

**Zed vdL.**

Berkeley, California

Untitled

Mixed media collage

This yearbook(let) is my attempt at capturing my experience at Oxbow. It's less about the art we've made and more about who we are as artists. I wanted to present my peers as I've come to see them-- as works of art in themselves. I wanted the book to have a sort of eclectic, nonsensical yet aesthetically logical feel to it to reflect Oxbow as a place, time, and group of people, so I used as many mediums as I could think to blend. I started by making all the page backdrops by sourcing and printing images, cutting them up and gluing them together. I then scanned those in, sourced digital images, cut those out and mashed them together using Photoshop, printed again, collaged and drew analog again, and repeated the process until I had something I was happy with. I wanted to use skills I had accrued in all three art classes here. Because of the process I took and my general indecisive and perfectionist nature, the product changed and evolved a lot. I hope to represent/show all those stages and phases in my final presentation because part of the art of this piece was the journey, much like my time at Oxbow. Grab a booklet with someone's name on it that you recognize (your child, your friend, etc.) and write something in it. There's a spread at the end meant for writing longer notes/messages, but feel free to annotate and doodle on any page in any way.

# The Fictionalization of Teen Girls in Media



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The Oxbow School OS45

*In this paper, I'll be reviewing and breaking down myths about adolescence and teen girls perpetuated by the media and analyzing their real-world impact. I'll first be reviewing the origins of fictionalized American teen life, then how that fictionalization became monopolized. Finally, I'll be discussing the influence teen girls have on the film industry and how they continue to shape pop culture despite being ridiculed, stereotyped, and villainized on screen.*

When I look at myself, I can see misogyny growing on me like a tumor. Where does this misogynistic tumor come from? No woman pops out the womb with these cancerous cells, they're a symptom of the radiation the world around us spews. It's everywhere, truly, in our classrooms, bedrooms, dining room tables, but it's especially prevalent in our media. Teen girls and young women hold the power in their hands to shape and define popular culture, but it's critical for television and movie executives that they don't know this. So while we're worshipped behind closed doors for our ability to shape the zeitgeist, we're continually murdered, monstered, and misrepresented on screen. Why?

## **I. The Fictionalization of Teen Life**

According to Ihab Hissan's "The Idea of Adolescence in American Fiction", the idea of the "adolescent" (or at least our modern idea of the "adolescent") is uniquely American and was born alongside America. As America changes, so does our perception of adolescence and how we write teens in fiction. When America was seen as shiny and new, its youth were seen as innocent: "The idea of adolescence in literature is... both form and vision, a complex symbol of the felt contradictions which history imposed on the American tradition of innocence" (Hissan 315). When America entered a phase of sanguine manifest destiny, its youth were seen as rebellious and

violent: “With the twentieth century a further reversal of earlier trends began to set in. In the cult of youth came to be recognized a hidden expression of guilt, a morbid fear of age, embodying elements of nostalgia and regression, and carrying in it the very seeds of death” (Hissan 316). As America became the dominant western culture, the “American teen” in fiction simply became the “teen.” As American media spread in the golden age of Hollywood, other countries and cultures latched on to that depiction of teenage life, so that depiction has stayed stagnant: a reflection of the fifties set in different decades.

## **II. The Origins of the “Teen Film”**

What we consider a “teen film” has been in constant fluctuation, largely because the tastes of teen moviegoers continue to change and the film industry continues to scramble to appease said ever-changing tastes (Nelson). This is why the “teen movie” as we think of it now, like *Breakfast Club* and *Mean Girls*, looks nothing like its ancestors: horror movies.

Filmmakers in the 1960s and ‘70s noticed that teens like horror movies, and that teens were more likely to attend horror movies they could relate to or that were marketed as relatable for them: movies starring prom, cheerleaders, cliques, jocks, and nerds: movies about teenage life (Nelson). Slasher films and horror movies continually grossed more than their light-hearted comrades, prompting the theory that they were popular in part because teen boys would take their girlfriends to see them to show their masculinity in exchange for the girl to cuddle closer, making horror movies the ultimate show of heterosexual performantivity (Nowell). Horror movie marketing seemed to be working, which meant filmmakers pivoted their efforts to capitalize upon that, regardless of *why* horror movies were grossing so highly.

Horror movies were targeted towards men, but starred women, so young boys could look at some “eye candy” while also relating to the boyish badass nature of the heroine. This is what Carol J. Clover, professor of American film at UC Berkeley, calls “cross-genderism,” a female character written as a male character so young men can relate to the hero while also objectifying and sexualizing her (Nowell). It’s also theorized that so many horror movies star young, white women in perilous predicaments because “as important as it is to have something to fear, it’s equally important to have something to fear for” (Zayd 4:10-4:16). Putting a beautiful, middle-class white woman played by a beautiful Hollywood starlet in danger made the threat seem more evil. This portrayal of the “woman-who-must-be-saved” further shows how horror reflects our society: would American audiences react the same to a black woman on screen? We fear more for the safety of our eurocentric, heteronormative culture than we do for the people living in it.

There’s the darker theory that horror and the men who watch and write horror just like to see women be punished and killed. Most victims in horror are women, and most of their murder or torture scenes go on twice as long as their male counterparts. So while women are something to fear for, their fear is something to fetishize (Ferreira). In feminist film theory, this is called “the Male Gaze.” The Male Gaze theory posits that women in film exist only to be seen by men, and that the way men look at women on screen is sexualizing and degrading to the woman, while empowering to the man (Soloway).

This brings us to the concept of the “female horror,” wherein the female character *is* the thing to fear. The female horror or feminine horror is almost as old as horror itself and is the first examination of oppressed womanhood manifesting in a character presented in a semi-sympathetic light in film (Zayd). Look at Carrie from *Carrie*, for example. Her abuse brews under her skin with no supernatural assistance-- there’s no demonic possession, no book of spells or witchcraft, there’s

just a young girl facing the horrors of her world until she explodes. Her “villain” arc is sympathetic and genuine and invites its audiences to think of her as a protagonist-- as a scorned woman, not a monster (Zayd). *Carrie* grieves the loss of sexual freedom and bodily autonomy in women. Mitchell Lichtenstein’s 2007 horror film *Teeth* and Karyn Kusama’s 2009 teen horror “dramedy” *Jennifer’s Body* take it back by giving the monstrous female a defense mechanism. *Carrie*, *Teeth*, and *Jennifer’s Body* all show the true horror: rape culture. The trope of the female horror shows that while all women have the capacity to become monsters, we aren’t inherently, the world just treats us as such when we seek to defend and protect ourselves.

The concept of the female horror or “monstress” flips the Male Gaze on its head and is a textbook example of the converse theory of the “Female Gaze” (The Take “Jennifer's Body and the Horrific Female Gaze”). The Female Gaze suggests that the woman on screen is not being inherently sexualized because she’s being presented to the audience through the lens of another woman. In Jill Soloway’s words, “the female gaze uses the camera to show how it feels to be the object of the male gaze. The Female Gaze is returning the gaze and daring to say ‘I see you seeing me. I don’t want to be the object anymore, I want to be the subject’” (Soloway 23:00-23:39). The Female Gaze isn’t simply the opposite of the Male Gaze, it’s a reversal of the way we see women on screen. Instead of agents of male sexual scopophilia, women in film under the Female Gaze are simply agents of their own.

### **III. How Teen Girls Have Been Represented and Misrepresented in Film**

Since the creation of the "New Woman" in the 1890s, girlhood was split down the middle into the traditional woman, and the "new woman," who campaigned for "masculine" equality for women like voting rights and education. Second-wave feminism took this perhaps too far as people started to see feminine women as betrayers of the feminist movement for femininity's previous ties to oppressive cultures (not to mention that second-wave feminism ignored most all intersectional aspects and shut anyone who was not a white, skinny, straight, cis woman out of the movement entirely). "Agreeing that you are feminine was subsequently agreeing that you were sub-human, and therefore holding the sisterhood back" (The Take "The Girly Girl Trope, Explained" 7:03-7:10). Girliness is a direct link to wealth, class, and whiteness, as our modern "feminine" or "girly" traits originate from the ideals of the western noble's daughter. She looks pretty, sits tight, and marries someone nice, allowing her family to gain more wealth and status. This is perhaps why the girly girl is so often conflated with a sexist woman.

Media since then has favored the rebellious, pioneering women as its protagonists to superficially show how "woke" it is, when in reality putting these two factions of womanhood against each other pits women against each other and collapses the movement altogether. Film and television does this by presenting its female characters as tropes that enact the same story, like some fucked up misogynistic *commedia de l'arte*.

The story could go like this: the quirky, "not-like-the-other-girls" tomboyish female protagonist whose pure inability to be feminine in any sense and bumbling clumsiness makes her somehow irresistible to both the quirky, misunderstood loner male love interest(s) and the young, involuntarily celibate "nice guy" audience members is set opposite the evil high school Queen Bee girly-girl whose vain, materialistic, melodramatic, and manipulative feminine wiles briefly "steals" our protagonist's love interest away, only to be revealed as the shallow husk of a person

she is. Our teen lovers unite at the Prom, and in the infamous case of Regina George from *Mean Girls*, the girly girl gets her comeuppance by being hit by a bus.

Or, the story could go like this: Alone in the night, deliberately avoiding a boisterous, drunken, lovesick high school party, is the Final Girl, a virginal, “strong female character,” and the product and cause of cross-genderism. She’s a female main character, typically in an action/adventure or horror movie, and she’s the one survivor, quite literally the final girl, protected only by her masculine traits like her sharp wit, lack of emotion, brutish strength and determination, and distinct lack of sexual desire, unlike the other girls in the film whose “unbecoming wants” and girlish qualities lead them directly to an untimely, lengthy, violent death.

But most commonly, the story goes like this: our leading lady doesn’t lead at all. She’s secondary, supplementary, purely in service of the forlorn, downtrodden, jaded, nerdy, male screenwriter/director self-insert protagonist. She doesn’t exist to be a person, she exists to fulfill a specific purpose: to show said male protagonist the wonders of the world. Whereas the Pick-Me girl or the “Not-Like-Other-Girls” girl is the protagonist and the Girly Girl is the antagonist, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG) is the deuteragonist. She’s quirky, original, and plays by her own rules in a way that is so utterly irresistible to the straightlaced, lost, yet-to-come-of-age male protagonist. She has quirky tastes, opinions, styles, etc. Men who need her are timid sadsacks who emerge from their time with the Manic Pixie Girl refreshed and alive.

AV club writer Nathan Rabin coined the term for Claire, Kirsten Dunst’s character from the 2005 romantic dramedy  *Elizabethtown*. In his review of the movie and defining of the character, he said: “The Manic Pixie Dream Girl is the type of woman who exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures.” Rabin later apologized for coining the



term: “I coined the phrase to call out cultural sexism and to make it harder for male writers to posit reductive, condescending male fantasies of ideal women as realistic characters. But I looked on queasily as the phrase was increasingly accused of being sexist itself” (Nathan Rabin for Salon magazine, July 16, 2014).

The defining quality of the MPDG is that she exists only to serve the man. She exists to fulfill a fantasy—she’s not human. This is best shown in Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton’s *Ruby Sparks* (2012), where a male writer quite literally writes himself his own MPDG, demonstrating to the audience how reductive and abusive this character trope is.

#### **IV. The Repercussions of the Fictionalization and Misrepresentation of Teen Girl Life**

Historically, ultra-femininity has often been one of the ways to be considered beautiful for women. But now, femininity is often synonymous with evil in media. Feminine characters lack unique qualities and blend together as catty, fashion-forward, boy-obsessed, vain, and in cases like *Jawbreaker* and *Scream Queens*, literal cold-blooded killers (Shanspeare). In this portrayal, femininity has become monstrous.

I’ve experienced the repercussions of Hollywood’s fictionalization of teen life (especially teen girl life) first hand, and I’m sure you have too if you look close enough (or perhaps far away enough these things can be tricky like that). The most immediate thing that comes to mind is the way in which women are treated in academic or professional spaces. I feel I’m constantly tiptoeing along the tightrope between heinous bitch and ditzy bimbo, straddling the line between the Stratford sisters in *10 Things I Hate About You*. In my junior year audio production class, for example, I was the only woman present, and was constantly silently expected to apologize for my presence and products. While my male peers would preface their “beats” as “straight fire,” I

couldn't do the same. I tried one time with a project I was particularly proud of, only to face the harshest criticism in the room. While I can't dismiss that this might be because of my skill level, which was bad, but on-par with my peers, I can't help but feel my male peers were reacting to my boldness and putting the loudmouthed, blue-haired liberal girl back in her place. On the flip side, I wouldn't face the same aggression if I prefaced my work with "I don't think this is any good."

Monstrification of femininity in film and media tells women that we're not allowed to care about our appearance, love pastels, or be charismatic and flirty. "Tomboys have to be 'one of the guys' instead of being viewed as women who just have different interests than their peers, and feminine women or girls have to be rude or dense or undergo some sort of a transformation to be viewed as worthy of respect" (Shanspeare 12:10-12:34). Women in film should be allowed to dress how they want while also expressing ambition and character without being labeled as "the diva," because once this happens in media, it happens in real life.

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