sex when used improperly. It does not attempt to hide the power

behind sex and does not hide the immorality of an older man engaging in sex with a minor. Sex, in the western patriarchy, remains a form of power, and will be used in order to maintain a gendered, and aged, hierarchy in which teenage girls are pushed toward the bottom.

All of these characters, again, are written very complexly and very realistically. With Lady Bird and Nadine, they are morally grey characters, as are most real people, who are battling the confusion paired with teenagedom. They experience damaging relationships through their own behavior, the want of being viewed as better than one really is, and the rapid-fire emotional changes that can ruin one's entire day. They also explore the awkwardness and failure of romance and sex that teenagers do face, not attempting to romanticize losing one's virginity and emphasizing the importance of having control over one's sexual experience. Minnie's character then allows the perspective of the not-uncommon sexual exploitation that teenage girls often feel whether it be with teenage boys or older men. That feeling of being stripped of a right to romance and control over sexual experience is a horrifying and emotionally charged experience, which Minnie expresses in a beautifully raw way.

By providing the space for female writers and directors to share their own emotions and experiences of their teenage years, the opportunity to provide accurate and comforting depictions of teenage girls also grows. This space is much needed to help undo the previous romanticization and levels of exploitation curated in films focused on teenage girls of the past, to serve as a beacon of understanding for the tribulations experienced by teenage girls going through sexual exploration, changing emotions, changing bodies, and mental health crises. A new hope for the future of women can be created by allowing their experiences and by exposing the misuse of the teenage body as an object of sex both in film and in the real world.

## Conclusion

From the case studies presented throughout this thesis, it can be inferred that the previous inner-cinematic voyeurism of the intrusive male gaze (Mulvey 841) is accepted outward, in the real world, enforcing that fear of castration (Mulvey 836) presented early in the mirror stage (Mulvey 836) to be held consistently through teenagedom. While there was an already established patriarchy and male gaze in the day-to-day life of the American people, its reflection in and application to film has been especially damaging to the teenage mind. With the establishment of the teenage girl in a new age of technology and media as a new frontier of inspiration or influence, teenagers are left to soak up the misogyny and sexual exploitation of teenage girls in film. This has, in turn, taught teenage girls that their exploitation is normal and taught teenage boys that it is alright, and even encouraged, to ridicule and exploit girls of their own age.

Even when these girls are not presented as a notable sexual object or a main character within a film, they are ultimately punished. When the character is not sexually viable, they are either punished through mistreatment by other characters or by being socially invisible or they are forced to be transformed into a sexual character, although this is often also to ridicule them. When a character is sexually viable, then they are unable to maintain their social relationships and are exploited by the boys in the film in order to maintain sexually viable. This bleeds into the real world, encouraging girls to act and dress in certain ways in order to be socially accepted and to feel wanted by the opposite gender. This also encouraged them to be revered by their same-gendered peers but simultaneously curates a culture of competition in which no other girl can be a true friend if they can also be perceived as sexually viable.

Of course, not all films depicting teenage girls wholly or explicitly function under these forms of phallogentric exploitation. Even though the films described above position teenage girls in positions of power over their sex and expose the forms of sexual exploitation of them, the depictions are not perfect. While films like *Lady Bird* (2017) are an incredible step forward for the empowerment of teenage girls, they are also not without their faults. There is still the engagement with a knowing performance for the male gaze, simply because it is so engrained within American society and within the American film industry, it is almost impossible to escape. At this stage of U.S society, it may be impossible to wholly escape a male gaze, but that does not mean it is impossible to shift from the male gaze being the main way of making film in order to empower women.

And, of course, there are blind spots within this thesis itself. While the films discussed in the last section are all directed and written by women, there are still films not discussed written or directed by men that work to avoid the exploitation of the teenage girl. This thesis also solely focuses on the American film industry and its products, and there are so many other films and shows outside of the U.S that both play into the male gaze and work to escape it. Similarly, a majority of the films discussed are focused on white heteronormative protagonists, a constraint that leads to a theoretical focus and functioning inside of a white phallogentric film world. There are fewer mainstream American films that focus on queer and non-white teenage girls, but they are equally, if not more, important and imperative to discuss in order to move away from said white phallogentric film world. A lack of diversity is another product of this male gaze, and it is important for teenage girls of all kinds to know that they have power over their lives, they have the power over their sexuality and their life as a whole.

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