
Sex Education, Hollywood Style: Gender, Sexuality and Identity in *The Girl Next Door*

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Films do more than entertain, they offer up subject positions, mobilize desires, influence us unconsciously, and help to construct the {cultural} landscape. Deeply imbricated within material and symbolic relations of power, movies produce and incorporate ideologies that represent the outcome of struggles marked by the historical realities of power and the deep anxieties of the times: they also deploy power through the important role they play connecting the production of pleasure and meaning with the mechanisms and practices of powerful teaching machines. Put simply, films both entertain and educate.

(Giroux 2002, p.30)

Cinema, Sex and the Young

Commentators as diverse as Henry Giroux (1989; 1994; 1997; 2002), David Buckingham (2003), Cameron McCarthy (1998; 1999) and Peter McLaren (1994; 1995) have contributed towards an understanding of how popular cultural texts such as films, television, music and magazines help to shape young people's worlds, and how they exist as pedagogical sites where youth learn about the world. The respected ethnographer and cultural theorist Paul Willis, for example, argued some time ago that popular culture is a more significant, penetrating cultural force in young people's lives than schooling:

The field of education ... will be further marginalised in most young people's experience by common (i.e. popular) culture. In so far as the educational practitioners are still predicated on traditional liberal humanist lines and on the assumed superiority of high art, they will become almost totally irrelevant to the real energies and interests of most young people and have no part in their identity formation. Common culture will, increasingly, undertake, in its own ways, the roles that education has vacated.

(Willis 1990, p.147)

More recently still, Nadine Dolby has claimed that popular culture is not simply fluff that can be dismissed as irrelevant and insignificant; on the contrary, 'it has the capacity to intervene in the most critical issues and to shape public opinion' (Dolby 2003, p.259).

Given that the popular is a site where youth are invested, where things happen, where identities are worked out, performed and negotiated, and where futures are written, for better or worse, it is always an instructive (and frequently entertaining) exercise to examine how popular films function as markers and transmitters of contemporary values. It is particularly pertinent to examine the manner in which cinema, and particularly the genre of the 'teen film', plays a part in the organisation of social identity. Generally speaking films play a notable role in the placement of particular ideologies and values into private conversation, and offer a pedagogical space for addressing how a society views itself and the public world of power, events, politics and institutions. Henry Giroux has described film as a form of public pedagogy, a visual technology which functions as a powerful teaching machine that intentionally tries to influence the production of meaning, subject positions, identities and experience, using spectatorial pleasure and symbolic meaning to shape young people's identities outside of school (Giroux 2000, p.6). As Toby Miller notes in *Global Hollywood*, the cinema is a 'twentieth century cultural addition ... that sits aside such traditional topics as territory, language, history and schooling' (Miller 2001, p.15). Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson argue that most teen texts are created 'to educate and inform while entertaining; to set certain agendas in this delicate time just prior to the onset of a more prominent citizenship; and/or to raise crucial issues (of adult choosing) in a "responsible manner" that is entirely hegemonically negotiated' (Davis and Dickinson 2004, p.3). Given the mass-culture saturated nature of teen social life, and the extensive range of influences such as television, advertising and the Internet, it would indeed be excessive and injudicious to overstate or exaggerate the impact of film; nonetheless it is clear that film is nonetheless an important cultural product with the potential to influence young people's ideas and values.

Because adolescence is a protracted term of adjustment and self-construction through culture, not a momentary rite of passage which initiates the child into instant adulthood, there is a great deal at stake in the movement over the chasm between childhood and adulthood. Society – that is, parents, schools, community leaders and the like – invests heavily in making sure that the journey into responsible maturity

is successfully completed, and in encouraging certain hegemonically inflected forms of nascent adulthood. It is generally accepted that from the middle of the twentieth century onwards the concept of adolescence has been more or less continuously entangled with concerns about and attempts to manage or at least regulate the sexuality of youth (Moran 2000; Kidd 2004). Indeed, films dealing with youth sexuality have constantly shifted in response to prevailing social wisdom regarding the thrills and dangers of sexual activity; after all, according to Toby Miller, cinema offers 'an instrument of instruction and response that varies with place, time, genre and audience' (Miller 2001, p.177), while according to Timothy Shary films 'hold the potential for the liberation of youth, but they can also exploit and even further suppress the exploration and acceptance of youth sexuality' (Shary 2002, p.210). As a general rule teen films handle teenagers' entry into citizenship, responsibility, and wider and more multi-faceted forms of social interaction by expressing key cultural concerns through a model of personal, psychological development, rather than proposing the possibility for larger macro-political change, and they typically construct a 'citizen-in-training' protagonist who learns to become a self-governing subject by way of self-development and self-discipline. They provide an important force of socialisation for their youthful audiences, providing role models of both sexes as well as instruction in dress and fashion, courtship and love, in marriage and career. And while it is important to point out that audiences mediate films rather than simply inhabit their structures of meaning, and that teen audiences can and do appropriate and use films in a myriad of different ways, it is undeniable that films have the capacity to function as conduits for channelling behaviour – and in this particular instance, sexual behaviour – into approved routes.

Sex in the Classroom

While sex seems to abound in the cinema, it is a different story in the classroom. At the present moment classroom sex education in the United States, in particular, is both hotly debated and highly contentious. In their recent examination of sexual pedagogies in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, Claudia Nelson and Michelle Martin argue that 'sex education is not a stable identity, but something which responds quickly to national

crises or to changes in social ethos. It reflects evolving ideas about gender, race, social class, and childhood, as well as about sexuality' (Nelson and Martin 2004; p.2). It is in keeping with these shifting patterns of sex education, for example, that in recent years the powerful religious right in America has moved from vehemently opposing all forms of sex education to strongly influencing the sex education students receive in schools and promoting 'abstinence education', in which abstinence until marriage is presented as the only insurance against pregnancy and AIDS, and the only moral choice as well. As a consequence abstinence education has become the sole type of sex education in a majority of schools across the country. According to a report in the *Manchester Guardian*, abstinence education actually increases the rate of teenage pregnancy, as Texas has the fourth highest rate of HIV infection in the United States and the slowest decline of any state in the birthrate among 15-17 year olds, despite the fact that George W. Bush spent \$10 million on abstinence campaigns while Governor of that state (Monbiot 2004, p.17). This report seems to be contradicted in *Teaching Sex*, where Jeffrey Moran asserts that researchers have found virtually no evidence that sex education causes students to change their behaviour in one direction or another (Moran 2000, p.219). What remains significant though is that while school programs would appear to have had virtually no impact upon curbing or reducing adolescent sexual behaviour, mainstream films designed to appeal to mainstream audiences may well be able to capitalise upon the failure of sex education programs in schools. If we endorse the argument that popular films are by no means mere entertainments which have limited impact upon sexual attitudes, values and identities, and if we define sex education not as a programmatic manual but as 'a largely unexamined set of beliefs, practices and texts that tend to endorse a narrow vision of adolescence and maturation' (Kidd 2004, p.96), then such films could prove a more effective conduit for sex education teaching for American youth (and others) – than the official, pedagogical experience of the classroom.

'A cute little movie about porn'

So what, then, to make of *The Girl Next Door*; specifically, what lessons does it provide teenagers about gender, sexuality and identity? The story can be summarised briefly:

Matt, a sweet, rather uptight, socially awkward high school boy from an affluent suburb (think Tom Cruise in *Risky Business*), falls in love with Danielle, the girl next door, who just happens to have run away from her career as a porn star. In a struggle to assert himself in material, social and sexual terms, Matt saves Danielle and in doing so sets himself up as an entrepreneur (think *Risky Business* again). From the outset this film seems to offer a muddled set of instructions to its audience. In straining to be simultaneously a sharply satirical sex comedy and a raunchy teen chuckle-fest it ends up as neither, but instead a rather lumpy blend of sweet teen romance and naughty R-rated prurience: one reviewer terms it 'a cute little movie about porn – if that's possible' (Martucci and Serougi 2005), while according to a review in *The New York Times*, it 'alternates between slobbery adolescent male fantasy and prim Hollywood moralising, with valuable lessons trotted out in skimpy lingerie' (Scott 2004, p.23).

Yet such confusion is not just a matter of mixed genres, for this disjointed text is riddled with other inconsistencies, and its most obvious muddle concerns the mixed messages given out about the pornography industry. For example, while for the most part *The Girl Next Door* offers a view of pornography that is non-judgmental, certainly candy-coloured or sanitised and even perhaps celebratory, at the same time its central premise that Danielle must be rescued from the shame and degradation of her old job suggests a more traditional, disapproving point of view. As Matt tells her at one climactic moment, 'I know who you really are and you're better than this.' Moreover, while Danielle spends much of her time trying to get away from her adult-movie past, at the same time she hardly appears to be damaged by it. This glaring contradiction is never addressed, as the movie seems to be acknowledging the appeal and popularity of porn without fully embracing or condemning it. Perhaps the film never really settles into a consistent relationship with the porn industry because of a reluctance to alienate that proportion of its teenage male audience which would regularly watch pornography; Hollywood is an entertainment industry, after all, developed primarily as a commercial enterprise rather than an educational instrument or art form. Perhaps, too, the confusion evident in the film's uneasy and blunderingly inconsistent rendering

of current attitudes towards pornography and sex is simply an accurate reflection of a contemporary social landscape that for teenage boys and others includes on the one hand abstinence-only education and on the other *Girls Gone Wild* and *Debbie Does Dallas*.

Since, according to Henry Giroux, films take the raw material of social history and of social discourses and process them into products which are themselves historical events and social forces (Giroux 2002, p.128), they can therefore provide information about the 'psychology' of an era and its tensions, conflicts, fears and fantasies. Films do so not as a simple representation or mirroring of an extra-cinematic social reality, but they refract social discourses and content into specifically cinematic forms which engage audiences in an active process of constructing meaning – that is, they provide insights into a period and reproduce dominant ideologies, yet they may also contain proto-deconstructive elements that cut across the grain of the ideology that films promote (Giroux 2002, p.128). In the more extreme examples films may offer such a range of mixed messages that they are rendered incoherent. *The Girl Next Door* can in fact be seen as an 'incoherent text', a term coined by Robin Wood to describe a cultural artefact with ideological contradictions and conflicts that reproduce existing social confusion and turmoil (Wood 1986, p.46). Wood developed this concept in the context of the dominant cinematic mode of the 1970s, when Hollywood was caught between depicting a series of social, political and cultural events that undermined American social and economic institutions, while simultaneously producing Reaganite block-buster entertainments (the so-called 'coherent' texts which reassure audiences that the system of patriarchal capitalism still works). Yet *The Girl Next Door* reveals a similar set of contemporary contradictions, and seems divided between liberal Hollywood attitudes and those of emergent heartland neo-conservatism (see Rampell, 2005, for an insider's detailed reportage of the Hollywood 'progressives' attempting to counter the entertainment industry's right wing backers). Like the 1970s movies, this film makes for an 'incoherent' text wherein unresolved contradictions tend to leave the audience unsatisfied; and it is precisely this incoherence which makes the text so intriguing.

But What About Gender?

While this film may be incoherent about pornography, ultimately it is at its most coherent in terms of gender. *The Girl Next Door* begins with an unusual gender reversal in which the more experienced woman is won over by the younger guy's innocence. Yet while Danielle is feisty and frisky at the start (she sees Matt watching her undress from his bedroom window and exacts revenge by making him run naked through the streets, teaching him a lesson about voyeurism and loosening him up at the same time), all too soon she settles into bland vulnerability, where she mostly has to look wistful, bite her bottom lip and appear in various stages of undress. In a bizarre but arresting way even she is inconsistent in that she seems a sexually ambiguous figure –she somehow manages to be both sexy and innocent, demure yet vivacious, fearful yet sensual, perhaps representative of the film's conflicted and ambiguous feelings about sex which (like pornography) it simultaneously wants to celebrate and repress. These contradictions receive visual expression in terms of Danielle's body: while she is described as a porn star, she looks for the most part like America's sweetheart, and her trim body, while undeniably sexy, is hardly pneumatic or salaciously curvy. Ironically, while the film's title plays upon the toppling of the iconic image of 'the girl next door' as the embodiment of wholesomeness and purity, in some ways Danielle actually *is* this sort of girl. On one level she's oddly and disconcertingly reminiscent of Sandra Dee, that quintessential 'girl next door' and typecast ingénue in the movies of the 1960s who was in real life sexually abused by her step-father and died an anorexic alcoholic (Scheiner 2000, pp.87-106). Just as Dee seems to be a specific embodiment of the cultural contradictions of the public face and the underside of the particular historical period which produced her, a similar kind of schizophrenic process seems to be occurring *on screen* here.

Despite this intriguing surface incoherence, however, it becomes increasingly obvious that the movie is not about 'the girl next door' at all, but about the reassertion of hegemonic masculinity defined in opposition to femininity. For a start, the audience is told nothing about Danielle's background, nor her plans for the future, as she only exists only in relation to Matt's character trajectory. Danielle is

and has always been defined by men, interpreted as a sign (property, sexual object, slut) to be exchanged by men as a means by which they label women and specify her place (as object) and their place (as subject) in phallogocentric culture. Indeed, while there is little emphasis upon Matt's body (even when naked his genitals are cannily concealed by a rubber tyre), the film fetishises Danielle's face (according to Mary Anne Doane 'the most *readable* part of the body' [Doane 1991, 47]) and her figure in lingering, scopophilic close-ups which, by interrupting the flow of the narrative, constitute woman as spectacle and reduce her sexuality as a threat, in keeping with Laura Mulvey's notion of 'woman as image' and 'man as bearer of the look' (Mulvey 1975, p.16). In fact it is impossible to avoid Mulvey's well-known and much reprinted analysis of Hollywood cinema as a pleasure machine which manufactures a masculinised viewer through the ideological apparatus of cinematic address, (as well, of course, as providing a disadvantaged positioning for the female). As Teresa de Lauretis has pointed out, the technology of the cinema constructs gender, controlling the field of social meaning, as it creates representations that the audience negotiates and inhabits (de Lauretis 1987, p.18). And so the feminine position in the signifying practices of this film text is generally the classic one of displayed exhibitionism, with Danielle's appearance coded for especially strong visual and erotic impact by the manner in which she is dressed, lit, and placed in the frame.

Ultimately in this movie the heterosexual couple is constituted along patriarchal lines: masculine subjectivity becomes the only available focalisation, while woman is 'situated as bearer of meaning rather than maker of meaning' (Mulvey 1975, p.8) – or in this case, multiple meanings. For example, Danielle appears to represent every teen male's fantasy of a beautiful doll-like creature whose sexuality he controls for himself, a meaning particularly evident in the scene where Matt loses his virginity with Danielle in the limo after the high school prom, for example, when Danielle appears to achieve a real orgasm, as distinct from her faked delight and fabricated groaning in the porn movie shown briefly in the opening credits. Moreover, Annette Kuhn has argued that in media addressed to specifically male audiences women are represented as object-victims

(Kuhn 1995, p.7). In this instance Danielle is constructed as a victim who has to be saved by a good man who makes an 'honest woman' of her, something she apparently can't do of her own volition.

The overall schema also fits in neatly with Barbara Creed's definition of the deviant woman in women's melodrama, in which she describes a pattern of female sexuality tainted with criminality, loosely defined as female role transgression, entry of exceptional male, marked change in point of view, and finally acceptance of more socially desirable role (Creed 2004, p.13). The filmic narrative clearly conforms to the Oedipal trajectory identified by Mulvey and others, where the male hero has to assert himself over another man (usually a father figure, and in this case Kelly, Danielle's pimp and ex-lover, who takes a paradoxically pathological yet also obviously avuncular interest in the younger man) in order to achieve social recognition and win the woman. In so doing, of course, the film may be said to represent the workings of the patriarchy. Furthermore his film could be usefully analysed in terms of Leslie Fiedler's myth of the other/stranger/alien, the locus of disorder which must be controlled (Fiedler 1974, p.11); in this instance Danielle's alluring and threatening sexuality, her sexual 'excess', is curtailed by Matt's intervention. And so while the film at first looks and sounds potentially funky and different, pretty soon it serves up the same tired old moralities, the perpetuation of phallogocentric myths in which woman (read sexual object, victim, deviant, Other) is returned to her place, accepting a normative female role to avoid being directly punished for narrative and social transgression. There is certainly no female empowerment, no notion of what Bob Connell has referred to as 'democratic power relations' (Connell 2000, p.25) which are empathetic and degendered rather than oppositional and hierarchical. Given that there is no reconfiguration of masculine subjectivities and power relations, this movie is deeply depressing fodder designed to legitimise patriarchal ideology for the implied teen male audience.

Schooling for Sex

There is one area, however, into which the movie offers new – if fairly fleeting – insights, and that concerns sex instruction itself. Prior to meeting Danielle, Matt has raised

\$25,000 for a Cambodian student to study in America but this money is taken by Kelly, who resents the usurping of his property (Danielle, that is) and who rationalises this theft as a semi-legitimate financial transaction. In order to recoup the money Matt makes a deal with the local porn king and in a startlingly different variation on the standard formula, Matt's closest friends escort two porn stars to the prom night, and the school jocks are persuaded to sneak into the school library to 'perform' with them in front of an assortment of aspiring young film makers. When Kelly then steals the prom-night tape, it seems as if the sordid mess will be revealed to Matt's parents and school principal. When the tape is played, however, it is not, as expected, a 'do-it-yourself' porn movie, but an up-to-the-minute sex education video which is a hit in high schools across America and enables Matt to become rich and attend the university of his choice (another homage to *Risky Business*).

Instead of the dated 1950s-like sex-control warning that Matt and the others are forced to see in class, which focuses upon the negative aspects of sex and sees it as something to be avoided, emphasising the perils of teenage parenthood arising from a liaison at the school prom, this sex education for the 21st century demonstrates practical methods of contraception, like the use of condoms starring a real-life boy instead of the usual banana. Both videos 'talk' directly to the audience, but there are marked differences: in the student production the female porn stars do the presenting and look relaxed, friendly and knowingly into the camera, although naturally they are still seen in terms of their bodies (they rip off their lab coats to reveal scanty underwear). In this new form of sex education contraception is not associated with shame or embarrassment, and explicit messages are given to young people by young people (as producers, directors, cameramen and most crucially actors/subjects) 'using' adult material to construct their own space for governing behaviour. That this is an appropriate way of disseminating information is immediately recognised by the adults: Matt's father reacts enthusiastically, while his headmaster nods grudgingly. And it may well be a successful pedagogical strategy in promoting sexual awareness and good health practices; according to the *Guardian* newspaper, for instance, peer group teaching is

the only sex education program in Europe that has been proven to work (Curtis 2003, p.29).

This emphasis upon youth-centred media rather than the adult-talking-down classroom sex-talks reveals a usurpation of the school as a site for the transmission of official forms of knowledge. School (usually a critical piece of territory for teen cinema) is a site for discipline yet also a symbolic site of 'social evolution' (Shary 2002, p.26), embodying youth struggles for social identity and status. *The Girl Next Door* focuses on a high school world where Matt is caught between the demands and expectations of adult authorities and the hegemonic authority of the school jocks and their elite narratives emphasising arrogance, entitlement and privilege, and his narrative function is to enact the complex scenarios of social difference from the perspective of a reasonably well adjusted but somewhat socially marginalised teen (the format for countless teen movies, involving the construction of a representative figure with whom viewers are positioned to identify). Matt has to navigate the social structure of the high school, especially the routine humiliations of everyday teenage life, and gradually learn to master a complex set of codes regarding social and sexual conduct. Now while the school has been used for subversive purposes prior to prom night – (the film room is used by Matt's friends for viewing porn, for example) – this subversion is accelerated after Matt meets Danielle and he begins to take steps away from the comforts and limits of his suburban life and to move into an adult space (for instance, although he is a highly motivated and conscientious student he leaves Maths classes to learn about life with Danielle). In comparison with this, the official knowledge offered by the school itself is insignificant, and the teachers are blustering figures comically irrelevant to the students who are for the most part utterly indifferent to them. By resituating these innovative sex education films within the classroom situation, the school space is transformed, no longer irrelevant or struggling to contain youth practices, but accommodating them.

Conclusion

It is clear that *The Girl Next Door*, while obviously not a programmatic sex education manual, plays a part in providing lessons in sex and romance to young male

audiences. Yet while young people are granted agency to cultivate their own pedagogical space, the gendered lessons themselves remain deeply reactionary and insistently problematic. The sex education lessons are for the boys only, and eroticised images of women are used to capture their attention (most specifically, of course, in the instance of the sex film). *The Girl Next Door* reinforces negative myths about women, and offers the male viewers pleasure, reinscribing oppressive female modes without interrogating hierarchies or representing ameliorated engendered intersubjective experiences. The film promotes reactionary ideological values through a set of cinematic codes and strategies which prompt identification with protagonists through erotic aims. It seems as if the most effective way to get boys' attention is to objectify women. And while the boys are shown to be successfully proactive, doing things for themselves, as it were, women are never shown in this way, and there is no reformulating of the gender schema.

Finally, it is necessary to return, once more, to the notion of film and its role in channelling adolescent sexual behaviour into approved routes. According to Douglas Kellner, film genres resonate to audiences' dreams, fears, and social concerns, and inevitably refract social mores, conflicts and ideologies as they deal with the central conflicts and problems in American society by offering soothing resolutions, reassuring the audience that all problems can be solved within existing institutions (Kellner 1998, p.129-131). Kellner argues that most Hollywood films, including teen social comedies, tend to promote versions of the American Dream and dominant American myths and ideologies – for example, that money and success are important values, that heterosexual romance is the proper social form. While films, like other cultural formations, can play a role in sustaining or challenging the existing binary power relations and gender hierarchy, for the most part Hollywood is an ideological institution whose values never stray far from mainstream US perspectives, positing individual solutions to social problems, thus reinforcing the conservative appeal to individualism and the mythology of the American Dream.

In her study of Disney films Robyn McCallum argues that the Hollywood culture industry is generally shaped

by conservative metanarratives, where anachronistic representations of gender politics constitute the normal order of things (McCallum 2002, p.116). Moreover, according to Kenneth Kidd, popular teen films teach adolescents about options in love and life, steering them towards sexual and cultural heterodoxy and emphasising the pleasure and profit of normative desire (much like traditional classroom sex manuals). What results is often a conservative film with a veneer of sexual radicalism (Kidd 2004, p.98). *The Girl Next Door* provides a space in which a number of contradictory issues and meanings enter public discourse, where pressing and urgent issues in American society (like the need to communicate ideas about sex education in a more informative and youth-oriented way) are at times addressed. In the end, though, despite its frequently mixed and often ‘incoherent’ messages, this slippery filmic palimpsest endorses in the clearest possible way a patriarchal social order rather than taking on gender dynamics and contemporary teen identity in a subversive, youth-focused manner. As a manual for sex education, then, *The Girl Next Door* maps depressingly familiar terrain.



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