

"Maiden USA" **Representing Teenage Girls in the 90s**

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Made-in USA

Myriad choices exist for girls within the image-systems of this post-feminist era. Women's sports have hit the airwaves with professional basketball teams, an Olympic hockey team and stellar focus on teenage figure-skating, gymnastics and tennis stars. Women run companies, have careers in medicine, law, and politics--domains previously off-limits to them. Role models for girls of women "making it" in the corporate world abound. Yet alongside the career triumphs of women, and the frequent use of the hype-term "Girl Power" in current advertising and journalism, reports of a chronic loss of self-esteem, eating disorders, bodily mutilation, teenage pregnancy, sexually-transmitted diseases, and suicide among adolescent girls also proliferate. In fact, the dilemma of a decline in girls' self-esteem has become a cultural given in mainstream news reportage.

The visual landscape of teenage girlhood is extremely contradictory, with wealthy models, actresses and sports stars defining the terms of youth success and "regular girls" often seen by the news media as troubled or in trouble. The ultra-thin body of the teenage girl-woman continues to serve as the commodified Maiden, Made-In the USA, a "model citizen" against which our culture measures its standards of beauty. For young girls, Barbie is the ideal teenager with the sparkly, dreamy clothes, the tiny, Cinderella shoes, and that impossibly sexy body. For feminists, she's the bimbo we love to hate. The teenage girl's own body falls under the scrutiny of her own often cruel comparative gaze, a gaze which alternately identifies with the Maidens of popular culture and rejects them wholesale as objects of a consumerist culture. And yet this Super Model aspect of the Maiden continues to wield clout as a substantial on-the-arm consort of the male power structure. Cultural taboos around menstruation and the expression of girl's sexual desire continue to mute the language of the female body, while beauty panic causes girls to scrutinize every inch of their skin, muscle, bone and fat cells in a hobbled language of fashion-based imitation, the performance of the feminine.

Although teenage models and actresses are continually glorified in their nymph-beauty state by advertising, Hollywood movies and network television, teenage girls in public life are being scrutinized as an "at risk" population by many scholars and journalists. Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls, a 1996 book by psychologist Mary Pipher designed as a clarion call, an "eye-opening look at the everyday dangers of being young and female," was on the New York Times bestseller list for over two years, 1996-98. This book has become a popular Bible for the documentation of this "national phenomenon" of girls' self-esteem loss, eating disorders, and self-mutilation, a guidebook which raises many fear-based questions and concerns. "America is a girl-destroying place." says Pipher. 1 The statistics of self-esteem loss are grim--less than a third of girls polled by the American Association of University Women's 1990 study, *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*, responded positively to the statement "I happy the way I am" compared with nearly half the boys. 2 Yet little focus has been given to the girls who do succeed--not as models, rock stars, actresses or Olympic athletes--but as happy, productive, outspoken, creative individuals.

Peggy Orenstein's 1994 book, *SchoolGirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem and the Confidence Gap* documented the effects of the AAUW's startlingly high statistics on the drop in self-esteem

among adolescent girls. Exploring the "real life" applications of these findings, she profiled female students in two middle schools, one largely middle class, predominantly white, the other in a multicultural, inner city school. What Orenstein revealed in her investigative journalism is a system ill-equipped to foster self-confidence in girls. "The lessons of the hidden curriculum teach girls to value silence and compliance, to view those qualities as a virtue."³ Boys learn to get ahead, girls to "get along". White adolescent girls, she observed, continue to be trapped by the polarities of the Slut and the Perfect girl. The perfect girl often achieves her ends through bulimia and anorexia, to acquire the "perfect body" and by keeping quiet to avoid ever giving the "wrong answer." African-American girls, comparatively free from the white beauty ethic, are statistically less prone to a drop in self-esteem. Their drive to succeed, however, is limited by the social stigma of achievers seen as "acting white" and a system, which, through overcrowding, funding cuts and neglect, sorely under serves and ignores them.

Documentary media of the 90s has responded to this "girl crisis" with several feature length films and videos which have gained considerable recognition. Independently -produced films as well as Hollywood features abound with recent depictions of wild, seductive Lolitas like Christina Ricci in *Buffalo 66* (1998) and *All About Sex* (1998). Drew Barrymore's appearance in the successful 1998 film *Ever After* revamps the Cinderella myth with a more self-actualized, scrappy teenage heroine who fights back against her victimhood. But it's still a fantasy about "getting the prince." The scripts of womanhood, and the definitions of gender have begun to scramble, but remain difficult to navigate. For girls coming of age in the 90s, the visual sphere of representation combined with complex and contradictory social messages have contributed to the complexity of growing up female.

This article will explore identity scripts of young womanhood from alternative media sources--specifically independently -produced narrative films and documentaries and compare them to mainstream, corporate media-financed features and television. The article will also profile media literacy programs and women's film festivals which have been reaching out to girls to counteract the seeming inevitability of "gender crash" by providing them with media skills for creative self-expression and venues for exhibiting their work. The discussion will focus on the language of girls' sexuality in the filmic landscape of desire, and will examine the work of teenage filmmakers in their attempt to break the verbal paralysis of the Western "virgin-whore" paradigm. Given all the mixed messages in a post-feminist culture, the question arises: What does it mean to "do girl" in the 90s?

Teenage Girls Read Sitcoms and Movies

Since the 50s and 60s, Hollywood has been aware that the teenage audience was the biggest movie-going sector of the population.⁴ To claim the biggest box office success, Hollywood sought to lure the teenage market into the theatre, often by creating B-movie teenage scenarios like *Beach Blanket Bingo* (1965) and *I was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957) and more serious movies depicting teenage themes like *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Splendor in the Grass* (1961). These days, Hollywood marketing strategies still seek to lure the teenage audience to create a box-office hit but rarely with films about teenagers. Examples include *Scream* (1996), *Scream 2* (1997) and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997). Like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1986), most of these teen-oriented goosebump flicks play with the sexual titillation of "young thing" victimhood. Big-budget action and special effects flicks hungry for teenage repeat viewership, however, nod to the common denominator of the male protagonist who determines the action of the film, with a female companion who may start off like an

intelligent professional but often end up acting like a helpless idiot. Exceptions in the blockbuster arena tend to be women who adopt a classically "male" tool—the gun or the car. Examples of this genre include *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *Terminator 2* (1991), the *Alien* trilogy (1979-92) and *Speed* (1994). In this context, the female icons of power viewed by teenage girls display what could be termed "male power in drag." What remains to be explored by the filmic landscape is an expression of female desire that extends beyond getting the guy or getting his gun.

90s Hollywood also produced *Clueless* (1995), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *The Craft* (1996) and *South Central* (1993), all of which focus on 90s teenage lives. *Clueless*, ostensibly a modernized version of Jane Austen's *Emma*, centers on a teenage heroine, Cher, the most popular fashion-plate bimbo at Beverly Hills High. It doesn't hurt that her Daddy, the toughest prosecution lawyer in town, gives her a nifty Jeep to drive (badly, of course) and unlimited credit at the boutiques on Rodeo Drive. In the end she lands the cutest guy, her ex-stepbrother, and is a successful matchmaker for a couple of déclassé teachers. Just like the Disney scenarios featuring teenage heroines, Cher's mother is dead. Mothers and daughters rarely coexist as team players on the Hollywood screen.⁵ The paucity of big screen examples of mothers supporting or mentoring their daughters sets a cultural precedent for the assumed difficulty for young women to find intergenerational guidance from older women. As far back as *Stella Dallas* (1934), girls coming of age must renounce their mothers to succeed, or scenarios eliminate them from the beginning. Fathers and father figures, are however, frequent denizens of the teenage heroine-centered feature film. Quite frequently, these pairings have sexual overtones, like Bernardo Bertolucci's 1995 film, *Stealing Beauty* and Adrian Lyne's much-publicized 1998 remake of *Lolita*. The coming-of age- co-minglings of young girls and fathers or father figures sets a visual standard for the girl's script of desire in the patriarchal representational sphere.

And while this "wanna be with daddy" fantasy feeds certain cultural myths, the real life consequences of sexual relationships with older males can be devastating to teenage women seeking an articulation of their nascent sexual power. As revealed in the study guide for Carol Cassidy's 1997 documentary about teenage motherhood, *Baby Love*, to be discussed below, adult men father over 50% of the babies born to teen women, age 15-17.⁶ The fantasy that an older, father figure will "take care of" teenage women has been absorbed through popular myth systems. Even though statistics prove that the majority of these adult men leave their teenage partners to become impoverished single mothers, this persistent fantasy of surrogate daddyhood rises up on the filmic horizon as often as the backbiting, jealous and destructive middle-aged stepmother or mother. On the one hand, media imagery encourages an intergenerational closeness between older men and younger women and on the other reinforces the intergenerational rift between young women and their mother figures, at a time when advice from women who have "been there" might be most useful to teenage women.

Network television creates the most programming for teenage girls about teenage girls (even though twenty-something actresses usually play the teenage parts). Examples include UPN's *"Moesha"*; ABC's *"Sabrina the Teenage Witch"* and *"Buffy the Teenage Vampire Slayer,"* a recent Warner Brother's hit which has inspired over 320 web sites. Both *Buffy* and *Sabrina* are classic blonds, continuing a script about desire and the blond which has inhabited Western culture for centuries. *"Buffy the Vampire Slayer"*, based on an 80s B-movie of the same name, employs the tropes of horror films. Though *Buffy* is the designated heroine of the series, her nemesis and one-time lover Angel, a vampire, provides the male-gaze orientation of the show as he stalks and voyeurs *Buffy* endlessly. The conflation of desire and potential violence provides a distressing message to teenage viewers—that the girl may be afraid of her stalker,

but she really "loves him," a script that has plagued interpretations of violence against women and girls for years.

Sabrina is a much more light-hearted, even goofy teenager who explores gender crossing, fantasy fulfillment and pranking with her newly discovered magic. Guided by two good witch aunts, Sabrina uses her magic sparingly. Like Buffy, she must appear "normal" to all except her closest friends, which perpetuates an unspoken girl-code that they not appear too powerful or proficient to their peers or risk social ostracization. The concealment of power also relates to the adolescent girl's nascent sexual power and to the taboos around menstruation, another mainstream "unnameable." While Sabrina does have a good rapport with the aunts who are in on her secret (because they have the same magic powers), Buffy must go to tortuous lengths to keep her mother in the dark about her shadow life. Buffy's charade of girlhood belies a concealed, secret life of great danger. For Sabrina, "doing girl" means engaging in a complex set of behaviors, which, when unveiled through the "magic" of television, becomes comedic.

"Moesha", with its cast of African-American teenagers and their parents, provides a potential site of empowerment for black girls who once had few role models on network television. Recently, however, the script shifted Moesha out of her milieu into an all-white high school, due to network interest in boosting the show's ratings.⁸ This could easily compromise the impact of the show on black female viewers rarely presented with characters who guide their own weekly narrative as strong-willed, outspoken and intelligent young women, within an African-American cultural milieu.

Indie Girls

Many representations of teenage girls in alternative, female-centered narratives tend to be among the "independent" theatrical films. Some examples of these films include Alison Anders's two features, *Gas, Food and Lodging* (1992) and *Mi Vida Loca/My Crazy Life* (1993); Larry Clark's *Kids* (1995); Jim McKay's *Girl's Town* (1996); Lisa Kreuger's *Manny and Lo* (1997); and Matthew Bright's *Freeway* (1997). As the major studios have begun to create their own lower budget "Indie" studios, the term "Independently-produced" begins to blur. As a rule, Independently-produced films are completed without studio funds, geared to an art-house audience. While some of these films may sign on with a major distributor, the marketing strategy tends toward an audience older than the depicted protagonists, with teenage girls rarely being the target audience.

Alison Anders, in her first feature, *Gas, Food and Lodging*, (1992) broke significant ground in bringing a woman-centered perspective to the story of a single mother (Brooke Adams), owner of a truck stop in a small Texas town, and her two teenage daughters. Shade (Fairuza Balk), the younger daughter, an offbeat romantic who fantasizes about a "normal life" with a live-in father, crosses cultural borders in her friendship with a Mexican boy. The older daughter, Trudi (Ione Skye), craving more direct male contact, ends up ridiculed by her peers as the town slut. She eventually becomes pregnant, and goes to Dallas to give the baby up for adoption. In many ways, these characters initiated the current wave of teenage girl representation in independent filmmaking by giving voice to previously ignored complexities of growing up female. Anders's second feature, *Mi Vida Loca* (1993) draws its characters from the girl gangs of East LA's Echo Park. The story's focus on Sad Girl (Angel Aviles) and Mousie (Seidy Lopez) provides a view into Latina culture with a rare depiction of girlhood friendship that explodes in jealousy and rivalry over Ernesto, the Latino drug dealer and gang leader who fathers a child with both girls. Following Ernesto's murder, the two single mothers eventually reconcile and

begin to re-create a friendship on the other side of early adulthood. This uncommon resolution of the "she's a bitch" rivalry onscreen proposes a visual record of the complexities of bonds between young women without romanticizing them. In both of Anders's girl-centric films, teenage pregnancy serves as a dramatic lynch pin to the scenarios.

In McKay's *Girl's Town*, four inner-city teenage girlfriends on the verge of high school graduation spend social time contemplating college, guys, pregnancy, date rape and suicide. The outlook is bleak. Nikki (Denise Hernandez), an African American girl who has been accepted to a prestigious college, commits suicide in the course of the narrative. Reading her diary after her death, her friends realize she was the victim of date rape, which leads Emma (Anna Grace), a college-bound white girl, to confess that she too had been date raped by a popular football player. Transgressing known codes of "girl behavior", Angela (Bruklin Harris) and Patti (Lili Taylor)--a teen mom with a toddler--join Emma in trashing the guy's car in the school parking lot, spraying "rapist" on the hood. They then scrape the body of the car--as a stand-in for his body--making a public spectacle of the adolescent male's pride and joy. As a measure of the taboo being crossed in this scene, a fear-based dread that their action would incite an even greater and more dangerous male rage follows the pleasure-based thrill-moment of viewing their act. By spraying his car, the girls name the rapist publicly. But because they never publicly admit to the vandalism, the raped girl remains silent, an anonymous author of the rage-based retribution. Because the rapist is never seen onscreen, in an odd way his anonymity is protected. The phallus is never revealed. Writing on the car, they mark an empty shell, a suit of clothes without a person to animate the legs. That person, however, is found in the journalist who date-raped Nikki during a summer internship. The three survivors track him down at his workplace and beat him up on a New York sidewalk. These violent solutions disturb the viewer, but make their mark: can girls achieve the most impact when they act like city boys in meting out retribution? McKay's camera trails off at the end of the film--he doesn't preach an answer, but leaves the viewer with a sense of hopelessness about the future lives of these girls.

Larry Clark's 1995 film, *KIDS*, on the other hand, promoted itself as an ubiquitous filmic eye into the life of "teenagers", a supposed "universalized" portrait of a depraved, aimless, sex-obsessed and violent sector of human culture in the 90s. The "teenagers" depicted in the film are specimens of a disturbed, drugged-out, dropped out, "normalcy" underscored by the cinema verité style of the filmmaking. Larry Clark assures the viewer he is "telling it like it is", that his film turns its lens on all of teenage life when in fact his film documents a very specific tribe of teenagers living in New York City around Greenwich Village's Washington Square Park. The main character, Telly (Leo Fitzpatrick), a seemingly mildly retarded virgin-hunter infected with HIV, talks incessantly with his friend Casper (Justin Pierce) about girls, tampons, breastfeeding, multiple partners and seduction strictly from an adolescent male perspective steeped in irreverent misogyny.

KIDS includes one scene of a room full of girls talking about their sexual exploits. Many of these sexually-active 16 year-olds have had multiple partners and have opinions on oral sex, anal sex and the best orgasms. The raunchy flavor of their discussion drops the jaw of the viewer at times, but is "realistic" in terms of the voyeuristic slumber party reportage of sexual exploits. These girls have the sexual experience of many women in their late twenties, without the emotional maturity or sexual information base to match. Most of their sexual escapades are performed without birth control or condoms. "Girls like sex too" is the message here, not necessarily a bad one; audacious in the rarity of its articulation. But in the very next scene comes the punishment: one of girls, Jenny (Chloe Sevigny), finds out she is HIV positive, even

though she had sex once, when she lost her virginity to Telly. Jenny spends the rest of the film wandering from place to place speaking only one line: "Where's Telly?". She has no other language. She follows his trail to a club where a male "friend" shoves a drug in her mouth which makes her more zombie-like. She finally locates Telly at a party/orgy where his seduction of a thirteen-year-old virgin is underway. To the viewer, Jenny is dumb; dumb for falling for Telly's double speak bed lines, dumb for getting HIV, dumb because after searching all day, she cannot speak when she finally finds him in coitus with this other girl. She stands in the doorway, impotent and mute, unable to prevent another infection. Crashing on a nearby couch, she falls into a deep drugged stupor where she is raped like a limp doll by Casper. She does not speak; she remains mutely receptive to the phallus-script of boys.

Freeway, another indie feature from 1997 directed by Matthew Bright, is set in the wasteland of Los Angeles, where an illiterate, illegitimate Vanessa Lutz (read: "slut"), played by Reese Witherspoon, drives this re-telling of the Red Riding Hood myth. The gratuitous violence, and disturbing incest-driven titillation of this film do not balance out with Vanessa's ultimate triumph over the serial killer Bob Wolf (played by Kiefer Sutherland). Once again we are presented with an overly sexualized teenage girl who is "stupid." Her introduction onscreen shows her in a Special Ed class struggling to read the sentence "The cat drinks milk." Again and again Vanessa is humiliated onscreen, by her parents, her would-be murderer and the judges in court, who bark, "One more word young lady and you're going to be gagged." There's little solace in her ultimate break-out from prison with her self-styled razor-sharp toothbrush and her self-defense killing of the Wolf who would not die. As a role model, as a cultural icon, Vanessa Lutz resonates little of value in this pseudo feminist sexploitation cop show, where once again a supposed "power girl" is respected only for her ability to shoot and kill.

Lisa Krueger's quirky film, Manny and Lo (1997), provides an unusual take on teenage pregnancy, tenaciously loyal sisterhood and the search for absent mothers. The story of two vagabond sisters who take off in the family station wagon after their mother dies, sixteen-year-old Amanda, or "Manny" protects her ten-year-old sister, Lo, from the cops and foster care by moving on whenever trouble glances in at their car window. Together they shoplift for food and spend their nights fantasizing about a "normal" life by breaking into vacant, furnished homes for sale, sleeping in their clean sheets and using as many personal hygiene products as possible. Yearning for assistance with her unexpected pregnancy, but too tough to ask for help, Manny convinces Lo to kidnap the saleswoman (Mary Kay Place) in the local maternity shop. Brandishing an old shotgun, Manny does the deed and the trio hole up in a rustic vacation home in the woods to wait for the baby's arrival. Though Manny refuses to wax sentimental about the imminent birth, she eventually allows the advice of the saleswoman to influence her prenatal eating and smoking habits. Once again on the run, the baby is born alongside a stream in a "back to nature" twist to the storyline as Manny admits to her fear and succumbs to the need for help from the saleswoman-cum-midwife. This film navigates issues of the feminine and the changing nature of "motherhood" in the 90s through a trio of unlikely hybrid heroines who ultimately protect and nurture one another as they improvise their own solutions to survival. All of these independent features deal with "real life" problems faced by many teenage girls. Several recent documentaries have done the same, with a big focus on the sexual lives of their subjects.

Real Girls in Crisis

"Girls Like Us", the Independent Television Service (ITVS)-funded film by Tina DeFeliciantano and Jane Wagner which won the Juror's Choice award at the 1997 Sundance Film Festival for

Best Documentary, profiles four South Philadelphia teenagers of diverse ethnicities in an intimate, hand-held labor of love that spanned four crucial years of adolescence, ages 14 to 18.8 Two of the girls end up pregnant in the course of shooting; the other two, "good girls" with great grades, but little in the way of power or access to a vocabulary of their own sexual desire, barely make it to college without contracting STDs or getting pregnant themselves.

"Girls Like Us" attempts to give us "real" girls. Yet the universalizing implication of the title--that these girls struggle just as "we," the predominantly adult female viewer did and continue to do, stretches the size and fit of this documentary. Who is the ubiquitous "us" of the title? Though broad gestures contribute to the packaging of this film, it is actually a specific portrait of four girls from different ethnic backgrounds, but only slightly different educational and economic backgrounds. Their working-class milieu does not speak for all sectors of girlhood in America, nor does it speak for a mythic "middle America" of girlhood. To do so would require a series, or a portrait of more than four girls' lives during adolescence.⁹

Economics have played a part in forcing independent producers to select hype-able subjects to attract funding. Framing the subject matter as a "state of emergency," a crisis in need of representation, underscores this. But however well-intentioned the producers may be with regard to the issues of their teenage girl subjects, portraying girls who fail may only serve to reiterate negative themes and undermine their subjects' long-term possibilities for success. While bringing public attention to social problems is one of the service-oriented functions of independent documentary filmmaking, balancing these visions of failure with positive reportage would also help aid the state of the girl-nation.

Carol Cassidy's 1997 film, "Baby Love," also funded by ITVS,¹⁰ explores the script of female desire as pregnancy. The title of the film plays with the permutations of the word "baby" in our culture, a term often used to sexualize women: "hey, baby" "I love you, baby", and "she's a babe", as well as referring to The Supremes 1960s hit. But these teenage babes now have babies they are trying to love. Through her research with one hundred single teenage mothers, Cassidy creates a self-styled tapestry of voices. A multi-cultural sisterhood of the Teen Mom.

The onscreen mothers remain oddly nameless, despite the intimacy of the stories they reveal in the cross-cut snippets of storytelling threaded through the narrative. Because the subjects are culturally diverse, it is easy to overlook the fact that they are not regionally diverse, and thus accept this universalized experience of teenage motherhood as representative of America. Where are the teenage moms from New York City, Los Angeles, or Dayton, Ohio? Many of these girl-women, all from Georgia, shared an ignorance of their reproductive biology prior to pregnancy, ignorance of birth control and economics, and a lack of love, support and open communication with their parents. This shocking admission in young women growing up in the 90s may cause the viewer to ask, "How could they be so dumb?" Only ignorance in 1997 has a nine-year old menstruating and thinking she will die. A horror scenario on par with *Carrie* (1976). How can it be that girls--in Georgia or any other place in the United States of free speech, public education for all--are still kept so ignorant of their own biology as to begin menstruating without any preparatory vocabulary? Several of these girls equated the early onset of their menses with the arrival of a "boy crazy" sex drive, which initiated sexual activity at age 11, 12, or 13. The persistent lack of a coherent language of girl's sexuality, of girl's desire separate from the biology of baby making perpetuates a myth that the ultimate female "orgasm" comes from conception. Teenage pregnancy fulfills the codes of desire as they are taught to girls--completes the sentence, provides the verb. Through pregnancy, teenage girls become visible, active, warranting attention. Until they have the baby. Then they become social

outcasts, abandoned by their peers, abandoned by their boyfriends, their families. Girls are taught to be aware of the "uncontrollable" phallus-driven desire in the pubescent boys around them. Wet dreams and boys' sex drive are taught as biology, as fact, while female desire is for the most part unnamed. If conception is the only sanctioned form of female desire-as-biology, doesn't that explain, in part, the continued occurrence of teenage pregnancy?

Kristy Guevara-Flanagan's short experimental documentary *The Ballad of Cecilia Rios* (1997), which won a Golden Spire at the 1998 Golden Gate Awards sponsored by the San Francisco Film Festival, provides a moving, poetic ballad about the random rape and murder of a promising teenage Latina at a Richmond, California high school. Combining footage of a teenage Mexican singing group, who provide the theme song for the film, with black and white shots of the murder site and close-ups of teenage girls' black dance shoes stomping traditional rhythms under their hand-embroidered Mexican skirts, the film serves as a form of cathartic mourning. Originally thought to have been the victim of gang violence, the film counterpoises hot-toned, second-generation evening news footage shot from the television screen with the voices of the many friends of the deceased Cecilia Rios. The film brings forward a story of loss and grief that might otherwise have been lost as yesterday's news and makes a cultural document of a community grieving the death of a young girl they loved by tapping the richness of their origins.

All three of these documentaries deal with issues of teenage girls' sexuality in terms of journalistic shock-value reportage. And while these issues are incredibly valid and worthy of attention, there has yet to be a PBS-funded documentary about teenage girls with positive outcomes for the articulation of young women's language of desire. In terms of representation, girls who have sex, especially those who enjoy it, continue to land in the extreme circumstances of pregnancy, rape, or STDs. The underlying message for girls and their parents is that abstinence remains the best way to maintain not only a reputation, but one's health and life as well.

What About the Boys?

While these and other recent documentaries focus on the dilemmas of "girl crises" which have now been clearly named, labeled, even pathologized. The message that girls need to change, need to emulate the competitive "qualities" of boys comes through loud and clear. Very little attention, however, has focused on the way boys are enculturated to deal with girls and how certain unmediated "boys will be boys" codes of verbal and physical harassment impact not only on girls' freedom to express themselves, but on their overall sense of safety and well-being. Boys' outwardly vocal appraisals of girls' physical appearance, ridicule of individuality, and other forms of adolescent censorship often prevent girls from speaking out. In *Schoolgirls*, Peggy Orenstein notes that girls remain silent in mixed-gender scholastic settings often out of a fear of ridicule.¹¹

On the Internet, a proliferation of recent web sites created by and for teenage girls demonstrates ways in which girls vocalize more openly and creatively in contexts of anonymity. Driven by language and ideas instead of appearance, the web represents an open field for girls' self-expression where identities can be masked or altered. Expanded networks of communication with girls from across the country allows them to travel beyond the potentially limited avenues of their local school. For teenage girls the atmosphere of cyberspace has a freedom-from-risk power that is not accessible in many classroom settings. In chat sites with such diverse names as "Ratgrlls Hideout" and "The Poptart Pages" girls discuss sex,

menstruation, gender stereotypes, rape, politics, feminism and the differences between grrls, grrrls and grrrrls. While cybergrrls talk freely and audaciously about all aspects of their lives, a significant number of teenage girls still keep up a quiet, "good girl" profile in the more public arenas of school. Most current educational initiatives lie in correcting girls, enhancing their competitive skills, teaching them "I can do" in math and science and technology, but few scholars are asking, "What about the boys? How can we change the boys?" It remains to be seen if documentary media will begin to address the behaviors of boys as crisis-worthy subjects on par with victim girls, bad girls, and failing girls.

In "House of Girls", a 1997 ITVS-sponsored video produced by Karen Cooper, Marisa, one of the five profiled girls says, "I am interested in sharing power. But boys don't like to share." Boys' hazing of girls marks a hegemony battle that maintains a gender-based hierarchy of power, of voice, of agency. Girls are taught to read and interpret male narratives, identify with the hero's journey, the male experience. But boys are not taught to identify with the female experience or the heroine's journey to the same degree. If they were, they might not be so quick to label those deviating from the limited mainstream images of beauty as "dogface," "fatso", or "slut," terminologies which contribute to teen suicide, depression and eating disorders. For girls to maintain their personal power they have to be taught to fight back, verbally keep pace with the razzing of boys. This exhausting repartee can be distracting, draining girls of resources which could be put to creative image production, social service or academic excellence. This entire arena of "boys will be boys" behavior has yet to come under mass cultural scrutiny as a form of gender-based censorship.

In "The Ride" another ITVS production from 1994, this cross-fire gender-hazing finds its expression in the seemingly casual segments of the crew members interviewing each other between cities, on the road. The eight-part series set out to document the lives of twenty teenagers—two per visited city—during a marathon cross-country tour. Six teenage ethnographers dig with cameras into the urban/suburban ruins of modern culture. Under the guidance of Executive Producer Shauna Garr, the teen crew shot and directed all of the segments, conducted with the in-your-face intimacy of MTV's "Real Life" and "Road Rules." An innovative hip-hop driven title sequence sets the rhythm of this intimate, gutsy, streetwise portrait of American teenagers. While gender equality was not a stated goal of the production, many issues emerged which pointed to unmediated disparities in a program that was otherwise quite strong in its multicultural approach. The crew was comprised of four guys—Jose Baltodano, Derric Crooks, Alex Garcia and Zachary Levy; two girls—Paula Patton and Ramona Catalanello; and an adult female Executive Director, Shauna Garr, who kept ostensibly to the background during shooting and interviewing. From the outset, a significant male majority led many of the profiles, which were overwhelmingly focused on the male perspectives of teenage life. Of the twenty teenagers, or "guides" interviewed, only six were girls. Of those six, most were depicted in relationship to boys, either as sister, girlfriend, or former girlfriend. In the towns they visited, girls were often shot and/or interviewed in a group—as cheerleaders; as girl gang adjuncts to a boys gang; or in cliques. Boys, however, frequently appeared solo onscreen speaking about "bigger" issues of racial identity, sexual orientation, and social perspectives. Leslie, a biracial girl in a wealthy suburb of Philadelphia flirts with bulimia and dissatisfaction with her appearance; a Latina named Maria toys with joining a gang but finds happiness with a new boyfriend; and Julie, a white Texan, who was sexually abused as a child by her stepfather, struggles with her reputation as the town slut and displays a shocking ignorance about AIDS and STDs. She says, "I wanted to be experienced and suddenly, I don't know, I was a slut..." Of the six girls interviewed, five are shown looking in the mirror or putting on make-up at some

point in their profile. A realistic part of a girl's everyday behavior, perhaps, but the guys are not viewed shaving, pumping iron or otherwise engaged in a parallel macho preening. Despite the fact that two teenage girls are often behind the camera, the profiled girls are linked more often to their appearance and one-on-one relationships than the way they look at their world. This reversal of Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" brings up the question: what happens when girls use the camera lens to view girls? In a female-only environment--like the mentorship project undertaken in Karen Cooper's documentary "House of Girls"-- the results are vastly different. Aside from what appeared to be a good working vibe between Paula Patton and Ramona Catalanello, none of the stories of the "guides" explored bonds between women as friends, while several hinged on the brotherly closeness of male friends. Two of the stories explored gay male sexuality; lesbians were absent from the inquiry. In this sense few of the girls on view existed outside the mainstream narratives of heterosexual, other-based desire.

Some of the most revealingly intimate--and most likely inadvertent--documentation of girl/boy dynamics came from the on-the-road interviews with the crew. While numbers can seem a trivial measure of equality, the result of four guys working as a team with two girls is that the guys will never be singled out or outnumbered. When discussions occurred along gender lines, the guys often won the opinion vote. In one sequence, Derric and Jose (who were almost always shown driving the van, ie. driving the narrative...) initiate a discussion about abortion after passing a billboard marked: "Abortion: The Choice That Kills". This is the conversation that ensues:

Derric: Alright, so Jose, you believe in abortion?

Jose: For real? Do I believe in abortion?

Derric: Paula, if you got pregnant, would you get an abortion?

Paula: Yes.

Derric: If you're ready to have sex, you should be ready to have a kid.

Paula: If I choose to have sex it's not because I'm ready to have a kid, it might be because you're like, in love with somebody and you wanted...

Jose: It's not really love then, it's lust.

Ramona (off screen): It's not really love if you don't want to have a baby with that person?!

Paula: Every time you guys, you know, have sex, whatever, you're thinking about, okay, yes I could take care of a child...

Derric: I'm sayin' I'm not the one who's gonna get pregnant so I'm not the one who has to think about it much, you know what I'm sayin'?

Paula: Well you have to have that freedom of choice, just like everyone wants.

Jose: Freedom to go out and get all hot and quick with somebody and then end up having a baby and then sayin', "You know what, I just fucked up my whole life, so I just might as well end up killing somebody and just throw it away because I'm not responsible enough." But you feel you're responsible enough to open your legs and let some guy come in you. I mean, what the hell is that?

(Camera pans back to Paula, who slumps back in her seat and falls silent.

Fade to black.)¹²

As in *Baby Love*, the double standard of procreative responsibility for teenage pregnancy falls solely on the shoulders of girls. How can teenage girls inhabit a social terrain of gender equality when males have access to sexual freedom without consequences?

Reel Grrrls with Cameras

Ramona and Paula in "The Ride" are good examples of savvy, smart, non-technophobes who duke it out verbally with the guys when necessary. But much of what even they represented in their videomaking--like the makers of "Girls Like Us" and "Baby Love"--are problem-bound girls who fail. The danger in making "movie stars" of those who fail is that the girls who succeed, those who could be the true peer-based role models, rarely make it into the visual purview. Based on the bipolar image extremes of beauty-based success and "regular girl" self-hatred, the message then becomes: girls' failure is inevitable unless you look like Kate Moss or can skate like Michelle Kwan. What about the girls who shine in other, non-consumerist ways? What about the black belts, the math whizzes, the volunteers at orphanages, the budding poets, the young political activists? As an alternative to the insistence in broadcast news-media and public television documentary media on crisis-driven representations of over-sexualized girls "at risk," racial stereotypes, and class biases, several media education programs across the country are encouraging girls to talk back to the media and create their own film and video programs.

Despite inroads made in the music industry with events such as the all-female Lilith Fair, in the realms of mainstream advertising and movie-making, the white, waif Made-in continues to proliferate in the face of a global economy of supposed diversity. Girls can, however, be empowered to talk back, stare back and write their own unique scripts for "doing girl." One way teenage girls can break free of this stranglehold on the limited beauty/power codes offered is to create their own images, to model their own languages of representation. In this way, through a combination of media literacy and media creativity, they can learn to speak a language of the body and desire that is not muted by comparisons to unattainable name-brand standards.

For the past three years Women in the Director's Chair Film and Video Festival of Chicago has hosted a "Media Girls" segment which provides a showcase of teenage girls' work from around the country, including videos created at a local organization, Street-Level Youth Media. One collaborative group of girl producers, Sync Sisters w/Style, combine street poetics with experimental strobing and colorization motifs to question gender roles, dangerous stereotypes, sexuality and identity issues. The intelligence of the teens involved radiates through their programming as they take to the hood to interview their peers on these critical subjects. Street Level Youth Media was recently given a Coming Up Taller Award for service to inner city teens by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. 13

The 1998 Madcat Women's Film Festival of San Francisco featured "Teen Scream," a program of teenage girls' works in film and video, which showed at the Roxie Cinema in San Francisco. Madcat's Director, Ariella Ben-Dov sees this showcase of girls' work as an opportunity to encourage girls who are combating gender-based technophobia by picking up cameras to express themselves. While making work is an important part of girls' empowerment, showing the work publicly provides the exposure that can create career drives of possibility. The mentoring efforts of these media groups provide an important support to girls who are speaking out, speaking for themselves, fighting against the tide of "power loss" with electric creative expression and personal drive.

The San Francisco School of the Arts is a competitive public high school with a media arts department where teenagers write, shoot, produce and edit their own films and videos. Media artists from the Bay Area are invited to SoTA to speak and show their work, to dialogue with students on alternatives to mainstream representations. Valerie Soe, media artist and instructor at SoTA suggests that it's "important for girls to understand how television and advertising shapes self-image, since they're so often the targets of commercials and ad campaigns. Learning to make videos demystifies the process and gives them insights into how they might

be manipulated by imagemakers." Soe has found that the girls drawn to media in her program tend to be natural leaders, like Ramona Catalanello and Paula Patton in "The Ride"-- self-motivated and self-confident-- "so they aren't easily intimidated by mixed-gender settings." A girls' ability to hold their own in difficult situations can be part of the training toward success in adult life. More girls need to be encouraged to cross over into the technology terrains of "the guys."

"The Mirror Project" , a five-year-old media arts organization for inner city teens operating out of the Boston area in Somerville, Massachusetts, is the brainchild of media activist and videomaker Roberto Arevalo. The organization, which has been recognized by the National Association of Local Art Agencies as "one of the most successful art programs for at-risk youth in the nation," selects eight teenagers--four guys and four girls--every four months to train on video production equipment and produce videos derived from the stories of their lives. "The Mirror Project" also maintains a web site (<http://www.somerville-eye.com/scat/mirror>) with news of current projects, screening histories and highlights of their five-year history. Three multi-cultural teenage girls from the project, Patricia Valadres, Louise Bernard and Zakia Dottin-Carter have produced personal documentaries which have been screened in festivals, museums and galleries across the country. All three won Bronze Apple Awards in 1996 at the National Educational Media Network Festival. One of the goals of the project is to "redefine and demystify the documentary production process" by encouraging participants to turn the camera lens on their own lives. Roberto Arevalo believes that "technology is power" and that providing at-risk youth with the means of telling their own stories helps to challenge racial and economic stereotypes about inner city teens.

In the early 90s, Sadie Benning proved that a sixteen-year-old girl with a Pixelvision camera could say a lot about growing up, the emergence of sexual desire and getting crushes on girls. Her video work, *Me and Rubyfruit* (1989), *Jollies* (1990), *If Every Girl Had a Diary* (1990), and *A Place Called Lovely* (1991) became cult-favorites at lesbian and gay film festivals across the country and abroad. These Pixelvision films, shot mostly in the private universe of Benning's bedroom, employed Barbie dolls, toy cars, candy wrappers and pop tunes to describe the experiences of a teenage lesbian falling in love. Transforming these heterosexual pop symbols into tools for the expression of her own emergent gay desire, Benning demonstrates that you don't always have to stray far from home to rebel in a coherent and powerful manner. Her work has screened at the Whitney Biennial and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, and in 1992, at the age of 19, Benning was awarded a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship. While Benning remains a potentially powerful role model for teenage girls, her work is shown mostly in the rarefied universe of film festivals and museums, which are less often inhabited by teenage girls. Growing up in an art-based environment, Benning was certainly encouraged in her image production and most likely assisted by adults in the distribution of her work. Even though her videos may not be seen by many teenage girls, the sheer existence of her artistic production proves that grrrls with cameras can explore issues of sexual preference, desire, and gender roles with close-ups on the familiar landscape of their childhood toys, teen idols, and their own bodies. The continued efforts of independent curators and film festival directors to find innovative curatorial solutions can help bring the work of teenage artists to teenage viewers through targeted outreach.¹⁴

Mentorship collaborations between women filmmakers, curators and teenage girls help to provide young women with the tools of self-representation, and models of dogged persistence in technology fields still dominated by men. *House of Girls* (1997), a half-hour program produced by Karen Cooper and funded by ITVS,¹⁵ discusses the struggles of girls in finding a

voice by giving the tools of image production to the girls themselves. Five girls from diverse backgrounds were invited to spend the weekend at a cabin in upstate New York with an all-female adult production crew to brainstorm their own video segments. Given that girls have historically been handed scripts of codified behavior, this project provides a breakthrough in girls' self-expression with strong peer-based role models for teenage viewership. These girls don't pretend to have all the answers, but use their intelligence, creativity and sense of humor to question a status quo which often erases the diversity of girls' self-expression.

In "House of Girls" the girls spoke very little about boys, boyfriends or hetero-centrist terms of desire. While two of the girls touched directly on the hazing that girls experience in their interactions with boys—the taunting, the beauty judgments—this was auxiliary to their creative goals. In segments derived from their loves of literature, girl bands, 'zines and their personal struggles in navigating the messages of a consumerist culture, a glimpse of an alternative girl culture emerges. An audacious, rarely represented space, absent of boy-craziness, these girl subjects inhabit the terminologies of a polymorphous female desire. The articulation of these desires, which span artistic, cultural, political and social goals as well as sexual ones, remains wide open to creative discussion and representation in the contexts of narrative and documentary filmmaking. As girls continue to express themselves through the tools of video and film, this foreign language of girl's desire can begin to be decoded and more fully understood. While girls are by and large bi-lingual inhabitants of the culture, learning to talk and achieve in masculine terms, boys remain largely illiterate regarding the language of female desire. As a culture we lack this fluency of language. In most public settings girls cannot express their desires without fear of ridicule or retribution. Girls who are vocal, intelligent, opinionated and goal-oriented on their own terms without a link to male approval ratings are not a frequent part of the Maiden USA landscape as seen through the lens of Hollywood and even most independently-produced feature narratives or documentaries. "House of Girls" leaves the viewer with a newly-whetted appetite to see more of these power girls, more windows into the culture of girl voices, music and image-jams. The evidence at recent festivals and on the web demonstrates there can be no stopping girls from talking back, sassin', snapping shots, running chat sites and shooting film and video. But young women do need adult mentors to provide tools and motivational structures for writing and producing their own scripts for "doing girl." In the process, they can help redefine what it means to be a Maiden in the USA.

NOTES

1 Pipher, Mary, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 44.

2 Orenstein, Peggy, *SchoolGirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem and the Confidence Gap*, (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p.xv-xvii.

3 *ibid*, p. 37.

4 One recent exception to this is the 1995 version of *Little Women*.

5 Douglas, Susan J., *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, (New York: Times Books, 1994), p. 71.

6 Sherarts, Karon and Harmon, Suzanne Stenson, "Baby Love" Study Guide, ITVS, 1997.

7 Hass, Nancy, "A TV Generation Is Seeing Beyond Color," The New York Times, February 22, 1998.

8 For more information about Girls Like Us contact: Women Make Movies, 462 Broadway, Suite 500R, New York, NY 10012; 212/925-0606.

9 ITVS recently funded Carol Cassidy to produce a cross-country series about teens entitled American Girls, which may redress some of these issues. The series will be completed in 1999.

10 For more information about Baby Love contact: Direct Cinema Limited, P.O. Box 10003, Santa Monica, CA, 90410.

11 Orenstein, *ibid*, p. 67.

12 The Ride, produced by Shauna Garr for the Independent Television Series (ITVS), 1994.

13 To submit work or obtain more information about teenage programming at Women in the Directors Chair, contact Sabrina Craig, Director, WIDC, 3435 North Sheffield Avenue, No. 202, Chicago, Illinois, 60657, 773-281-4988, <http://www.WIDC.org>. ...Street Level Youth Media can be reached at: 1856 W. Chicago Avenue, 1st Floor, Chicago, IL, 60622, 773-862-5331, <http://www.streetlevel.iit.edu>.

14 For more information about the work of Sadie Benning, contact Women Make Movies.

15 To find out more about "House of Girls" contact the Independent Television Series (ITVS), 51 Federal Street, San Francisco, CA 94107.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Christine Tamblyn.