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THE "SELL–OUT GIRL" IN CONTEMPORARY HOLLYWOOD CINEMA: TRAINING FUTURE GENERATIONS OF CAPITALIST CONSUMERS

By
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Bachelor of Arts in Communications
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A Thesis
Presented to Ryerson University
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Master of ~~Social Science~~ Arts
In the Program of
Communications and Culture

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2006

'Anne Elizabeth Dollack, 2006.

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The "Sell–Out Girl" in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema: Training Future Generations of Capitalist Consumers.

Master's of Social Science, 2006
By Anne Elizabeth Dollack
Communication and Culture
Ryerson University

Abstract

Contemporary Hollywood teen films are laden with ideological themes that advertise socially appropriate behaviours for young women. The following study, using a theoretical foundation in Marxism, presents a critical examination of the naturalized codes of consumerism, femininity, and adolescent subcultures found within the medium of film. The study of "alternative" female characters in *Clueless* (1995), *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), *She's All That* (1999), *Ghost World* (2001), *Thirteen* (2003), *Mean Girls* (2004), and *The Perfect Score* (2004), reveals some of the hegemonic processes of capitalism that commodify potential forms of social opposition while reinforcing dominant norms about gender expectations, class status, and conspicuous consumption.

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Preamble

This thesis is a study of the role of consumerism in film and its influence on gender socialization. More specifically, I study how contemporary Hollywood teen films help train future generations of female consumers by placating forms of alternativeness and feminism while reinforcing dominant myths about beauty, consumerism, and domesticity.

My initial interest in this topic is two-fold. Although enjoying a wide range of independent, Canadian, and sometimes controversial films, I have always found a guilty pleasure in watching teen romantic comedies. Discussing about this with my peers I found that I was one of many twentysomething women who enjoy what we originally thought was pulp entertainment. The number of women who enjoyed these films drove me to examine them more closely. I discovered that beneath the shallow and predictable narratives reside directive ideologies that condition young consumers. The second reason for pursuing this topic resides in my concern about the general lack of awareness, starting in youth, of the various hidden sociopolitical agendas embedded within mainstream media.

I chose to study film because of my passion for this media and also because films are social texts. They are a medium in which cultural meanings are circulated. Films also characterize the natural world and mirror the current sociopolitical state (Mageo and Stone, 79).

I chose the subcategory of teens for a few reasons. As well as their spending power, teens are a cultural category almost solely created from the mass media in post WWII North America (Catcher in the Rye & Sweet Sixteen popular culture arose in the 1950s [Danesi, 14]). Teenagers are also in a continual state of emotional and physical development making them vulnerable to advertisements and stories of an idealized society.

My goal in producing this thesis is to contribute to the field of media awareness. I hope that through my bring attention to the ways in which consumer ideologies work, these ideologies will be lifted out of their status (because ideologies are only truly effective if people are unaware of their location and purpose [Schiller, 11, Eagleton, 108]).

Introduction

One of the many functions of contemporary cinema stardom is to maintain dominant ideological discourse about adolescence and femininity. This is visible in Hollywood when, in the late 1990s, the character of the "alternative" female becomes a common recurrence in the landscape of teen films. The "alternative" female is a film character, defined by her commodity consumption as outside of mainstream teen culture. The "alternative" female appears counter-hegemonic but, in fact, serves to uphold the dominant socio-economic structure of North America.

Carol Clover coined the term "Final Girl" to describe a female adolescent character who reoccurs in slasher films[1] to outweigh all odds to remain living at the end of the film. Although no slasher films are addressed in this thesis it is important to note that patternized characters do emerge within different film narratives. While Clover describes the "Final Girl" as "abject terror personified" (35), I argue that the "alternative" female is ideal (read: capitalistic) consumerism personified. Similarly, the distinctions of these characters are framed as "different" from the start of the films. "The Final Girl of the slasher film is presented from the outset as the main character. The practiced viewer distinguishes her from her friends minutes into the film. She is the Girl Scout, the bookworm, the mechanic" (Clover, 39). The

[1] Slasher films are a subgenre of horror films. For more on this see Clover (1992).

"alternative" female is the feminist, the riot grrl[2], the goth[3], the potential lesbian, the artist and so on. What differentiates my "alternative" female from Clover's "Final Girl" is that while the female of the slasher films reveals hidden strengths, the "alternative" female of contemporary teen films readily "sells-out" her apparent counter-culture status to reveal a complacent girl who wants to uphold dominant traditions of domesticity, class-status, and consumerism. As Timothy Shary, a key researcher of teen films, notes, "most of the recent representations of girls' roles in general reveal a cautious effort by the film industry to provide increasingly active images of young women, even if many tend to remain conflicted about their new senses of power" (Teen Movies, 93). While the "alternative" female characters are indeed more active images of young women than in the past, they are exhibited in such a way that the characters have no choice but to relinquish the new sense of power in favour of dominant ideologies.

The "alternative" female character, once an anomaly in teen films only, is now frequently and widely incorporated into cinematic narrative structures to reinforce the current hegemony of consumer culture in North America. Using theoretical foundations in cultural studies, film studies, and feminist Marxism, and researching the ways in which these characters are portrayed, I examine why "alternative" female characters are the "sell-out girls" of contemporary teen cinema, helping to suppress potential socio-economic opposition.

The movies under investigation naturalize consumer capitalism, and encompass and neutralize behaviours that seek to contradict it. The duplicity of the "alternative" female resides in the ability of these characters to appear and resonate as active or progressive female images

[2] "Riot grrrl" is a term that arose in 1991 out of the punk and alternative music scene in the United States. For more on this see Murphy (2001), 146 – 151.
[3] "Goth" is a label for a subculture that arose from a mixture of New Wave and Glam rock influences. For more on this see Hodkinson (2004), 135 – 147.

while unknowingly supporting the status quo. The character portrayals seem to challenge *while* supporting hegemonic ideologies.

In this work, the depictions of "alternative" female characters in *Clueless* (1995), *She's All That* (1999), *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), *Ghost World* (2001), *Thirteen* (2003), *Mean Girls* (2004), and *The Perfect Score* (2004) are analyzed. Each film shows contradictory female characters that strengthen dominant ideologies of consumer capitalism while appearing to resist them. Using these seven films as examples, this thesis explains how consumer ideologies work to prevent any development of opposition to capitalist economic ideologies.

In the following pages the methodology highlights theoretical approaches that contribute to the study of this cultural phenomenon and that are applied through this work. Following this, the literature review will cover the concepts of celebrity, consumer culture, socialization, adolescence, femininity, ideology, and cultural hegemony as they pertain to the examination of "alternative" female characters in contemporary teen films.

In chapter one, Scarlett Johansson's characters in both *Ghost World* and *The Perfect Score* are investigated to reveal the underlining social implications of capitalist expectations of womanhood. As both of Johannson's characters face the transition from adolescence to womanhood their economic, gender, and racial biases and limitations are revealed.

The social significance of conspicuous consumption is examined in *Clueless, Mean Girls,* and *She's All That* in chapter two. *Clueless*, recognized for its revitalization of the teen film genre (Shary, 2002; Hentges, 2006) also modernized characteristics of the film makeover that are duplicated in *Mean Girls*, and *She's All That*. The makeover scenes depicted in each of these films naturalize conspicuous consumption and reveal the entrenched relationship between materialism and social relationships in North America.

In chapter three, the "alternative" female characters portrayed in *Mean Girls, 10 Things I Hate About You,* and *Thirteen* are analyzed as exemplifications of the way socially oppositional behaviour is co-opted into forms of alternative lifestyle choice that sustain dominant cultural hegemony. The conclusion will bring together the topics of each chapter to show how the themes of seven contemporary teen films are culturally and economically relevant to the study of consumer culture.

Methodology

Essential to studying popular films and contemporary culture is a refreshed analysis of the *current* culture of which the films are a product. Popular culture is dynamic and, at a glance, seems unpredictable but there is little doubt that capitalist politics direct the trends of purchasing power it features. Popular culture is pre-determined, in part, by dominant socio-economic forces. We can discover some ways in which these socio-economic forces work by studying the relationship between Hollywood films and North American society. By examining in particular the hegemonic inclusion of "alternative" female characters in contemporary Hollywood teen cinema, we can discover some dominant naturalized codes of consumerism.

By continuing to study the nature of hegemonic forces and their outlets (in this case, teen films), more people can become aware of the suppressive ideologies of consumer culture, and thus hopefully be lifted out of their status as ideological subjects. This work seeks to illuminate the activities present in current adolescent cinema that endorse qualities of spending power.

The term "popular" is usually applied to what appeals to the mass or majority of society. Traditionally, academic discourse has been apprehensive about the study of popular culture. In the 1940s and 1950s, when various fields of communication studies were just blossoming, popular culture was largely overlooked, since it was (and still is) difficult to ground within quantitative social science methodologies. But it was during this time period that popular culture became essential to creating and maintaining political, economic, and social values across a large geographical space. More recently, there has been a boom in the study of popular culture, as theorists are beginning to see its importance on all social science disciplines. Studying popular culture means having to find creative new ways to study dynamic, qualitative phenomena. For

this reason, a combination of various social science disciplines (outlined in the introduction) is applied in this work.

Films are social texts. As such, they contribute to the way in which society is interpreted and the way in which cultural meanings are circulated. The many contradictions that exist in contemporary society are mirrored in films of the same period. "Screen images have two components: an idealized image expressive of shared cultural values, and a despised image that represents a socioeconomic reality in discord with those values. Rather than confronting the contradiction between values and economics, people perceive these images as two different social types whose characters contradict one another. People avoid recognizing the symbolic nature of screen images by seeing them as characterizing the natural world, rather than betraying the politics of a particular cultural/historical world" (Mageo and Stone, 79). The fact that people do not always recognize the symbolic nature of images within films is a valid reason to pursue this study, to reveal the ideological nature of screen texts.

In particular, this work examines teen films to reveal how ideologies support dominant cultural beliefs about females and the role of youth in North American society. "The young have to be socialized into sets of values involving their place in the work force, the encouragement of an early family, marital life to assist in the reproduction of that work force, and conventional political and moral outlooks concerning the world and their place in it" (Brake, 20). The young also have to be socialized as shoppers. The teen films under discussion in this work contribute to the socialization of adolescents because they all disseminate messages about the relations between consumerism, gender roles, economic class, and social relations. "Teen films continue into the twenty-first century as an important cinematic genre, and as a revealing indicator of adolescent trends as well as cultural attitudes about youth" (Shary, Teen Movies, 109). As such,

the films in this thesis can be regarded as tools utilized to propagate a culture that supports dominant political and economic structures.

One approach to discovering the ideological implications in the films being studied is to study the metalanguage of their narratives, and how it is constructed and delivered. Simplified, "metalanguage" can be described as a stylistic reading between the lines, a narrative that remains unspoken yet prevalent; it can be found within the implications of screen happenings rather than in what is actually said in the dialogue (MacCabe, 2000). Although the concept of metalanguage was first applied to literary and, later, cinematic realism it can also be applied to the genre of teen films. Studying the metalanguage of this genre can help distinguish the reality of the culture of consumerism. "Whereas other discourses within the text [or film] are considered as material which are [sic] open to re-interpretation, the narrative discourse simply allows reality to appear and denies its own status as articulation" (MacCabe, 201). Therefore the metalanguage is the naturalized ideological narrative of films. This narrative constructs commodified subcultures under the guise of being counter-cultural. "The metalanguage reduces the object languages into a simple division between form and content and extracts the meaningful content from the useless form" (MacCabe, 201). In the case of this analysis, the meaningful and consumeristic content is found within the metalanguage rather than in the obvious story of the films.

The study of metalanguage is here combined with a second approach that involves the study of the cultural signs in the various narratives of these seven teen films. This approach focuses on the characters' acts of consumption and how the display of materialism relates to their social positions in fabricated teen cultures. In each of these films, commodities directly relate to how the characters perceive their high school culture and how, in turn, their peers perceive them.

The correlation between consumption and social relations is one that goes beyond Marx's theories of exchange value and use value. "Material commodities have a sign value, and their actual sign value is generated (semiotically) from within the system of signs" (Lodziak, 25). This approach expands upon Marx's philosophy to try to develop an understanding of the signified values of various modes of consumption. "In a consumer society, all commodities have cultural as well as functional values" (Fiske, 283). Therefore, while Marx applied the term of use value to the functional characteristics of the commodity, use value in the current political and economic climate of North America is a term that must be expanded to include the cultural function of consumption. The use value of a commodity is determined, in part, by its cultural significance. In turn, the reproduction of culture in contemporary capitalism relies on the dominance of the signifying values of commodities (Jameson, 2002). This thesis examines the dominance of the relationship between the commodity and the implied cultural value system for adolescent females.

Each film in this study placates cultural alternatives by naturalizing the representations of consumerism. Hall applied the use of naturalized codes to describe the ideological nature of language. "The operation of naturalized codes reveals not the transparency and naturalness of language but the depth, the habituation and the near-universality of the codes in use. They produce apparently 'natural' recognitions" (Hall, 170). The naturalized codes in these seven teen films promote infinite consumption while quelling potential cultural rebellion. Film narrative, metalanguage, and the language that is expressed through commodities work together to construct complacent young women as ideal shoppers.

Literature Review

The Role of the Celebrity

Celebrities are everywhere: they are in our homes, on our television sets, in magazines, and in public, crowding our streets, skies, and subways. The mediated image of the celebrity in North America is one of the purveyors of "normal" consumer practices. "Film stars function as icons in American popular culture, defining and symbolizing for the rest of society roles and behaviors that are normatively appropriate at a given historical time" (Levy, 30). The image of the celebrity is amplified with the ever-expanding cultural integration of media and society. The more access the media gives to the celebrity, the more the celebrity derives cultural power from this privileged access to the mass media (Silvera and Austad, 2003; Street, 2004; Gamson, 1992). The concept of stardom is intrinsically linked to the nature in which the mass media operates (Fowles, 1992; King, 1985). The celebrity constitutes a cultural enterprise that either directly or indirectly affects cultural consumption. Theoretically, the celebrity is a system of influence with an ideological function to perpetuate images that endorse governing cultural values. To meet the need for new market segments the celebrity, as a system of influence, has begun to represent members of fringe cultures in popular Hollywood movies, in such a way that bolsters modes of mainstream consumerism. The celebrity function is part of the process of understanding how the inclusion of alternative female roles in teen cinema works to maintain capitalist hegemony.

Inasmuch as the celebrity is an endorser of consumer ideologies, she is also a spectacle of political-economic diversion. The ruling ideas are embedded within the celebrity's image. While individual stars lack permanence, the concept of stardom has been able to persist because of its support for the agenda of the ruling class. "If movie stardom has persisted for so long in a time, despite political, economic, and cultural changes, in both the film industry and society at

large, it must be supported by powerful groups, for whom it fulfills important functions" (Levy, 32). These important functions reside in the social sphere and have an ultimately economic-driven purpose to maintain the culture of commodities.[4] This is due, in part, to the stars' ability to propagate popular opinion. The most marketable celebrities are powerful purveyors of cultural "norms" (Kilbourne, 1999). Celebrities substantiate cultural norms by adopting qualitative characteristics (identities, values, and beliefs within various character renderings) that help manipulate the current cultural system.

A Commodity-Dependent Society

Marx once noted that the commodity embodies more than the actual use value of the product. "The mysterious character of the commodity form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things" (Marx, "The Fetishism of the Commodity," 11). For Marx the commodity is also a representation of the exchange value of labour. But what the statement alludes to is that, in light of developments in consumer culture, the commodity is integral to the development of modern capitalism. In his work, Marx develops ideas about the ways in which the commodity embodies not just an economic function but also a culturally significant one. Theorists have expanded upon Marx's ideas about commodities, modifying and applying them to various concepts, including, but not exclusive to, commodity fetishism (Baudrillard, 1973) and conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1925).

Contemporary theorists have extended Marx's theories to reveal the ideological nature of the commodity. Lee states that consumer goods lead "a double life, as both agents of social

[4] 'Culture of Commodities' is a term borrowed from the title of Slater's article (1998), 100-130.

control and as the objects used by ordinary people in constructing their own culture. Ideologically and aesthetically contextualised by advertising, design, marketing and other promotional forms, commodities are to be considered as 'texts' inviting certain preferred forms of reading and decoding which aim to reproduce dominant social relations. But in their role as cultural artifacts, consumer goods become important material and symbolic resources with which ordinary people reproduce their life and their patterns of life" (49). Therefore, the commodity, while still characterizing the labour process of which it is a product, is also an embodied representation of cultural signifiers of an individual's lifestyle choices, economic status, and gender roles. This social function of the commodity becomes more prevalent in film as it depicts the character image and also predicts certain social interactions.

The commodity, in post-1995 Hollywood teen cinema, is an important social signifier because it clearly marks a character's lifestyle choices. A young woman is a punk, a feminist, an artist: whatever she is, it is clearly constructed. The lines are distinctly drawn and marked by the commodities that adorn the characters.

The Commodity

Current capitalism is dependent on the consumption of products: both tangible, material goods and products of an ideological nature. The "needs" to be found in consumer culture are not the nutrition and shelter essential to human existence but wants that can be advertised as needs in a scheme where human value is determined by virtue of what people have or do not have.[5] Slater states that consumer culture "associates satisfaction with socio-economic stagnation: there must be no end to needs" (100). Quite often the products being sold are condoning and encouraging insatiable consumer desires. For example, within the fashion industry a great emphasis is placed

[5] This idea is developed in detail in Lukacs (1971), 83 – 110.

upon the current season of styles (if one is fashionable she must purchase the "latest" fashions), perpetuating the idea of continual consumption.

The social importance of acquiring commodities serves a hegemonic function by providing false choice to the masses. It is false because one is given a choice between commodities, but not whether or not to consume. One cannot choose an identity separate from the world of consumer goods. "The object world of consumer culture, for example, seems to demand astonishing refinement and differentiation of needs and subjectivity but generally in the form of merely *choosing* among given objects: individuals are unable to recognize these objects as the products of their own labour and therefore as externalizations of their subjectivity. They can *choose* between pleasurable things but cannot *assimilate* them into a process of self-development" (Slater, 104). This inability to assimilate is a function of the hegemony of capitalist consumerism. If the only culturally and socially recognized way to display individual subjectivity is through the accumulation of products, then those people with the financial means to do this will prevail as part of the ruling stratum. Therefore the hegemonic process of consumerism is inherently a class-based one.

The class structure of the current consumer culture aids in the social maintenance of capitalistic ideals, that is, the ideals that strengthen the position of the ruling class. This is accomplished, in part, by burdening the commodity with a great deal of social meaning. "A particular array of objects may be found to represent and assist in the construction of perspectives relating to control over production or rivalry between consumers, but also to wider issues concerning morality and social ideals" (Miller, 106). The films in this study emphasize rivalry between consumers, thus distracting many from the larger social implications of

consumerism seen broadly. Further, consumption practices in these films perpetuate wider issues regarding the social ideals of adolescence and femininity.

Femininity and Adolescence

The age group referred to as "teens," "young adults," and "adolescents" was not socially recognized until the dissemination of teen culture in the mass media in the 1950s. J.D. Salinger's The Catcher In The Rye (1951) was one of the first examples of the popular use of the term "teenager." "The crystallization of the teenage persona and of its supporting subculture can be traced to the fifties. In most of the Western world, the appearance of this new 'social animal' has led to significant changes in social structure and economic behaviour" (Danesi, 14). Since the 1950s, there has been an increasing political-economic need to ground the culture of consumerism in the social formation of teen culture. This is accomplished by moulding teen culture through the mass media. First, the mass media served to distinguish teens from other population stratifications. "In developed Western countries the stratification of our culture into age groups has traditionally been mapped directly on to our media culture" (Lumby, 53). The mass media, therefore, create the social space for adolescence. Secondly, the mass media functions to perpetuate the classification of teens as a social group. This is achieved through the creation and recreation of a teen culture (where commodities are signifiers of social meanings), a culture as constantly changing as the dominant hegemony of society. Examining how the mass media exhibits teen culture is essential to understanding how this segment of culture serves a greater socio-economic function in North American society.

The social ideals of adolescence and femininity are displayed through consumption practices of the "alternative" female characters in teen cinema. The gendered portrayals of teens help create a perceived relationship between the celebrities and the adolescent audience. Dyer

states that "stars provide ideals of femininity for adolescent women in the audience preoccupied with attaining adult femininity" ("Authenticity", 151). The star role models feminine ideals for young women through her ability to typify character types that comply with many values and belief systems of the female audience. "By encouraging women at home to identify with media celebrities whose lives mirror their own, a new form of celebrity worship is invoked--one which constructs women as 'consumer allies'" (Mann, 352). The celebrity fabricates a perception of consumer alliances between her mediated image and the audience. This persuasion, from the celebrity, reaches teens through the mass media and it is the media that disseminates the dominant cultural perceptions about femininity. "Both the news and entertainment media have had enormous power to set the agenda about how people consider, react to, and accept women's changing roles and aspirations" (Douglas, 293). Teen films do not fall outside this spectrum and as such are a medium that affects the gendered roles of adolescence. "Indeed, the social face of femininity is constructed by mechanisms of visual representation, such as advertising and film, which gain women's collaboration and consent via specific forms of identification" (Humm, 179). Films, as well as aiding in the social production of femininity, mirror cultural realities of womanhood. "In this sociological view, the objection to the dream factory of Hollywood is that it produces false consciousness, that films do not show 'real' women but only the stereotypical images of an ideological laden 'femininity'" (Smelik, 8). Teens as well as the adult population accept this false consciousness about values of womanhood. Lumby states that the teen film's role as a mediated message "serves parents and teenagers with images of who teenage girls are about to become as adults, what is expected of them, and the role that they are about to play in society" (50). Therefore, not only are teen films telling girls how to act in society but they also send a message that is reinforced by adults, who contribute to the dominant discourse's strength

by perpetuating hegemonic codes of femininity. The idealization of femininity in teen films effectively limits counter-culture lifestyle options for young women. Research has shown that Caucasian American women are often contested in their attempts to navigate their lives (Golden, 2002; Kirby and Krone, 2002). The challenge of negotiating different parts of their lives (trying to "find themselves" in the transition period between adolescence and womanhood) is a theme that reoccurs in the seven films under examination.

Conspicuous Consumption

Veblen states that the term "conspicuous consumption" describes the "cultural significance of consumption for social groups in their attempts to fix and demonstrate to others their place within a social hierarchy" (31). Therefore, conspicuous consumption refers to the act that involves the purchase of the fetishized commodity for the social and cultural connotation that the commodity embodies. Conspicuous consumption is an act of purchased social reputability. In North America, the way in which an individual interacts with her social environment has a great deal to do with the cultural significance of the material goods that she possesses. The more extravagant the items in one's possession, the more others will regard him/her as having an elite social status. The importance of the commodity as a social signifier is undeniable. "The real significance of the commodity, then, rests upon the fact that it tends to reflect the whole social organization of capitalism at an historical and geographical point in its development" (Clark, 83). By examining patterns of conspicuous consumption as portrayed by "alternative" female characters, we can analyze the contemporary nature of capitalism.

Lifestyle

There are many factors that fall under the umbrella term "lifestyle." From one's choice of shoes to one's choice of career, there is a vast range of components that constitute an

individual's lifestyle. Featherstone states that the term lifestyle "connotates individuality, self-expression and a stylistic self-consciousness. One's body, clothes, speech, leisure pastimes, eating and drinking preferences, home, car, choice of holidays, etc. are all to be regarded as indicators of the individuality of taste and sense of style of the owner/consumer" (92). Lifestyle, in other words, is a very general term for the tastes reflected by the commodified individual. Lifestyle choices are signified by various acts of consumption that, not unlike conspicuous consumption, can be interpreted by others as signifiers of the individual's class, gender, and socio-political designations. The representations of "alternative" females in this work demonstrate the ability of contemporary teen films to simultaneously alienate and commodify unconventional lifestyles.

Alternative and Oppositional

Social opposition and resistance are quelled through labeling certain lifestyles as "alternative" and not "oppositional". Williams notes the gap between the two terminologies. "There is a simple theoretical distinction between alternative and oppositional, that is to say between someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it, and someone who finds a different way to live and wants to change the society in its light" (Williams, "Base and Superstructure", 160). The implications of this theoretical distinction play out in teen films and will be examined in detail in chapter three.

The female characters in these films have no option to become oppositional because they are labeled, through acts of consumerism as "alternative" and so do not pose a threat to dominant societal values. "Alternative" lifestyle originates and resides in the individual; "oppositional" lifestyle can occur only with groups. "As presented by the national message-making apparatus, conflict is almost always an *individual* matter, in its manifestations and in its origin" (Schiller,

17). Individualization of that which counters dominant societal discourse is an effective manipulation tactic of capitalist culture. The effectiveness of "alternative" lifestyle as a myth resides in its apparent non-existence. "In short, manipulation requires a false reality that is a continuous denial of its existence" (11). This mass denial allows for ideas to circulate about individual freedoms that ultimately support cultural hegemony. This is done, in part, by linking individualism with freedom: "The view that freedom is a personal matter, and that the individual's rights supersede the group's and provide the basis for social organization, gained credibility with the rise of material rewards and leisure time" (9). Consumer culture solidifies the myth of individualized freedoms, naturalized in the language of teen films so as to encourage narcissistic and hedonistic actions for the end product of economic profit. The myth of autonomy can be made visible only by the absence of like-minded oppositional groups. The effort of the "alternative" female to distinguish herself as a culturally resistant *individual* is precisely the action that, instead of leading her to form or to become a part of a counter-culture, demonstrates her compliance to the ruling hegemonic forces of consumerism.

Culture/Society and Socialization

The terms "culture" and "society" are broad and difficult to statically define. It is important to distinguish the applied meaning of culture and society because much of this work examines the socialized role of "alternative" females. Culture, in this work, refers not only to the totality of human products (Berger, 157) but also to a process. Williams notes that "we use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life--the common meanings; to mean that and learning--the special processes of discovery and creative effort" ("Culture is Ordinary", 4). Both of Williams's meanings of culture are applied in the following pages. As well, culture is examined in contemporary Hollywood teen films as a product of dominant social ideologies

that aid in the process of commodifying subcultures. "The dominant culture, itself an unequal composite of the 'high' and the postmodern, of civility and commercialism, increasingly undermines traditional identities, thus pressurizing the residual to the point where it reappears as the emergent" (Eagleton, 123). It is this process (making the old new again) that distributes dominant socio-economic ideas of culture through Hollywood teen films under the false portrayal of counter-culture choices.

Culture, therefore, is a dynamic phenomenon that helps uphold the ideas of the ruling strata of society while providing a way for theorists to identify and name various social occurrences. As well, society has a multi-faceted definition. Society is a product of humans just as humans are products of society (Berger, 155). This work uses the term "society" to describe the location of current North American culture. Because society is not an entity with static borders it can be studied only as a process. Socialization is also a process and a necessary condition of both culture and society. It is necessary because it is through this process that the role of humans in and on culture and society can be studied. "Socialization can, of course, be described psychologically as a learning process. The new generation is initiated into the meanings of the culture, learns to participate in its established tasks and to accept the roles as well as the identities that make up its social structures. Socialization, however, has a crucial dimension that is not adequately grasped by speaking of a learning process. The individual not only learns the objectivated meanings but identifies with and is shaped by them" (Berger, 163). So, socialization is the process by which culture and society affect the individual and it is through this process that young women learn about socio-economic and gender roles.

This work also recognizes that the individual can affect culture and society by accepting and employing social signifiers. Inglis and Hughson identify the individual's effect on culture

and society using Marx's theory of base and superstructure. "The essential thrust of Marx's argument is that if we want to understand a society, we should examine the nature of its material base. The base expresses itself in the nature of the superstructure. Thus a particular type of base will produce a particular form of cultural superstructure" (22). While individuals may be the original creators of various alternative subcultures, the social effect of these subcultures resides in the commodified versions perpetuated by the cultural superstructure. Thus socialization is, in the larger cultural sense, the process by which these various subcultures affect the patterns of society's superstructure. By studying the socialization of the "alternative" female in adolescent cinema, the contributing cultural and societal factors are identified.

Ideology and Hegemony

Much of this work is applied to the examination of the dominant ideology and hegemony of North American society. "Ideology, in its normal senses, is a relatively formal and articulated system of meanings, values, and beliefs, of a kind that can be abstracted as a 'world-view' or a 'class outlook'" (Williams, "Culture", 109). The ideologies promoted in the portrayal of the "alternative" young woman are the socially and culturally constructed meanings and values of a dominant cultural and societal hegemony based in consumerism.

The way that ideologies enforce the commodification of teen subcultures by converting possible social opposition into forms of alternative, individual lifestyle choices is also scrutinized. "Ideology happens wherever power impacts upon signification, bending it out of shape or hooking it up to a cluster of interests" (Eagleton, 108). Therefore it is through the ideologies signified with contemporary Hollywood teen films that that subcultures are portrayed to support dominant socio-economic interest.

Hegemony, on the other hand, is a term that extends past the definition of ideology to define the lived process of dominance of one class and the subordination of another (Williams, "Hegemony", 108). This lived process is everywhere, all at once. "It is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values--constitutive and constituting--which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming" (Williams, "Hegemony", 110). The dynamic and all-encompassing nature of consumeristic hegemony has completely enveloped culture to the point where it is able to create its own subcultures. "It can be persuasively argued that all or nearly all initiatives and contributions, even when they take on manifestly alternative or oppositional forms, are in practice tied to the hegemonic: that the dominant culture, so to say, at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture" (114). The interwoven nature of political, economic, and popular cultural aspects at work in the cinematic portrayal of "alternative" females reveals the hegemonic force behind the creation and subsequent breakdown of subcultures.

Chapter One

Bad girls just want to be good: The Normalization of Female Social Values Through Scarlett Johansson's Characters in *Ghost World* and *The Perfect Score.*

In this chapter, the representation of the transition between adolescence and adulthood, and the uncertainties therein, is examined in the context of two contemporary teen films. This chapter provides an in-depth look at Scarlett Johansson's characters in both *Ghost World* (1995) and *The Perfect Score* (2003) to demonstrate how two different filmmaking perspectives (Independent and Hollywood) embed similar dominant ideologies within the portrayal of the transition between adolescence and womanhood. Both films represent the implied capitalistic expectations that exist during the characters' transitions from being young rebellious females into socially compliant women. This chapter is not an examination of Scarlett Johansson or of her acting career but rather focuses on her characters (Rebecca in *Ghost World* and Francesca in *The Perfect Score*), and the metalanguage of the films to reveal ideological implications about female adolescence and socio-economic expectations. Both characters serve as examples of how a socially idealized female is perpetuated in teen films.

Rebecca and Francesca serve to remind girls on the cusp of womanhood that they can rebel as adolescents but that as adults, they are expected to want the same things as other grown-ups around them: for example, to be "normal," to have (class-determined) jobs and apartments, and to be "real" moms. These aspects of womanhood are touted as socially recognized accomplishments in both films. Rebecca and Francesca subscribe to these pre-determined accomplishments and, therefore, do not have control over their futures. "Lack of control is precisely what many women experience at various stages of their lives as demands are placed on them by others, and as they are seen more as mothers, wives, daughters than as individuals with

control and autonomy. No one has been assigned the role of enhancing the development and well-being of women beyond the stage of childhood" (McIrvin Abu-Laban, and McDaniel, 115). The development of women beyond childhood, although not formally assigned as such, is depicted in the idealized portrayal of Rebecca and Francesca. In the following pages the ways in which these two characters comply with prescribed socio-economic norms of females in North America will be studied.

Even though Rebecca and Francesca are constructed within different narratives, their revealed desires in both movies serve to uphold dominant capitalistic ideologies of class and gender status. The inherent ideologies in North American culture that are mirrored in *Ghost World* and *The Perfect Score* include notions of class status (or lack thereof) as well as notions of domesticity rooted in gender, racial, and sexual bias. These ideological implications are incorporated into the character make up of both Rebecca and Francesca, creating an imperfect harmony between potentially counter-hegemonic characters and ones that uphold capitalist ideals. Rebecca and Francesca's characters serve to normalize the dominant ideologies underlying these films, thus placating counter-hegemonic notions before any potential for opposition can occur.

Ghost World

It is not just Hollywood films that serve to uphold the dominant order but as illustrated with the example of *Ghost World*, independent teen films can also advertise a capitalistic hegemonic message. *Ghost World* was produced with a relatively small budget of $7 million US and has many narrative and text structures that can be deconstructed at many levels (Sperb, 2004). The two adolescent protagonists are Enid (Thora Birch) and Rebecca (Scarlett Johansson). They are childhood friends who have just graduated high school and are uncertain

of their future. Enid and Rebecca are, from the onset of the film, exhibited as rebellious teens, not conforming to the standard of mainstream teenagers (as depicted in the graduation dance scene when Enid and Rebecca remark upon the "pathetic" behaviours of their peers). Enid and Rebecca are social outsiders and display unsociable behaviour through the use of sarcastic criticism to separate themselves from the rest of their graduating class. The graduation scenes, at the beginning of the film, situate Rebecca within the definition of the "alternative" female. She and Enid are set apart from their classmates both physically and mentally as they stand by the punch bowl surveying the room, making sarcastic comments about their peers. Rebecca's "alternativeness" is established from the outset of the film as her comments at the graduation indicate that she either refused to partake, or was rejected from partaking in mainstream teen culture during her high school years. But it is quickly revealed that Rebecca is less of a social outcast than Enid upon being faced with life decisions. After her graduation she chooses the path of the conformist. "As the summer unfolds, a strain develops between the two girls as Rebecca moves in high gear by getting a job working in a local Starbucks-like emporium, earnestly starts look for an apartment, and uses her free time to spend money in typical consumer-like fashion on cheap wares for her new place" (Giroux, 116). In this quote Giroux has summed up the essence of Rebecca's presence in this film as she embodies the normalized process of entering adulthood. She is distanced from Enid because her portrayal of entering womanhood is depicted in a manner that is socially appropriate. Rebecca takes the path of least social resistance by finding an apartment and job. This effectively increases the separation between her and her former childhood friend, the social outcast.

The role of Rebecca in *Ghost World* conveys the message that after graduation women must put aside their adolescent angst and conform to societal expectation. When Rebecca curbs

her teen rebellion she then conforms mentally as well, aligning herself to the mainstream status quo. This gives her a feeling of superiority to Enid, who does not conform in the same manner. "Rebecca disapproves of Enid's inability to move forward and Enid is confused by Rebecca's easy adaptation to a world they both despised while in high school" (Giroux, 117). Rebecca's disapproval is advertised as a normative action in the film whereas Enid's resistance to normal modes of consumption is portrayed as individually based confusion. Rebecca does not view Enid's reluctance to conform as an option in her life. Real life constitutes real things--a job, an apartment, a future. Rebecca mirrors the conditioning many teen females endure during their transition into womanhood. Rebecca's mental state reflects the widely held belief that there are limited options (those offered via mainstream culture) as an adult (Coleman, 1961; Chodorow, 1978; Saxton, 1990; Douglas, 1994).

Enid's life choices are not represented as choices at all. Rather, they are portrayed as hopelessness about what her future may entail. Enid's art teacher, Roberta (Illeana Douglas), doesn't like Enid's artistic talent, pressuring her to change her style. Enid resists, but faced with no other options uses a shocking image (a racist advertisement for a fictitious restaurant, Cook's Chicken, formerly named Coon's Chicken) to illustrate the hypocrisy of Roberta's more "political" style of art only to face scrutiny from the community and the loss of her art school scholarship. Enid's social resistance, at the individual level, is continually subject to a challenge that tries to strip her of the capacity to choose a life that does not proscribe to dominant cultural ideologies. "In the context of this rhetoric of nomadic subjectivity and privatized resistance, the dystopian notion that there are no alternatives to the present order reinforces the message that young people should avoid at all costs the prospect of organizing collectively to address the social, political, and economic basis of individually suffered problems" (Giroux, 120). In an

effort to isolate any potential for collectivity, *Ghost World*, reflecting social ideologies present in contemporary North America, depicts Enid with a sense of despair in juxtaposition to Rebecca's purposeful path.

Rebecca, as a role model for capitalist hegemonic consumer practices, avoids anything regarded as potentially socially oppositional as soon as her high school graduation is completed. The dominant ideologies of North America are embodied within Rebecca; she does exactly what society expects of her. With ease, Rebecca accepts her new social role while giving up her adolescent beliefs and childhood friend. Rebecca's transformed behaviour starts soon after graduation in a diner when she casually asks Enid about apartment hunting and attempts a discussion of the transition period both girls are in. Enid, not feeling the need to normalize her social being and not understanding Rebecca's need to voice her social transition, ends the conversation abruptly. From this point forward every interaction between Enid and Rebecca is underscored by the tension created between Rebecca's need to conform and Enid's resistance to it. Rebecca, thinking Enid's reluctance is just an aftermath emotion of having to deal with the end of high school, strives to frame her social conformation in a manner that she thinks might appease and possibly transform Enid. For example, Rebecca describes apartment hunting as a fun little game of dress up that both girls can do together.

> Rebecca: "So, I was thinking that when we look for our apartment we have to try to convince these people that we're totally rich yuppies."
> Enid: "What are you talking about?!"
> Rebecca: "You know, that's who people want to rent to. So all we have to do is buy like semi-expensive outfits and I think it's no big deal. It will be really fun."

Enid, apparently wise to Rebecca's thinly disguised plea for normalcy, goes home and proceeds to dye her hair green. Rebecca continues her hunt for an apartment for both of them. This scene

demonstrates that Rebecca wants to transform Enid in the same ways that she has conformed to have companionship in this transition.

Ghost World is an artistic reflection of a disinterested middle-class America that, via Rebecca, serves to uphold the economic structure of the middle class. Enid and Rebecca are initially confused about their middle-class status. "Enid (Thora Birch) and Rebecca (Scarlett Johansson), whose adolescent angst and resentment informs both their resistance to a phony middle-class world and their attempts to adjust to it without losing their self-ascribed marginal status" (Giroux, 115). This confusion parallels a capitalist reality that keeps class status, for the most part, prevalent but undefined. This is a direct result of a dominant social ideology of the ruling strata that serves to mislead the general public. "One group may dominate large areas of cultural production, whilst another, through lack of access to cultural form, may be less clear as to the nature of its own interests" (Miller, 111). The elite, through its dominance of cultural production in North America, ensures that the middle-classes are without interests aside from those assigned via various channels of cultural production. Rebecca, not ten minutes into the film, has set aside her resistance to the middle class, in light of having no other options, to become an advocate for it.

Rebecca unfailingly accepts her class because she has been conditioned to welcome the norms that society prescribes to her. She doesn't question her choice to work at a coffee shop and to skip attending college because this upper-class future option was not a part of her middle-class childhood dream. This dream, according to her back-story in *Ghost World*, was formed in grade seven and included a job and an apartment: no more, no less. Rebecca's willing and sometimes enthusiastic acceptance of her commodifed future shows how the idealization of middle-class standards in *Ghost World* serves to reinforce the existing order of consumer

capitalism. As long as there is an elite class in North American society there will also always be a need for lower classes to serve the elite. Rebecca's acceptance of her first job at the coffee shop translates as her acceptance of her subservient role (working in the service industry) in the capitalist economy to uphold a ruling [8] Her self-identity is shaped by her middle-class status that, in turn, shapes her future career choices. "Occupational choice is shaped by individual conceptions of self-identity and preference but at the same time, work aspirations are constrained by qualifications, skills and social obstacles related to gender, race and class" (Bowlby et al., 233). Rebecca's acceptance of her middle-class status, therefore, limits her career possibilities to choices provided within her socio-economic class.

Rebecca's employment is only one of the contributing factors to her submissive role in middle-class America. She also undertakes, with great enthusiasm, that task of renting an apartment and filling it with various household commodities. She encourages Enid to follow her in her consumerist path when they go shopping together. Enid despises all of the mass-produced kitchenware, whereas Rebecca is excited to fill her new home with it. Rebecca's "need" for mass-produced commodities demonstrates her compliance to the current socio-economic structure of North America as she willingly supports a large corporate infrastructure. In this scene, Rebecca has distanced herself from any possible change aside from her product choices. "The mass-produced goods of the marketplace were conceived of as providing an ideology of 'change' neutralized to the extent that it would be unable to effect significant alteration in the relationship between individuals and the corporate structure" (Ewen, 85). Rebecca's blind acceptance of choice through commodity purchase makes her one of the few middle-class role

[8] For more on the characteristics of the ruling class refer to Marx and Engels. "The Ruling Class and the Ruling Ideas." (2004) 39-42.

models in contemporary teen films.[9] Most, as will be examined in the following movie, *The Perfect Score*, advertise capitalist ideals from an elite perspective.

The Perfect Score

The Perfect Score is a Hollywood film about a group of teens that conspire to steal the answers to the SAT. While this film was not a remarkable blockbuster hit (only grossing $4.8 million USD on opening weekend) it remains a relevant example of the portrayal of upper-class American teen stereotypes. The characters include two Caucasian protagonists, Matty (Bryan Greenberg) and Kyle (Chris Evans). The supporting cast is made up of Anna (Erika Christensen), the smart and virginal love interest of Kyle; Roy (Leonardo Nam), a Korean computer wiz-kid and comic pothead; Desmond, an African-American basketball player (played by NBA professional Darius Miles); and Francesca (Scarlett Johansson), the rebel feminist. All except Francesca and Roy are depicted as good teens[11] who feel, because of various circumstances, that they cannot get the score on the SAT that they need to complete their life plans. Roy is included due to his eavesdropping on Matty and Kyle as they discuss the heist. Francesca, on the other hand, is essential to the plan's execution because of her socio-economic status; her father owns the office building where the answers are located.

In *The Perfect Score,* the metalanguage is constructed of the dominant ideologies of patriarchy and upper-class American values. Each character comes from a home with either a high level of income and/or a strong focus on traditional family values. The metalanguage of *The Perfect Score* carefully constructs an image of young adults ready to accept adulthood once the obstacle of the SAT is overcome. The SAT in this film--as compared to graduation in *Ghost World*--serves as the signifier of the threshold between adolescence and adulthood. "For

[9] Other examples include *The Slums of Beverly Hills* (1998); *Save the Last Dance* (2001), and *Thirteen* (2003).

[11] Read: mainstream and goal-oriented

instance, the SATs cause much anxiety and in films like *The Perfect Score*, 'multicultural' teens work together . . . to steal the results rather than study. This is an unsanctioned rite of passage, and while it's a collective process, it's still for individual gain. Further, this film doesn't address the more structural problems with the SATs like its racial, gender, and class bias, for example. [Checked quote – this is verbatim] Or the fact that such a meaningless test holds so much weight not only in some college admissions, but also socially and mythically" (Hentges, 133). In *The Perfect Score*, Francesca mentions the gender bias of the SAT (and later, Desmond mentions its racial bias) but beyond the mere mention there is no attempt by the film to resolve these issues. None of the characters pay heed to the class bias of the SAT, because they are all in a socio-economic class that the SAT is structured to advantage. Instead of critiquing the biases of the SAT, the film uses the test to create a narrative that focuses on the life transition of the group of teens. Also, the act of stealing the SAT, aids in Francesca's conformation to dominant gender roles.

While Francesca embodies a similar cultural conformation to Rebecca in *Ghost World*, she differs from Rebecca's middle-class attributes to conform to an upper-class ideal of womanhood. Francesca's class attributes are displayed through her future plans (she writes a book and is set to attend university) and can also be viewed on the body of her character. Francesca displays pricey commodities (laptop, hair dye, make-up, and a multitude of accessories and new outfits). As well, the lavishness of her father's house and his office building indicate that she comes from a wealthy background. All of these factors together illustrate ideologies of an upper economic and societal class in America. Unlike Rebecca, who passively accepts her economic rank, Francesca is aware of her privileged economic status. In one scene, Francesca points out to Kyle that the "poor little rich girl thing is played out."

Francesca's wardrobe is carefully constructed to depict her as a social outcast while still maintaining her sex-object status. Her suburban punk motif with low-cut tops and mini-skirts not only indicates her alternative lifestyle but also calls attention to her acknowledgment of being the object of other people's gazes. "This pattern, which leaves women as individuals, extends from high culture to popular mythology: 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.' This determines not only the relations of men to women, but the relation of women to themselves" (Wolf, 58). Francesca's wardrobe implies her knowledge of the way in which others regard her and also indicates the way in which she wants to be viewed.

Francesca is in a socially advantageous position of being white and upper-class, yet she remains uncertain of her life plan. "The affluent, educated, liberated women of the First World, who can enjoy freedoms unavailable to any women ever before, do not feel as free as they want to" (Wolf, 9). Although she is confident that her intellect will bring her success, she still characterizes anxiety about her future because having a family and being a real mom is what really matters to her. She briefly entertains her feminist advocacy for "girl issues" before internalizing her angst. "The cumulative weight of women's various social obligations means that women often blame themselves for 'not coping,' for not being well enough organized, or for not being sufficiently capable, when in fact it would be more realistic to simply acknowledge the social forces that impinge on them and constrain their lives" (McIrvin Abu-Laban, and McDaniel 116). Francesca doubts her oppositional capabilities and prefers to conform to constraining social expectations.

Francesca, it is implied, is in on the heist for no greater reason than to try to achieve social normalcy through the acquisition of friends and a heterosexual relationship. She does not admit this to herself but when another character, Matty, her newfound love interest, allows her to

share her feelings, she eagerly divulges. She confides in Matty that all she really wants is to be a real mom, "not one whose name on her business card is more important than the title of mother." In this scene Francesca vocalizes dominant ideologies of feminine norms and societal expectations. Now that she is entering womanhood and a relationship with Matty she feels confident enough to proclaim traditional values. This scene settles the contradiction between feminist and capitalist ideologies by voicing capitalist norms while implying that Francesca has curbed her feminist convictions in a less aggressive manner. Like *Ghost World's* Rebecca, Francesca illustrates the perpetuated myth that it is acceptable for teens to rebel, but they must conform to capitalistic societal expectations in the "real world."

Feminism in Francesca's teen life is portrayed as a hard façade or protective shell that she uses until she reaches womanhood by graduating high school. The narrative structure of *The Perfect Score* blends dominant female stereotypes (about motherhood and heterosexuality, for example) that are prevalent in North American society. Female teens are thus being encouraged, by lack of inclusion of different behavioural modes, to become complacent and unquestioningly accept dominant societal expectations. Ultimately, Francesca, like Rebecca, submits to societal expectation of adulthood. She is rebellious on the exterior but her mannerisms and actions indicate a nature complacent to the ruling order.

At the beginning of the film Francesca is working on her online 'zine[12]. Through the 'zine, Francesca introduces her interest in advocacy for greater social causes but this is quickly co-opted in favour of showing her battle to define herself individually and socially. Instead of the potential for the 'zine to be a counter-hegemonic tool, it becomes an illustrative example of her inner turmoil about her role in society. Her web page is a site of emotional weakness as

[12] A 'zine is self-published magazine or blog that is critical of consumer culture. For more this see Duncombe (1997), 1 – 16.

opposed to empowered strength. *The Perfect Score* implies acceptance of the counter-hegemonic act of publishing 'zines but at the same time rejects this act as a sign of strength. The website then becomes just another indicator of the weakness of Francesca's identity. The film suggests that it is far easier to accept the dominant discourse of feminine identity than to try and create one's own.

The once-rebellious act of publishing 'zines is normalized; it is recreated as a diluted form of feminism that, rather than challenging capitalist hegemony, can exist within its constraints. "Even when counter-hegemonic interpretations of mediated images are available, following the preferred readings reinforces that a mythologized status quo is generally easier" (Sanchez and Stuckey, 81). The socially oppositional potential embodied in Francesca's 'zine is co-opted to support pre-existing dominant ideologies. The implied message is that to rebel against capitalist society, even in an online forum, is not a viable future option.

In both *Ghost World* and *The Perfect Score*, Rebecca and Francesca are given limited lifestyle choices that include no true alternatives to dominant societal expectations. "Choice and diversity, though separate concepts, are in fact inseparable; choice is unattainable in any real sense without diversity. If real options are nonexistent, choosing is either meaningless or manipulative. It is manipulative when accompanied by the illusion that the choice is meaningful" (Schiller, 19). Rebecca and Francesca curb their teen angst, counter-culture status, and feminist ideals to support the current socio-economic structure of North America. Both of these characters demonstrate the way in which teen films are used as agents of gender socialization. Both characters are laden with notions about female attributes and society's behavioural expectations. Rebecca and Francesca are struggling with choices that will affect their futures. In both films, neither character holds on to her socially oppositional beliefs

portrayed at the beginning of each story, rather these oppositional beliefs are co-opted, as each film progresses, into individual forms of expression that support the dominant economic hegemony of middle-class and upper-class America (respectively) and support dominant norms about the socialization and roles of young women.

Chapter Two

Makeovers and the Importance of Physical Appearance on Social Relations in *Clueless, Mean Girls,* and *She's All That.*

In this chapter, three Hollywood teen films, *Clueless* (1995), *Mean Girls* (2004), and *She's All That* (1999) are examined to illustrate how the cinematic makeover promotes dominant beauty myths, gender roles, and conspicuous consumption practices. Dominant ideologies that support capitalist consumerism situate social signifiers of femininity on the bodies of women. "Through both everyday practices (such as dress, make-up, diet, and exercise) to more intensive practices (including skin bleaching and cosmetic surgery) women fuel the economy through the consumption of appearance products that promise to transform them into paradigms of unattainable idealized beauty (which is believed to reside primarily in white bodies)" (Whittington-Walsh, 130). The makeover scenes analyzed in this chapter exemplify how films educate females on socially acceptable codes of femininity. These scenes display the process of commodifying one's body to reap social "respect."

All three films depict scenes in which "alternative" female characters receive makeovers. These makeovers are emblematic of the period of adolescence when a female begins to realize her potential social power as wielded through her beauty. Unlike men, for whom the appearance of aging is constructed as "maturing," women reach their peak of physical beauty, as defined by society at large, between 18 and 25 years, just they are entering adulthood (McIrvin Abu-Laban and McDaniel, 2000). "From a very early age girls are taught to be mindful of their appearances" (McIrvin Abu-Laban, and McDaniel, 2000). By the time these girls become teens the pressure to be beautiful has reached an apex, as physical appearances help determine one's position in the social hierarchy of teen culture. "The ideology of the status "to be looked at," of being an object of the admiring male gaze, has been conditioned in women to the point that they bear the brunt

of bodily changes in identity" (Kaplan, 239). Therefore the social significance of a young female's appearance affects the way in which she starts her adult life. These films show how being physically appealing provides greater social opportunities than are available to those who are deemed less attractive by North American cultural standards. The perpetuation of beauty myths found within makeovers in these films is a part of the adolescent conditioning that contributes to the gender socialization of females.

The makeovers depicted in *Clueless*, *Mean Girls*, and *She's All That* are embedded with dominant notions of femininity; their purpose is to teach normatively-appropriate gender roles to their recipients. For young women, this includes conforming to a sex-object status. The female must be the object of the male gaze to gain acceptance within teen society because the male gaze represents the site of social approval (Mulvey, 1989). The adolescent girls in these movies learn to become sexually objectified through makeovers.

In teen films, makeovers are most often depicted through a change in a fashion and physical appearance. These superficial transformations (most commonly, changes in clothing and make-up) are socially significant in adolescent culture because these material adornments are practices of conspicuous consumption that indicate the female's station in her high school's social hierarchy. As will be discovered in the following pages, the more females adorn themselves with expensive fashions and conform to a sex-object status, the more popular they are.

Clueless

Clueless, along with the credit of repopularizing teen films, has received sufficient academic attention (Shary, 2002; Hentges, 2006; Wald, 2002). Preceding analysis on this film demonstrates how *Clueless* modernized the traditions of a makeover by enforcing social

constructed images via modes of conspicuous consumption. This chapter shows how the various makeover scenes in *Mean Girls* and *She's All That* draw from the framework established in *Clueless* about gender and socio-economic class.

Clueless used consumerism, not solely as an act to acquire products, but rather as a way of socially signifying gender roles and relationships. "Consumption is not merely an "activity" in which Cher and her girlfriends engage; it is also a sign through which their gendered and classed identities are made and re-made through the mediation of a purchasable relationship to commodities. In *Clueless*, consumption is additionally a primary means of sociability among girls, who alternately "bond" over shared (or similar) purchases or fan social rivalries through competition over the possession of specific items (e.g. a particular party dress)" (Wald, 112). *Clueless* created a direct correlation between consumption as a social practice and status within a social hierarchy.

In this modern version of Jane Austen's Emma, Cher (Alicia Silverstone) spends her time at high school remaking and matchmaking others. Although Cher is the protagonist, it is a supporting character, Tai (Brittney Murphy), who illustrates the culturally dominant characteristics present in the makeover.

When Cher and her loyal friend Dionne (Stacey Dash) first lay eyes on Tai they see not a girl but a project. Tai, sporting frumpy clothes and no make-up, is the new girl at their high school. Cher and Dionne immediately start their makeover by informing Tai about the importance of social relationships. For example, on Tai's first day they are quick to discourage her potential relationship with Travis (Breckin Meyer), the local stoner, by stating that if she decides to hang out with him she will be the subject of the popular group's jokes.

The second phase of the makeover involves Cher and Dionne re-dressing Tai in a fashionably appropriate manner. "The makeover scene plays out to the song 'Supermodel'[13]. Red hair color swirls down the drain. Foundation is foregrounded as Dionne carefully instructs Tai in how to apply make-up. A full-length mirror reflects snappy fashion choices, front and back, as Tai preens gleefully in a miniskirt, short blue sweater, cool shoes, and fluffy hair" (Ford, 70). During this key makeover scene Tai is just happy to be the center of Cher and Dionne's attention. With giddy schoolgirl glee she wholeheartedly accepts their makeover, setting aside her reservations about bearing her midriff and wearing make-up.

The third and final stage in Tai's makeover involves her internal qualities. Cher encourages her to speak without her New Jersey accent and increase her vocabulary (so that she can appear to be smart, which is more socially effective than actually being intelligent). Cher's ex-step brother (and soon to be love interest), Josh (Paul Rudd), remarks that Cher is using Tai like a Barbie doll. Cher responds by stating that she is saving Tai from a possibly traumatic teenage experience, rescuing her from the fringes of teen culture. Cher is teaching Tai, through fashion and mannerisms, how to act as a popular teenage girl.

Tai's new makeover is judged a success by Cher and Dionne because of the number of boys who are lustfully staring at her. "The result stops high school hunks in their tracks the next day and Tai struts between Dionne and Cher, posture erect, wearing a black and white plaid mini, dark hose, make-up, a natural and becoming hairstyle and a fashion book bag" (Ford, 70). Although Cher and Dionne profess to be experts on fashion and social etiquette, their expertise is not validated until it garners approval from the male teens.

As the film progresses, Tai applies Cher's techniques of seduction to flirt with two males who end up dangerously suspending her over a rail at a shopping mall. Tai then embellishes her

[13] 'Supermodel' by Jill Sobule, *Clueless* Soundtrack (1995).

"near death" experience the next day at school becoming the center of attention, thus displacing Cher in the social hierarchy. Being able to see her image mirrored in Tai, Cher realizes the superficial nature of her popular teen status. It is her role in making Tai over that teaches her a valuable lesson about her own identity. "While Cher's makeover talent in *Clueless* may give her a sense of control, it does not give her any real power, except the power to temporarily change something's surface. When she tries to change what's on the inside to match the outside, as she does with Tai, the results are not as dramatic. Thus, while makeovers can give both power and empowerment, neither of these are [sic] guaranteed. As Cher finds out, her makeover power only really matters when she finds she needs to make over her inner self, a task she really doesn't have the tools for" (Hentges, 118). Cher's makeover of Tai reveals its superficial nature as Tai's inability to conform to Cher's personality teachings (vocabulary and physical presentation) and forced socializations (attendance at the "right" social events, matching up with the socially accepted partners) reveal the apparently superficial nature of the makeover. "In *Clueless*, new clothes take Tai from rags to designer style but those clothes don't change her personality, nor her character, since she rediscovers herself when she hooks up with Travis" (Hentges, 120). What Tai has learned about beauty, sex, and consumption remain ingrained in her character. She can only add to her individual character, and cannot change her compliance with dominant expectations.

Mean Girls

Mean Girls (2004) is a satirical portrayal of North American female high school cliques. In this film, a previously home-schooled 16 year-old, Cady (Lindsay Lohan), moves from Africa to the suburbs of Chicago. Until the move she had never experienced consumer culture and the

workings of "girl world" (a term used in *Mean Girls*). Like *Clueless, Mean Girls* is a teen film that reinforces the relationship between physical appearance and social position within teen culture. Cady learns about her new environment with help from Damian (Daniel Franzese), the token gay male, and Janice (Lizzy Capland), the gothic-looking artist, who befriend her and explain the social hierarchy of the school by providing her with an illustrated map of the cafeteria outlining the various cliques. But Cady does not learn to identify, interact, and navigate her new social environment until the Plastics (the most popular girl's clique), Regina (Rachel McAdams), Gretchen (Lacey Chabert), and Karen (Amanda Seyfried), take her under their wings.

The Plastics have clearly defined the rules of girl world. Appearance is detailed down to daily dress codes (pink on Tuesdays, pony-tailed hair only once a week). If one fails to adhere to the dress codes, she is punished by being socially ostracized.[16] Cady learns that to be socially successful she has to wear revealing and expensive fashions, sport make-up, and style her hair. She finds herself competing with her "frenemies." She is continually primping and plucking herself to compete physically with the Plastics and she also performs "Plastic sabotage," where she schemes to ruin Regina's popularity. "This competition and cruelty is portrayed as if it were the natural product of a corrupt social order, a social order that seems to be autonomous from the adult world, the very culture that helps to define and confine teen cultures" (Hentges, 125). *Mean Girls* depicts the harshness of girl world as a normative rite of passage that young women must go through in high school.

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[16] For instance, if one does not wear the colour of clothing appropriate for a certain day then she cannot sit with the rest during lunch.

Cady goes through two makeovers, first her transformation into one of the Plastics, secondly, her self-removal from the Plastics to be a part of "normal" teen culture. Both makeovers are signified by her change in clothes, make-up, and accessories and indicate a maturation, or rebirth, of her commodified social existence. The representation of a change in character only occurs through a change in commodities. In this way *Mean Girls* uses Cady's transitions in teen culture to support capitalist consumerism. "Phantasmagoric images in rebirth spectacles designed for the social control of politics and culture create a mass of depoliticized individuals while simultaneously fulfilling a political mandate" (Whittington-Walsh, 130). Similarly to *Clueless*, *Mean Girls* uses the image of female characters to indicate personality traits. This superficial focus on image (created through acts of conspicuous consumption) perpetuates myths about beauty and femininity. When Cady partakes in creating, maintaining, and changing her personality via commodities, she is demonstrating how to socially construct femininity. "It is through experience that women learn to be female. Experience is not only personal, it is also social: to know you are a woman is to know you belong to a group or class, that is to a gender" (Smelik, 17). *Mean Girls* equates the experience of femininity with conspicuous consumption. By desiring certain clothes, make-up, and accessories female are emoting their desire for expressed femininity. This myth of gendered consumerism is never revealed in *Mean Girls*. By the end of the movie, Cady realizes the error of her ways, morally but not physically. Similar to Tai, Cady can only change her individual character while continuing to conform to dominant codes of beauty, fashion, and femininity. This conformation signifies Cady's change in friends and social behaviour. "It goes without saying that clothing is also a rich source of signification. At adolescence clothes become powerful signifiers of gender, sexuality, identity, and clique values" (Danesi, 76). By the end of the film Cady has become

well versed in the role of clothes as social signifiers and uses her knowledge to finally display herself in a manner that she feels depicts her personality.

She's All That

She's All That was able to reach a large home audience (US and Canada) ($16 million USD, opening weekend) due to the resurgence of popularity in teen films, and to being released on the heels of the tremendously successful *Clueless* ($10 million USD, opening weekend). In *She's All That* Laney Boggs (Rachel Leigh Cook) is a nerdy artist who becomes the subject of a bet amongst the popular crowd. Zack (Freddie Prinze Jr.) is the high school hunk and school president who has just been dumped by the popular and bitchy Taylor (Jodi Lyn O'Keefe). As a result, he sets out to win a bet proving he can remake the biggest loser of the high school into the prom queen.

This movie is a typical Pygmalion tale. It does not have a makeover scene; it is a makeover movie. The main narrative of the movie revolves around Laney's makeover and subsequent struggle to be accepted by the popular teenagers in an effort to gain the affection of Zack. "At first Laney shows an informed suspicion of Zack's intentions, which makes her seem confidently independent, yet she gradually gives in to the lure of being accepted, despite the fact that the popular crowd still resists her. In this way, the film is harsher than many of the previous nerd tales, for Laney so openly compromises her sense of identity in spite of herself (setting aside her dedication to political causes as well as her expressive artistry) that her embarrassing efforts at gaining acceptance become more self-depreciating than socially integrating" (Shary, Generation Multiplex, 40).

She's All That portrays both external and internal character makeovers. Laney is depicted as a nerdy artist at the outset of the film. Her alternativeness sets her apart from mainstream teen culture. As the narrative progresses she receives a superficial makeover that transforms her appearance into a socially accepted form of beauty. But her makeover does not stop there. She redirects her intellect (made obvious in her art that expresses the political plight of developing nations) to achieving the social status associated with her new appearance. "Inclusive of these films, the image of the nerdly girls has been used as shorthand for the torment that awaits smart women later in life if they do not find a way to become more physically attractive, and thus the narratives about nerdly girls are built on an inverted Pygmalionesque pathos, as the character attempts to redirect her intellectual sophistication to social sophistication" (Shary, "The Nerdly Girl", 239). Whereas Tai and Cady eventually regain their sense of self, Laney's personality remains remodeled. She compromises her values and beliefs to invest herself mentally, as well as physically, to be among the popular teenagers. Laney views this route as an easier way to navigate her social existence than through maintaining her old belief system. Laney effectively abandons the moral and ethical values that she held when her appearance was perceived to be nerdy. Unlike Cady, who feels ashamed of her Plastic sabotage, Laney does not show any remorse for her actions. For example, Laney paints a clown face on a passed-out girl at a party because of the girl's previously hurtful words.

While Laney's personal character departs from the previously discussed examples, she also becomes objectified in the same manner as Tai and Cady. Laney's struggle for acceptance is dependent on Zach's approval. "The true deception of *She's All That* is that it suggests its heroine is indeed all that--smart, comely, talented, caring, resilient--and concludes that such great qualities do not guarantee happiness without social and, more strikingly, masculine

endorsement" (Shary, Generation Multiplex, 40). Although she already possesses many qualities that would make her an intelligent and independent adult, Laney cannot succeed in the popularity contest of high school without male approval.

The Girls Just Don't Know Better

The back-stories of Tai, Cady, and Laney are constructed to suggest that all of these girls are innocent in the ways of "girl world". They are all taken under the wing of popular teens and through this guidance (via makeovers) learn that to be socially successful they must also be sexually desirable.

Tai has just moved across the country but she has moved to a whole new world. Until Cher and Dionne befriend her, she is oblivious to the way in which others perceive her. It is implied that she is unaware, not because she does not care, but because she has not been *taught* to care. Cher and Dionne thus designate themselves as Tai's social tutors. By teaching Tai the dominant traits of femininity (beauty, seduction, and fashion), Cher and Dionne thus mentor her through the rite of passage into womanhood.

Similar to Tai, Cady is a new girl in town. But *Mean Girls* takes this "new girl" theme further. Cady is not only from a different town, she is also from a different continent and culture altogether. Therefore Cady is completely innocent to North American societal expectations and the inner workings of teen culture. The main narrative of *Mean Girls* centers around acts of Cady's gender socialization. In *Mean Girls*, Cady does not know her own beauty because she has not been socialized in North American society. Damian and Janice call attention to Cady's physical beauty by stating that she is "a regulation hottie." Within five minutes of the start of this film Cady is made aware that social power resides in her physical desirability. "Power can enhance women's appeal, but it is seldom sufficient in itself to establish that appeal. Appearance

in women often is" (McIrvin Abu- Laban, and McDaniel, 109). Cady learns that through the power of her appearance (being sexually attractive) she can navigate her way through the social hierarchy of teen culture.

These three films epitomize how females navigate their transitions between adolescence and womanhood through acts of conspicuous consumption. The films all work on the assumption that females must "gain" their femininity by going through a process of commodification. Furthermore, Tai, Cady, and Laney demonstrate that femininity is achieved through a course of action rather than through maturity.

In *She's All That*, it is implied that Laney does not notice her physical beauty because her mother passed away before she could teach Laney how to dress and behave like a woman. This is revealed in a scene with Zach's sister, Mackenzie (Anna Paquin), plucking her eyebrows and Laney stating that she has never done this before. Due to her mother's death, she assumes a role of adult domesticity and fails to develop her femininity. It is assumed that Laney has not learned the codes of femininity (maintaining physical beauty) because she did not grow up with a female role model. Because she assumes the responsibilities of an adult during her youth, she has missed her adolescent rite of passage into womanhood.

Tai, Cady, and Laney are each played by a beautiful female actor, one who needs only clothes and make-up to go from frumpy to fantastic. Although at the beginning of the films these three girls are depicted in baggy and mis-matched garments, their apparent lack of fashion sense is the only characteristic that sets them physically apart from the dominant standard of beauty. "The image of beauty that society presents to women is embodied in a female who is not only young and slim but also white (or "whitish"), heterosexual, and class advantaged. This is a monolithic image of appearance that reflects the prejudices of those who are in dominant

positions in our society" (McIrvin Abu-Laban, and McDaniel, 123). Tai, Cady, and Laney are all white upper-class teens, and as such they occupy a privileged societal position before their makeovers occur. Thus, while the makeover appears to be a miraculous feat to improve physical appearance, it is actually the struggle to commodify the girls' personalities that is the real feat. Tai, Cady, and Laney are easily made-up into sexually desirable teens. The real challenge of the makeover resides in the character change.

As previously noted, this change in character is not completed without difficulty. Although the girls display some internal conflict about taking on a complete change of character, they still embrace the codes of conspicuous consumption, and it is these codes that mark their personal transitions. "Conformity in dress and hairstyles is another safeguard that teens employ in order to divert critical attention away from themselves. Above all else, the desire to become cool constitutes a defensive behavioural strategy--a strategy designed to transform the physiological and emotional changes that occur at puberty into peer-shaped and peer-acceptable patterns of social behaviour" (Danesi, 43).

Clueless, Mean Girls, and *She's All That* are three contemporary teen films that teach young women that importance of physical appearance in social interactions. If one does not want to be ridiculed by her peers, she must choose the "right" clothes and make-up to appear to be part of mainstream teen culture. The message of the makeovers in these three films upholds dominant notions about femininity and how women should expect to be judged by others based on physical appearances. Although these films are fictional, much of what is implied about females is mirrored in society at large.

Chapter Three

The Commodification of Alternative Teen Subcultures in *Mean Girls, 10 Things I Hate About You,* and *Thirteen.*

At this point, contemporary teen films have been examined in relation to normalized future expectations determined by gendered class positions and also in relation to makeovers and how conspicuous consumption is a factor in determining social interactions. This chapter follows from the previous two examining, in particular, *Mean Girls, 10 Things I Hate About You,* and *Thirteen* to demonstrate the ways in which "alternative" female lifestyles are depicted and commodified. These films simultaneously alienate and commodify unconventional lifestyles to quell any possibility of socio-economic resistance. Each of these three films incorporates a character who, while displaying subculture traits that place her on the fringes of high school society, serves to uphold dominant cultural hegemony.

The purpose of this chapter is to show the ways in which these "alternative" characters are constructed to embody the anti-popular while never truly posing any threat to the dominant, mainstream order. The methods used to stereotype these characters are examined to distinguish the nature of contemporary Hollywood teen films as it relates to their function in creating and perpetuating social norms for female adolescents.

Until *Clueless* spawned a renewed interest in the teen film genre, the "alternative" female character was a rare occurrence. Since *Clueless,* these "alternative" females began to appear in most teen films. Contemporary portrayals of subcultures have effectively incorporated "alternative" teens into the landscape of adolescent cinema in a manner that does not pose a threat to the existing hegemony of consumer capitalism; they can be socially marked as outcasts or as different without being allowed to disrupt the socio-economic order.

In the following three teen films alternative lifestyles (or subcultures) are displayed through fashion. "Clothing communicates. Like language, it can be endearing, offensive, controversial, delightful, disgusting, foolish, charming, and the list could go on and on" (Danesi, 80). The fashion displayed in the films under discussion in this chapter indicates how stereotypes are applied to distinguish various behavioural characteristics of subculture members. The process of stereotyping via fashion will be examined to reveal the benefits to the current capitalist economy, and to how subcultures are exhibited in ideologically strategic ways that do not conflict with dominant societal norms.

The continuously expanding nature of capitalism depends, in part, on the incorporation of new consumer markets. New markets are repeatedly found within teen culture because adolescents frequently use fashion as outlets of expression. "The economic impulse of the culture of consumption, its search for new markets and profits, has always involved the revitalization of popular culture through the use of subordinate, oppositional and alternative cultural forms and practices" (Clarke, 290). Subcultures are co-opted into forms of material expression which, on the surface, create avenues of individual expression for teens who seek to be differentiated from mainstream culture while serving a greater capitalistic need; consumer dependence on the commodity. It is through this act that capitalism subsumes the potential for social opposition and contorts various teen subcultures to support the dominant economic structure. This process involves two stages.

First, any oppositional aspects of a teen subculture are redefined as a mere lifestyle choice represented through clothing, make-up, music, and other consumer goods. Brake emphasizes the speed with which this process takes place. "Although oppositional norms may be developed in direct contrast to respectable norms, a subculture cannot survive for long which

exists in direct conflict with the prevailing society" (11). Here, Brake states that while North American society does not dissuade oppositional thought, it does seek to encompass opposition in any formal action. The most economically and politically advantageous way to accomplish this is to offer choice, through consumer goods, that caters to various teen subcultures. This choice is not a real one. For example, choosing to wear one t-shirt as opposed to another does not really constitute a significant social choice, but marketing correlates certain t-shirts (and other clothes items) with various subcultures, thus making the shirts a marker of social positioning for the teens who wear them. This strategy also divides the subcultures into small subtypes[21] that minimize opportunities for organized social opposition. The practice of marketing subcultural identifiers through commodities also adds a price tag to subcultures. For example, if a teen chooses to become a part of a subculture, then the teen must purchase and don the proper attire. By attaching a price tag to many teen subcultures, the members are forced into supporting the dominant economic structure of North American society.

The second process in commodifying subcultures involves standardizing a set of social codes. These codes are used in the governance of young adults, to instill a value and belief system that upholds consumer capitalism (Rose, 1999). Raby defines these codes of conduct. "Codes of conduct are sites of knowledge production, fashioning middle-class, normative, gendered citizens, and marginalizing those who do not easily conform" (1). These codes of conduct are applied to teen subcultures in a manner that produces stereotypes that are communicated through the apparel associated with the given subculture. The associative stereotypes allow for the subculture to appear as if it exists on the periphery of teen culture. "Stereotypes do not only, in concert with social types, map out the boundaries of acceptable and

[21] For example within the goth subculture there are cyber-goths, dark goths, art goths etc. – for more on this refer to Hodkinson (2004), 135 - 147.

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legitimate behaviour, they also insist on boundaries exactly at those points where in reality there are none" (Dyer, The Matter of Images, 16). The function of stereotypes allows teen subculture members to feel as if they are socially marginal while, at least on an economic and political level, they are in fact part of the mainstream mass culture. Stereotyping allow for easy recognition of social "difference" and the application of certain characteristic traits while removing the power of individual expression.

***Mean Girls* – Revisited**

Mean Girls has been discussed in chapter two pertaining to the way in which the makeover is used in contemporary teen films to promote acts of conspicuous consumption. In this chapter an analysis of a supporting character, Janice (Lizzy Caplan), is provided to illustrate the dominant misperceptions about "alternative" female characters. In *Mean Girls*, Janice is portrayed as a goth or art-school "freak." The "alternative" females of contemporary teen films are portrayed as social outcasts through an event, such as a rumor, that has removed them from the mainstream culture of high school. In *Mean Girls*, Janice is socially ostracized because Regina (Rachel McAdams), the "Queen Bee" of her high school, spread a rumor that Janice had a lesbian crush on her. The rumour was so effective in ostracizing Janice that she removed herself from school for the remainder of the year and returned the following fall with her new persona. The subtext is that Janice would have been "normal"--even possibly popular--had it not been for her social sabotage by Regina. Janice's hatred of Regina's actions fuels her anti-social behaviour and is the very basis for her befriending the new girl, Cady (Lindsay Lohan), in an attempt to damage Regina's current social standing as head of the Plastics. Janice serves to help Cady navigate her new social surrounding as well as to encourage Cady to perform "Plastic

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sabotage."[22] This function makes the role of Janice integral to the plot but the metalanguage of her character displays deeply ingrained social stereotypes about "alternative" personalities.

Janice is depicted as a goth, not because of her actions, but rather because of the clothes and make-up she wears through the film. The costumes that cloak Janice in *Mean Girls* signify her social position (on the fringes of high school culture) and also connote an ideological position that she occupies. While this display is only through her fashion statements, it is no less important than if she had verbally articulated her ideological position. Clothing and make-up serve to communicate what female teens, at times, have difficulty putting words to. "Fashion is also an ideological statement. Teens who see themselves as antisocial and iconoclastic will convey this through their clothing selections" (Danesi, 80). The fact that Janice dons dark clothes and accentuates her dark eyes and pale skin with make-up communicates her gothness to her peers. Being a goth has many social meanings. This style choice started as a subculture associated with a certain genre of music. "By way of background information, 'goth' emerged in the early 1980s, when a number of bands and their fans merged elements of punk, glam rock and early New Romantic into what became a 'dark', androgynous style of music and fashion" (Hodkinson, 135). Although this is widely recognized as the root of goth culture, it is increasingly difficult to correlate music taste with fashion sense as subcultures in the 21st century are becoming more and more integrated (combining with other forms of subculture styles), localized, and distanced from the original motives for their creation. Within *Mean Girls* Janice's gothness is made obvious to others through her clothes, make-up, and hairstyle that places her outside the "cool". "Coolness entails a set of specific behavioural characteristics that vary in detail from generation to generation, from clique to clique, but which retain a common essence. It is firmly anchored in a *symbology* – a set of discernible bodily movements, postures, facial

[22] A series of pranks and rumors that Janice and Cady stage in the attempts to thwart the Plastics from popularity.

expressions, voice modulations, and so on – that is acquired, and takes on strategic social value, within the peer context" (Danesi, 38). While her peers (especially the Plastics) may not have the insight into the history of goth subculture that is provided above but they nonetheless recognize her subculture status by enforcing her place on the fringes of teen culture.

Although labeled as a subculture, goths are actually as distinct from one another as they are from mainstream society. In his study focusing on goth subculture Hodkinson notes its inability to articulate a uniform message. "There was little evidence of any distinct shared *raison d'etre* embedded within the clothing, music and lifestyle practices of participants. Individuals varied considerably in their views as to what the goth scene was and what it meant, and many suggest that their dark, sometimes ghostly, appearance represented something of a red herring for those seeking to understand their experiences, motivations and meanings" (138). This deviation is exactly why Janice is portrayed as a goth in *Mean Girls*. Also the individual nature of the subculture allows Janice to use the commodities she sports as false armor, appearing to protect her from the social rejection of not belonging to a mainstream clique. "Teenagers who do not belong to a clique risk being ostracized and being labeled *losers* by their more socially inclined peers. Losers are adolescents who do not possess, or aspire to possess, any of the critical attributes for clique membership and, therefore, of coolness" (Danesi, 58). So while most of Janice's peers label her a loser, she finds protection within her goth appearance. Her inability to articulate her emotional turmoil (resulting from Regina's sabotage and her social location outside of mainstream teen culture) is thus expressed through her clothing and make-up choice. Therefore Janice's gothic appearance is accomplished through consumption: this is key to understanding how what was once deemed counter-culture is now socially understood as a mere fashion choice.

By making a statement through clothing, Janice indicates not only her emotional turmoil but also the fact that she has the economic freedom to create her appearance of character through fashion. She has chosen to represent her alternative lifestyle by adorning herself with commodities that reflect her individuality. "Lifestyle attributes the reflexivity which informs individual consumer creativity to a desire on the part of individuals to take an active part in the making and remaking of their image and identity" (Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 13). The consumeristic nature of capitalism has attached a monetary value to expressing individuality by associating lifestyle with the choice of clothing and make-up. This economic association allows for subcultures to exist within the dominant framework of capitalism without posing a threat to the current hegemonic order. "It was clear, more generally, that involvement with the goth scene would be better understood as a particular form of consumer choice influenced by a variety of factors, rather than any kind of spontaneous reaction to structural positionings. In particular, the goth scene was not consistent with the notion of sub-culture as any form of working-class struggle, symbolic or otherwise" (Hodkinson, 139). Janice's gothic style is indicative of her economic freedom (upper-class) and position within the social hierarchy of high school.

It is not until the climax of the film that Janice has the courage and opportunity to verbally respond to Regina's accusations. She relieves her emotional burden created by being socially ostracized. After this zenith occurs, Janice's fashion changes slightly (less dark make-up and more brightly coloured clothes) to become more socially acceptable. Her gothic appearance becomes tailored to suit mainstream fashion. Therefore the use of gothic style was a visual reflection of her teen angst which, when overcome, is laid by the wayside in favour of a more normal appearance.

10 Things I Hate About You

10 Things I Hate About You is a teen film remake of Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shew. The story revolves around two sisters, Kat (Julia Stiles), a feminist and riot grrrl, and the younger, popular, and virginal sister, Bianca (Larisa Oleynik). They live with their strict yet perpetually absent father, Walter (Larry Miller), who imposes a rule stating that Bianca is not allowed to go on dates unless Kat does. Knowing that Kat is adamant that she will not date "the unwashed cretins" who go to her school, Walter feels assured that this rule will guarantee Bianca's chastity. But it does not stop her being pursued by Joey (Andrew Keegan), the popular and superficial senior, and Cameron (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), a sensitive and adoring junior. Cameron, using Joey's financial resources, hires Patrick (Heath Leger) to pursue Kat, thus allowing her sister to date. This task is fraught with difficulties because of Kat's criticisms of and resistance to teen culture. Her peers perceive her behaviour as anti-social because she "doesn't care what people think of her." Kat's behaviour is deemed so anti-social that her classmates and teachers refer to her as a "heinous bitch." In one scene she advocates for a feminist curriculum, a position dismissed by her English teacher as "a quest of privileged white girls." Authorities continually subvert her intellectual beliefs, veiled in witty sarcasm, because they view this as unruly behaviour. "The unruly female is not about gender confusion but inverting dominant social, cultural and political conventions; unruliness occurs when those who are socially or politically inferior (normally, women) use humour and excess to undermine patriarchal norms and authority" (McCabe, 62). Kat is portrayed as a potential threat to dominant ideologies through use of sarcasm to challenge patriarchy and her commodified image as an "alternative" female. Although her character seems to be the epitome of a progressive female, it is an image that her peers, family, and teachers seek to change; thus she expresses the

general reluctance of society to embrace non-traditional females. "Transforming Shakespeare's Padua into upper-middle-class Seattle suburbia, *10 Things I Hate About You* works hard to soften the gender inequities of the original, but in many ways silences honest and serious debate over gender in the process. Substituting a grunge-wearing, feminist-fiction-reading, girl-band-listening Kat for the play's Kate, *10 Things* proposes an alternative explanation of its heroine's antisocial behavior" (Pittman, 147). Kat's advocacy for feminist rights and her general critiques of teen culture (she describes a Saturday night party as a "pathetic excuse for all the idiots in our school to drink beer and rub up against each other in hopes of distracting themselves from the emptiness of their meaningless and consumer-driven lives") are a result of a traumatic sexual encounter.

Unlike Janice who is placed on the fringe of teen culture as a result of a rumor, in *10 Things I Hate About You,* Kat is a self-made social outcast. Her first sexual experience, with Joey, was a result of peer pressure and caused her to be cynical of and separate from popular teens. "In an effort to humanize Kat, the film's screenplay creates a back story for her that actually only serves to underscore the quiet misogyny of the plot: girl traumatized by sex becomes frigid ice queen and requires a more satisfying sexual encounter to restore balanced personality" (Pittman, 147). The theme of romance is one that is widely circulated in mass media. Females are continually encouraged to quest for romantic involvement with males. This serves to uphold dominant gender roles where girls perpetually seek the approval of boys. "The markets aimed at the pubescent girl and the adolescent have a central theme of romanticism. Romantic attachment, and dependency on men is emphasized and advice on emotions, make-up and fashion is given as well as glamorous hints of the lives of pop stars" (Brake, 140). The theme of romance is not only central to *10 Things I Hate About You;* it also is naturalized in the

behaviour of the various characters. Kat is the only character who, at first, does not comply with this theme. Her subsequent social transformation is accomplished through her acceptance of the theme of romance. The film shows that underneath Kat's anti-social exterior she is similar to other female teens in her quest for romance. Although Kat is portrayed as a feminist, it is implied that she can easily put her socio-political beliefs by the wayside when faced with a positive, heterosexual, and romantic encounter. Kat's character is forced into a dichotomy that pits feminism against heterosexual romance. Kat can either hold on to her feminist beliefs or "soften" them to accept the possibility of romance. She must compromise the aspects of her beliefs that don't coincide with that of the dominant capitalist hegemony.

Her alternativeness is placed within the narrative of her romantic plight thus making her socio-political views seem purchased along with her grunge apparel and female alternative rock albums. Similar to Janice, who uses her appearance to protect her emotions, Kat uses her alternative appearance and attitude to protect her from romantic involvement. While Kat openly criticizes consumerism she unwittingly proscribes to dominant capitalism by commodifying her appearance to reflect social stereotypes about feminism. She makes fun of "Drakkar Noir-wearing dexters" while buying into a clichéd appearance of her own; that of a grunge-wearing riot grrl. In her condemnation of consumerism she fails to consider her economically advantaged position. She is able to purchase her car, latest rock show tickets, and clothes without recognizing the privileged socio-economic class that she is a part of. Like Janice, Kat is not challenged in her acquisition of her alternative appearance - the challenge lies in navigating her social environment. The following section shows how *Thirteen* departs from the upper-class biases exemplified in *Mean Girls* and *10 Things I Hate About You*, to show a young girl's emotional and socio-economic struggle to obtain alternativeness through consumption.

Thirteen

Thirteen (2003) deals with issues of adolescence and consumerism from a different class perspective than those offered in *Mean Girls* and *10 Things I Hate About You.* The price of materialism is a significant issue in *Thirteen.* Set in the urban environment of Los Angeles, *Thirteen* tells the story of Tracy (Evan Rachel Wood) in the transition between childhood and adolescence. Realizing she is not popular at school (studious, poetic, girlish clothes, and no sex appeal) Tracy pleads with her mom, Mel (Holly Hunter), to help give her a new look. Mel does so, spending her last pennies on a "cool" jeans and t-shirt outfit for her daughter only to realize later on that this new look has helped Tracy befriend manipulative Evie (Nikki Reed), the most popular "hottie" at school who then introduces Tracy to shoplifting, petty theft, sex, drugs, and other deviant acts (piercings, tattoos etc.). *Thirteen* deviates from the other two films examined in the chapter in two key ways.

First it shows Tracy's economic plight involved in consuming and secondly, it reveals the damaging nature of Tracy's consumeristic ways (her need of commodities is so dire that she resorts to deviant acts, stealing and shoplifting, to acquire them). What remains consistent with *Mean Girls* and *10 Things I Hate About You* is the dependence on commodities to socially define oneself. Although this film appears to be a critique of contemporary consumerism, like all other films in this thesis it upholds the dominant hegemony of capitalism. The end of the film shows Tracy being "saved" from the harsh realities of adolescence she faces, by reverting back to the innocence of childhood. This is accomplished by changing her appearance that, in turn, changes her personality.

The use of commodities directly correlates to Tracy's social positioning within her school and peer group. Like Kat and Janice, Tracy's alternative apparel places her on the fringe of high

school culture, yet unlike Kat and Janice's teen environment, the fringes of Tracy's teen culture is where popularity resides. Tracy's popularity comes in the form of the "alternative" girl – one who achieves her social status via commodities and indicates changes in her social behaviour through her commodified appearance. Her popularity is sustained through her sex appeal and her deviant behaviour. Tracy finds that with her popularity she must continually struggle against authorities (her mom and teachers), do badly in school, and reject her former childhood friends. When Tracy begins to don her new "alternative" look she immediately realizes the social deviance that is expected from her in her new group of friends. She stops doing homework, using her "study time" as a cover for hanging on the Melrose strip. Tracy feels that being smart does nothing, socially, for her and so she strives to be beautiful believing that this will gain her the social currency that she feels she needs. "Most films actually suggest to girls that intelligence is a burden more than an asset; more valuable assets that tend to grant girls success (popularity and respect) are fashion sense, physical beauty, agreeable attitude, and the attainment of a boyfriend" (Shary, "The Nerdly Girl", 236). *Thirteen*'s narrative allows Tracy to subscribe to this dominant myth. A significant aspect of this depiction of adolescent angst is that this film shows Tracy learning to commodify herself at the age of thirteen. Whereas the aforementioned films show females learning this process as they enter adulthood, *Thirteen* depicts this transition as one from childhood into adolescence. She learns, from a very young age, to use her sexual appeal to navigate her social environment. "Moreover, as the bodies of female youth are signifying maturity at younger and younger ages, girls are required to become street-wise long before their mothers were. Forced to recognize the power imbalances that structure our society, girls must learn and practice the strategies that will help them survive in an environment that is often hostile to both females and the young" (Kearney, 129). These strategies involve Tracy

purchasing her street-wise attitude through commodities that substantiate to others her toughness and delinquency. For example, her navel and tongue rings signify that she is not afraid of needles, not afraid of the repercussions from her parents that getting the piercings may entail, and also not unwilling to break the law (as it is recognized within the film that legally one must be 18 years old to get a tongue piercing). These acts of delinquency are portrayed as exciting events in Tracy's life as she feels that these commodities, rather that emotional maturation, signify her development into an adolescent. "These tough girls became conscious of their challenges to gender norms, and they often employed an assured aggression in expressing themselves. On a generic level, films about such girls began to focus on the exhilaration of their toughness via delinquency, rather than the sensitive negotiation of power that still troubles most teen girls in other films" (Shary, Teen Movies, 91). Instead of emotionally negotiating her transition from youth into adolescence, Tracy uses her new "look" to communicate to others that she is ready to be a teenager.

Her alternative appearance also indicates that she is trying to define herself as individual and independent. "Appearance becomes a measure of personal value. The socially created standards for appearance are far from harmless decorative diversions" (McIrvin Abu-Laban and McDaniel, 118). Tracy commodifies herself into a sex object, not because this is something she values, but rather because she has learned in her social environment that to be a sex object is to be socially powerful. She does not create an original style but rather subscribes to an alternative appearance with sex appeal. This indicates her social status - she belongs with the popular, party girls at school. "Style, then, is used for a variety of meanings. It indicates which symbolic group one belongs to, it demarcates that group from the mainstream, and it makes an appeal to an identity outside that of a class-ascribed one" (Brake, 14).

Tracy's quest for popularity has her acquiring commodities outside of her family's economic status. Because she either steals the items or purchases them with stolen money she gains respect from her new friends. The ability to wear expensive clothes, make-up, and accessories without working to pay for them makes Tracy delinquent. This, in turn, equates with popularity amongst her peers. "The key dimension may not be whether the object is received through the market or some alternative distributive mechanism, but rather its place as a consumption item in constructing social images" (Miller, 117). Tracy's middle-class economic status does not suppress her overwhelming desire to acquire social signifiers in the form of commodities. Her striving for popularity and social conditioning has translated her want of commodities into needs. She cannot navigate her social environment without them.

Thirteen, *10 Things I Hate About You*, and *Mean Girls* exemplify the ways that teen films depict "alternative" females through purchased identities. Tracy, Kat, and Janice all unwittingly subscribe to dominant consumer ideologies to indicate inner emotional turmoil instead of addressing their angst. The focus on appearance over personal character serves to strengthen capitalist economics as well as dominant myths about intellect, beauty, and socio-political beliefs. Each character, while on the surface appearing to be part of a counter-culture, only assists in advertising the social significance of consumerism.

Conclusion

Though constructed narratives, the consumeristic patterns of gender socialization in *Ghost World, The Perfect Score, Clueless, Mean Girls, She's All That, 10 Things I Hate About You,* and *Thirteen* serve a similar ideological function. Independent from one and another, these films suggest a progressive, modern portrayal of female teens but, by studying them as part of the same genre, dominant modes of socialization are revealed. "The socialization messages presented in any one movie are therefore generally reinforced by others thereby making the messages so much more ubiquitous and accepted as normative rather than be challenged by the target audience as to the domination that they represent" (Zehnder and Calvert, 125). The "alternative" female character embodies suppressive gender stereotypes that are not always evident in the narrative structure of each teen film but become obvious when compared and contrasted to others of the same genre and time period. This research, conducted on the cultural codes embedded within teen films, is intended to contribute to the field of academics that works to inform people of the way in which adolescent socialization is situated within consumption practices. "Teen films continue into the twenty-first century as an important cinematic genre, and as a revealing indicator of adolescent trends as well as cultural attitudes about youth. While young people may always be targeted for their consumptive power that supports the entertainment industry, we must also encourage them to learn more about their representation, and further, to work at making it better" (Shary, Teen Movies, 109). This thesis contributes to the understanding of how the representations of young women are indicative of their economic influence as consumers.

By examining these seven teen films from a combined film studies, cultural studies, and feminist Marxist perspective the subordination of female gender roles is exposed. The concealed

nature of capitalism has been lifted from its ideological status to display how each film encourages consumerism to, on the surface, aid in representing lifestyle choice and social position of the characters, while ensuring that young women will continue to be a significant segment of the economy.

Ghost World, The Perfect Score, Clueless, Mean Girls, She's All That, 10 Things I Hate About You, and *Thirteen* are all contemporary teen films that help maintain dominant myths about gender roles, beauty, lifestyle, and socio-economic status. Through the culture of commodities depicted in these films the pervasive nature of capitalist hegemony becomes apparent. The cinematic representations of gender roles are interwoven with conventions of materialism that bind social identification with representation through acts of conspicuous consumption.

The gendered experiences of Rebecca, Francesca, Tai, Cady, Laney, Janice, Kat, and Tracy are all structured by, and bound within, rituals of consumerism. "Of course, gender is both an attribute and an experience. It has the characteristic of being structured – through a range of modes from hegemonic imposition to creative performance – from the outside, a topographic field, toward a pose and postulation that can be imagined as "inner"; but also of being felt sublimely and then constrained, an essence upon which, or toward which, conventionalized and conventionalizing rituals of bounding are applied" (Pomerance, Ladies and Gentlemen, 3). These consumer rituals in turn express the socio-economic position of each girl within adolescent culture. The culture of commodities is so entrenched in the cinematic organization of teen society that commodities have become synonymous with personal identification. "In short, our identity has become synonymous with patterns of consumption which are determined elsewhere" (Miller, 112). These patterns of consumption, determined by a variety of socio-

economic forces, are perpetuated in teen films to advertise traditional gender roles. By circulating "alternative" female images, created from modes of consumption, these seven teen films serve to quell potential opposition to capitalism. The suppression of prospective cultural resistance is coded within the commodification of the "alternative" female. By studying this reoccurring image within various film narratives the suppression of feminism becomes evident. This thesis has revealed how the "alternative" female characters within contemporary teen films contribute, sometimes unwittingly, to the continued dominance of materialism and traditional socio-economic views about femininity.

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Filmography

Clueless (USA, 1995, PG-13)
Director: Amy Heckerling
Writer: Amy Heckerling
Producers: Robert Lawrence and Scott Rudin.
Production Companies: Paramount and Robert Lawrence Productions.
Soundtrack: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack, *Clueless*, Released July 18th, 2005, Capitol Records, USA.

Ghost World (USA, 2001, R)
Director: Terry Zwigoff
Writers: Terry Zwigoff and Daniel Clowes.
Producers: John Malkovich, Russell Smith, and Lianne Halfon.
Production Companies: Granada Film, Jersey Shore Films, and United Artists Films.

Mean Girls (USA, 2004, PG-13)
Director: Mark Waters
Writer: Tina Fey
Producer: Lorne Michaels
Production Companies: Paramount, M.G. Films, and Broadway Video.

The Perfect Score (USA, 2004, PG -13)
Director: Brian Robbins
Writers: Marc Hyman, Jon Zack, and Mark Schwahn.
Producers: Roger Birnbaum, Jonathan Glickman, Brian Robbins, and Michael Tollin.
Productions Companies: Paramount, MTV Films, Moviemaker Productions (MMP), Spyglass Entertainment, and Tollin/Robbins Productions.

Save The Last Dance (USA, 2001, PG-13)
Director: Thomas Carter
Writers: Duane Adler and Cheryl Edwards.
Producers: Robert Cort and David Madden.
Production Companies: Paramount, MTV Films, and Cort/Madden Productions.

She's All That (USA, 1999, PG-13)
Director: Robert Iscove
Writer: R. Lee Fleming Jr.
Producers: Robert Levy, Peter Abrams, and Richard Gladstein.
Production Companies: Miramax Films, FilmColony, and Tapestry Films.

Slums of Beverly Hills (USA, 1998, R)
Director: Tamara Jenkins
Writer: Tamara Jenkins
Producers: Michael Nozik and Stan Wlodkowski.
Production Companies: Fox Searchlight and South Fork Pictures.

10 Things I Hate About You (USA, 1999, PG-13)
Director: Gil Junger
Writers: Karen McCullah Lutz and Kirsten Smith.
Producer: Andrew Lazar
Production Companies: Touchstone Pictures and Mad Chance.

Thirteen (USA, 2003, R)
Director: Catherine Harwicke
Writers: Catherine Harwicke and Nikki Reed.
Producers: Jeffrey Levy-Hinte and Michael London.
Production Companies: Antidote Films and Michael London Productions.

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