

2005

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Recommended Citation

VanderHoff, Kerri (2005) "*Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Porky's*: Gender Perspective in the Teen Comedy," *McNair Scholars Journal*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 16.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mcnair/vol9/iss1/16>

Fast Times at Ridgemont High and *Porky's*: Gender perspective in the teen comedy



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Abstract

This study examines gender representation in teen comedy with an emphasis on two films from the genre. Fast Times at Ridgemont High (1982) was directed by a woman, Amy Heckerling. Porky's (1981) was directed by a man, Bob Clark. This research reveals the different ways male and female directors portray teenage girls and encourages a re-evaluation of the values conveyed to young viewers when the perspective represented in Hollywood entertainment films is predominantly male.



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Teenage boys fantasizing about teenage girls—a normal and common occurrence in everyday life, no doubt about it, and a common subject in movies as well. Consider the following scenarios from two teen comedies:

In *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), one boy, Brad, who has just returned home from his fast food job, peeks out the bathroom window. His younger sister's friend, Linda, dives into the backyard pool.

In *Porky's* (1981), another boy, Tommy, who has just crawled under the school foundation with his buddies, peeps through a hole in the wall of the locker room. The girls' gym team starts to shower.

As Brad closes the window, his point of view (the object of his gaze) is framed in the camera for the movie viewer. This framing signals that the narrative perspective has shifted into a subjective fantasy state. The film begins to move in slow motion and the soundtrack of *The Cars* "Moving in Stereo" begins thumping. Linda emerges from the pool, shimmering and beautiful, and says "Hi Brad, you know how cute I always thought you were." With that, she seductively steps out of the pool and walks toward Brad, who is suddenly looking very successful in a business suit. She unclasps her bikini top and exposes her breasts to Brad, then reaches up to kiss him. Abruptly, the film cuts away from Brad's fantasy point of view and replays the scene objectively. The music stops. Linda, bikini intact, emerges from the pool in search of a cotton swab to clean the water out of her ears. The view of the camera is now following Linda's perspective as she goes into the house and down the hall to the bathroom. She opens the door without knocking and is completely taken aback by the sight of Brad masturbating. She slams the door closed and the sequence cuts to a shot of Linda's horrified reaction. To say the least, a definite end to Brad's fantasy!

Tommy, meanwhile, is enjoying the sight of the nude girls. The viewer watches the showering from the point of view of the boys. Tommy's friend PeeWee is having trouble seeing past an obese girl who is standing in front of the peephole and, in his frustration, he inadvertently shouts out for her to move. The boys' presence is now known. Two of the girls leave the shower room quickly, but the remaining girls laugh and move closer to the peephole to flirt with the boys. The camera framing cuts back and forth from close-ups on the boys in the crawlspace to the view of the girls. The teens enjoy themselves until the gym coach breaks up the fun. The film cuts to the next scene and the boys' story continues.

At first glance, the fantasy sequences seem similar enough, but a closer look reveals obvious differences.

In the first scenario with Brad, the fantasy sequence is clearly indicated as such. Linda's exhibitionist actions are placed in the context of Brad's imagination. The slow-motion film speed, the filters, the music, and the framing depict the fantasy scene and contain it to Brad's perspective. When the film shifts to Linda's perspective, the sequence takes on a much different interpretation of the same set of events. There is a balanced perspective between male and female, fantasy and "reality."

In the second scenario with Tommy, the sequence is not clearly represented as fantasy. The sequence is from the male perspective from start to finish and the narrative is portrayed as realistic throughout. There are no indications that the scene is anything but a natural series of events. The male fantasy version of the shower room scene, with no female point of view, is unbalanced yet represented in this film as the male and female perspective. The females in the shower act how the boys would like them to act, not necessarily how girls might typically respond to violations of

their privacy. The scenario is seamlessly cut into the movie as a whole and portrayed as a normal course of action.

The narrative styles described above are not limited solely to teen comedies of course. However, the examples do raise important questions in terms of the influence of the director, specifically with regard to the director's gender and what is represented in films viewed by teenagers. In the scenarios above, a woman (Amy Heckerling) directed the first sequence about Brad. A man (Bob Clark) directed the second scenario about Tommy.

In terms of prestige in the Hollywood film industry, the teen comedy generally rests near the bottom of the list. The genre rarely attracts the A-list of directors in the film business and teen comedies are usually produced on a low to medium budget. Despite the reputation of the films, the audience for them is a substantial block of consumers. Whether or not critics and parents approve of these films, the young generation comes out to see them—and what is represented in them. That the established directors in Hollywood are reluctant to work in teen comedy has helped make possible the hiring of a small number of female directors over the years—still quite a rarity in mainstream cinema (Speed, par. 4). Does the director's gender make a difference in terms of character representation to this young audience?

This essay argues that the gender of the director does make a discernible difference. Considering the ongoing criticism about the exclusion of women in the film business, it is important to focus attention on the differences that exist in form and content between films which are directed by men and those directed by women. Structurally defined differences—that is, differences based on the creative choices regarding formal elements such as framing, camera angles, and *mise-en-scene*—would

demonstrate specifically what is *not* being represented when one gender lacks inclusion in the industry. Because of the nature of the impressionable young audience, along with the window of opportunity for female directors in the low budget teen comedy genre, it is a reasonable place to start the process.

There are many factors involved in movie production. It is a large-scale collaborative effort and the many influences, from producer to writer to audience demand, must be examined. A logical first step is to analyze individual films to understand the formal elements and identify key areas for comparison.

The purpose of this study is to examine and identify the portrayal of female characters and narrative perspective in two selected films. The difference in structure between the two films is a significant point of departure in context of the statistics concerning the small number of women directors in Hollywood. Evidence of a difference in directing styles between men and women will demonstrate that the female perspective is compromised by lack of films directed by women.

Amy Heckerling's *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (*Fast Times*) and Bob Clark's *Porky's* are similar in terms of the storyline and the year in which they were released. *Fast Times* and *Porky's* are teen comedies set in a high school location and have a cast consisting of students and teachers.

Lesley Speed has aptly labeled the subgenre of these two movies "low-comedy" (Speed, par. 10). This type of film tends to make repeated references to functions of the lower body, with plenty of toilet humor and sex jokes. Low-comedy is also the great equalizer; no matter what your class or social situation, lower body operations are universal (Hollywood translation: wide audience appeal). Speed notes that this subgenre has "a tendency to construct comic scenarios around themes such

as masturbation, oral sex, and sexual fantasy” (Speed, par. 12). While both films employ this type of humor, portrayal of gender perspective is where the differences are evident.

In film criticism, text based analysis includes visual and auditory elements. The text is made up of the formal elements that comprise a shot or sequence such as camera angles, lighting, *mise-en-scene*, framing, and music (see appendix). Every one of these formal elements is seriously considered for every single shot and together create the structure of the movie. Pre-production on a film is a very long process, where the script is broken down into sequences and the elements are deliberately planned to guide the audience in a certain direction, to come to a certain conclusion, to follow the story the filmmaker is intent on telling. This is where the decisions of the director can make a significant difference. How a director chooses to use the formal elements, moderated by other influences (i.e. collaborations), will greatly influence the storyline and how the characters are represented.

The pre-production set-up and subsequent editing are so seamless, however, that it's designed not to be noticed as people sit in the theatre enjoying a movie. The shots are cut together to create a narrative flow that seems perfectly natural, and included in the story is the dominant ideology that comes across as perfectly natural, unquestionable that the values and beliefs (including the gender roles) are just the natural order of things. In fact, the narrative is painstakingly constructed.

Annette Kuhn writes that text based analysis is “a form of reading which starts out with the aim of uncovering processes and structures at work in a text that may not be immediately discernible” (82). Robin Wood, in his attempt to provide a definition of American ideology and “the values and

assumptions so insistently embodied in and reinforced by the classical Hollywood cinema” compiled a partial list to “make conscious... concepts with which we are all perfectly familiar” (Wood, par. 4). The list includes capitalism, the work ethic, and heterosexual romance and marriage. The patriarchal society, where men are active and women passive, is the status quo (Mulvey 39-41). Males are expected to be assertive and females should be submissive. In most Hollywood movie narratives, the boys get to play and the girls get to stand on the sidelines.

While male and female directors work within the same dominant ideology in mainstream cinema (otherwise the film risks rejection by the majority and is apt to be labeled feminist or experimental cinema), the way they express themselves within that framework is noticeably different.

Robin Wood elaborates on the nature of low-comedy. The movie must incorporate “certain bottom-line generic conditions that must be satisfied for such a film to get made at all” (Wood qtd. in Speed, par. 12). Rachel Abramowitz, an author who interviewed several successful women in the Hollywood film industry, reveals that Martha Coolidge, director of the teen comedy *Valley Girl* (1983) “responded to the producer’s demand that ‘we must have naked breasts in this movie four times’ by devising scenarios in which the spectator is encouraged to identify with female characters” (Abramowitz qtd. in Speed, par. 15). Female directors have found ways to “incorporate female perspectives into generic frameworks that were not traditionally thought to be feminine” (Speed, par. 15).

Both *Porky’s* and *Fast Times* incorporate conventions of the teen comedy genre, yet closer examination of form and content demonstrate the differences between the two.

The first convention is the idea of same-sex friendships, depicting two or more characters that generally develop throughout the course of the movie and support each other. In *Porky’s*, the female characters interact minimally. The young gym teacher, Miss Honeywell, and the older gym teacher, Beulah Ballbricker have an adversarial relationship. Cherry Forever, the exotic dancer visited by the boys, does not have a scene with another female. Wendy, the classmate who happily bears the brunt of practical jokes and is known for her willingness to have sex with anyone, is shown in groups of females from time to time, but characters and friendships are not developed. In the sequence where Wendy encourages a naïve young freshman girl to approach a group of male friends, we see the treatment of the same sex friendships in terms of how they differ in their formal elements.

The sequence begins with a long shot of the students in the schoolyard. The camera follows the freshman Mindy, a bit character who appears only in this scene. The framing is distant and wide as she is pushed along by Wendy and walks over to the group of boys (the main characters who have been introduced previously). While Mindy addresses Meat, the athlete of the bunch, the long shot cuts to a medium shot of the four boys on one side of the fence and Mindy on the other. During dialogue, the view of the camera is on Meat and Mindy’s conversation (Wendy sent the girl over to find out how Meat acquired his nickname) until the athlete glances over his shoulder. The viewer then sees Meat’s point of view as he looks at Wendy standing with two other unidentified girls in a medium long shot with no dialogue. In a reverse angle medium shot of the four boys and Mindy, we listen to Meat’s buddies talk him out of taking advantage of the naïve young freshman so that he

doesn't risk losing a sport scholarship. They are all in the frame and the focus is on the boys. Wendy, in the medium long shot, again with no dialogue, is clearly disappointed that her sexual prank on the naive girl didn't work and waves Mindy back away from the boys. The sequence ends with the four male friends in a medium shot laughing and interacting. The friendships between Wendy and other females are never brought into the narrative, and her prank on the young freshman shows her lack of camaraderie with Mindy.

In *Fast Times*, the friendship between Stacy, the female lead, and Linda is developed over the course of the movie. Viewers are introduced to them as they work in the mall, listen to them talk to each other as they lounge poolside, and see them eating lunch together at school. In one particular sequence, Linda comes to the defense of Stacy after Damone backs out of the deal to pay half for an abortion. The camera stays on medium close-ups of the two girls as they talk on the phone, alternating between the two and giving them full screen time as Linda vows to get revenge for Damone's shirking of responsibility. In the following series of shots, we see that Linda indeed followed through for her friend and took matters into her own hands. She publicly humiliates Damone. As he leaves for school in the morning, he finds "Prick" spray painted on his car. Damone covers it with taped cardboard, but the word is also marked across his locker when he arrives at school. Female friendship in this film is important to the narrative and is developed as loyal, supportive, and constant. Framing and editing in the sequences directs our attention to the storyline involving the actions of the female characters.

Another convention of the teen comedy genre is the inclusion of some type of authority figure. In *Porky's*, it's the cops; in *Fast Times*, it's the history teacher, Mr. Hand.

There are subtle differences in the portrayal of young females in this comparison. These less obvious choices are important in training the critical eye to identify the perspective and characters that are actively driving the narrative. In *Porky's*, the group of male friends is hanging outside the local diner. There are some girls sitting around the car too, giggling at the boys but never speaking. The local cops drive up and PeeWee gets out of the cruiser. He was picked up after the cops found him running down the road without clothes, the result of a practical joke by his friends who tricked PeeWee into thinking he was going to have sex with a prostitute. Instead, he ran into the woman's angry "husband", who was hired by his friends to scare him. As the sequence opens, our attention is on the boys cracking jokes and interacting. The cruiser pulls up, and Meat walks into the foreground of the frame, highlighting his importance in the narrative. The camera turns and we see the cruiser through Meat's point of view. When PeeWee gets out of the car, the framing is medium close-up as attention is paid to him speaking. Throughout the sequence, the boys' dialogue is the focus of the camera. Their actions and storyline is important to the film. As the officers leave, one cop turns around and says "See ya later, boys" even though clearly there are both girls and boys hanging out at the car. The girls essentially are absent from the narrative in any real sense and are simply part of the *mise-en-scene*.

In contrast, the classroom sequence in *Fast Times* includes interaction with both male and female students. Mr. Hand walks around the room lecturing the class, and as he does, he directs his attention to boys and girls. When the class is framed in a long shot, Stacy is in the center of the frame. Our attention is directed to her as an important part of the narrative in the scene. When the

camera is at the student level, a low angle shot looking up at the authority of Mr. Hand, the viewer is encouraged to feel as if they are one of the young students in the classroom. As Mr. Hand approaches Stacy, he is seen from her point of view. The sequence cuts to Mr. Hand looking down at Stacy, who is the central focus in medium close-up framing. Again, the female characters are portrayed as integral to the narrative and actively involved in the storyline.

Of course, a low-comedy in the teen genre usually includes the first sexual experiences. In *Porky's*, viewers generally follow PeeWee throughout the movie on his desperate quest to have sex. Each time, he is foiled by some circumstance or another until the very end. Tommy, one of the lead characters, makes a bet with Wendy that if the boys can outsmart Porky, she will have sex with PeeWee. In the culminating scene, Wendy fulfills her part of the bargain in good spirits and drags him onto a school bus. All of PeeWee's friends are outside the bus, where the camera is placed as well. The whole group of boys (as well as the viewer) cheers him on. The focus is not on an individual or couple, but on the group as they celebrate a teen ritual. Wendy's character is never developed and we don't get a clear idea why she would agree to participate in the practical jokes and sex favors. She is one-dimensional, without a point of view, and functions in the narrative solely to move the boys' storyline along. All the close-ups are predominantly on the boys outside or on PeeWee shouting out the bus window.

The sex scenes in *Fast Times* are different. Stacy is determined to experiment with sex and relationships and her first encounter is in a baseball dugout. The *mise-en-scene* is sparse and projects a feeling of alienation. The location has harsh lighting from a bare bulb and there is graffiti on the walls. The sequence does not make

the act appear glamorous. It does not give us the male's perspective. The camera framing varies from an over-the-shoulder close-up on Stacy to watch her facial reaction, to her point of view as she looks at the grimy dugout ceiling during the event. The storyline follows the female character from start to finish in the sequence; her actions and reactions drive the narrative. We see the very average and un-romanticized event from a female perspective that doesn't wander into fantasy. The formal elements of the scene don't register it as good or bad, celebratory or painful, and there are no cheering crowds. It is fairly early on in the film, as it becomes part of Stacy's adolescent experience on a journey toward a better understanding of herself.

Social issues are another aspect of teen comedy. *Porky's* incorporates the peeping tom situation described earlier where Tommy and his buddies are caught peeping in the girls' gym shower by Beulah Ballbricker. The character of Beulah has been, up to this point, portrayed as a sexually repressed woman who lacks a sense of humor. The girls in the shower, Wendy and a group of nameless characters, seem to enjoy having the boys peep in on their privacy. When Beulah takes the issue to the principal's office to attempt to prosecute the offender, she is ridiculed out of the office. The formal elements of this scene are unconventional. In a four-minute shot that remains static in framing, a rare choice in filmmaking, Beulah is on one side of the desk while the principal is on the other. Three other men, the boys' coaches, flank him. As she pleads her rather unusual case for positively identifying the culprit, the coaches crack jokes and laugh at her attempts to stop the peeping tom. After the very long four minutes in which the viewers watch Beulah outnumbered and humiliated, the principal can't hold back and starts

laughing at her issue as well. She leaves the office defeated, as the camera closes in on the men's hysterical laughter and ends with a close-up of a smiling picture on the wall, a presidential portrait of Eisenhower. Intentionally placed into this sequence, the president becomes one of the men laughing Beulah out of the office as she attempts to present her case to the proper authorities. *Porky's* is set in the historical context of 1950s style patriarchy, the cultural assumption is that "father knows best" and "boys will be boys." The male authority figure is expected to assess the validity of a situation and settle issues with an unquestioned final decision. Against these five laughing men, from the president on down, Beulah didn't stand a chance. There would be no recourse for the peeping tom issue.

In contrast, when a serious issue arises in *Porky's* that relates to the male perspective, comedy is set aside until it is resolved. The character Brian, a Jewish boy, is harassed and called a "kike" by another character, Tim. When Tim hurls a basketball at Brian because he is a Jew, the coach reprimands Tim. No hysterical banter surrounds this particular issue. Finally, Brian decides he must defend himself and fights Tim in the schoolyard. No one laughs at the situation and Brian is not ridiculed for lacking a sense of humor about the issue. Rather, he is respected for his fighting skills and standing up for himself. Supporters do not flank Tim. President Eisenhower is not there to approve of a bullying situation. The creative choices of close-up framing that alternate on Brian and Tim, in addition to back-story developed on both characters, gives them equal importance in this sequence. Brian's issue is legitimized and the other male characters (and viewer) sympathize with his problem. The sequence ends on a serious note with no distracting jokes or camera play.

In *Fast Times*, the big issue is teenage pregnancy as experienced by the female lead. When Stacy approaches Damone at the high school track to inform him that she is pregnant, she pulls him aside and speaks one-on-one. The camera holds the simple two shot on the characters. Their dialogue is in standard over-the-shoulder framing. The characters are filmed similarly, representing an equal, one-on-one feel. When Damone attempts to use old clichés to deny responsibility, such as accusing Stacy of promiscuity, she stands her ground and rationally negotiates a compromise to schedule and pay for half of an abortion. The perspective in this sequence incorporates the emotions and actions of the young female character. While the film doesn't dwell long on the serious situation in the girl's life and returns to the comedic aspect shortly after, it also doesn't dismiss or undermine the issue while the sequence is taking place.

Certainly while discussing teen comedy conventions, the "Final Festival," a term coined by Northrop Frye and described by Jon Lewis in his book on teen culture, *The Road to Romance & Ruin*, cannot be overlooked. Be it graduation or the county fair or the important game, a big event near the end of the film is standard for the genre "as a new order is installed" (Lewis 139). In *Porky's*, the event is the celebration in the middle of the night at the county line. The whole town comes out to support Tommy, PeeWee, Meat, and the rest of the boys as they seek revenge on Porky. The marching band is there, complete with twirling majorettes, and so are the local cops and high school coaches. Earlier in the film, Porky tricked the underage boys out of their money when they visited his strip club to hire prostitutes. The boys devise a plan to destroy the building and lure Porky to their hometown county line where the men and women, boys and girls wait to watch and celebrate the

boys' victorious return and the defeat of Porky. The sequence begins with a series of long shots to convey the scope of the celebration. When close-ups occur, they are of the lead male characters as they celebrate. In this classic male fantasy text, it is not necessary to explain why the town, especially the females, would want to come out in the middle of the night to celebrate a group of high school boys' right to hire prostitutes without repercussion. The townsfolk cheer them on as the boys destroy public and private property on a grand scale. To introduce reality into the narrative would undermine the intentions of the film. The scene is satisfying as it allows the viewer, who has been encouraged to become sympathetic and fond of the group of boys over the course of the film, to vicariously live out a fantastic revenge plan. The good guys win and the bad guys get theirs in the end.

The "Final Festival" in *Fast Times* is the end of school year dance. All the requisite silliness ensues as the surfer dude character gets up and sings with the band, the nutty science professor introduces his smashingly beautiful wife, and we watch all the characters dance like goofy teenagers. The noticeable

female perspective is included as Stacy talks to Linda in the bathroom. Linda is upset because her college boyfriend dumped her, and Stacy consoles her. The *mise-en-scene* is the refuge of the ladies' room. The close-up framing of the two girls puts them in the action of the narrative, and the viewers watch as Stacy realizes that perhaps she needs to stop being in such a hurry to grow up. It becomes apparent that the seemingly experienced Linda perhaps doesn't have all the answers. The dance sequence, without a real climax, shows the students as they continue to navigate through adolescence and move on with their lives a little bit wiser.

Clearly there are differences in the representation of young females between these two films. As demonstrated by the examples in this essay, the structure of formal elements in a film is more than a sum of the parts. These aren't just camera angles and close-ups we're talking about, but the very building blocks of narrative manipulation. The point of this comparison is not to make a value judgment over which perspective is better or worse than the other, but rather to argue that one perspective is systematically produced

more often than the other. If men direct the overwhelming majority of films, and those directors choose to make movies with a predominantly male perspective, a huge imbalance is created. Based on this study, further research is warranted to support the argument and bring awareness to the importance of representation in film.

Porky's, from start to finish, maintains the perspective of the male fantasy film. It incorporates outlandish humor and situations in a narrative completely driven by the male characters. The young female characters are marginally represented. *Fast Times*, on the other hand, devotes much of the storyline to the young female lead, Stacy, and her point of view. It includes comedy based on situations where male and female characters interact and develops a narrative where the female characters are represented as integral to the story.

Awareness of these differences, and recognizing the discrepancy of gender representation on a larger scale, is an important step in the evolution of a more inclusive mainstream film industry.

Appendix

The following is a glossary of film terms, compiled from the course information websites at <http://spot.pcc.edu/~mdembrow/glossary.htm>, <http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chlit130/terms.html>, and <http://puffin.creighton.edu/fapa/aikin/Web-files/...glossary.htm>:

Camera angle: The position of the frame in relation to the subject it shows: above it, looking down (high angle), straight on, or looking up (a low angle).

Conventions: Forms and symbols in language, art, and culture that have an agreed-upon meaning.

Cut: In the finished film, an instantaneous change from one framing to another.

Framing: The use of the edges of the film frame to select and to compose what will be visible onscreen.

Genres: Various types of films which audiences and filmmakers recognize by their familiar narrative conventions.

Ideology: A relatively coherent system of values, beliefs, or ideas shared by some social group and often taken for granted as natural or inherently true.

Mise-en-scene: Literally, “putting in the scene,” “staging the action”; a term that describes everything that the camera photographs, including acting, lighting, décor, locations, make-up, and other element within the shot itself, as opposed to effects created by cutting.

Shot: A take, in part or in its entirety that is used in the final edited version of the film.

Point of view (POV) shot: A shot taken with the camera placed approximately where the character’s eyes would be, showing what the character would see; usually cut in before or after a shot of the character looking.

Shot/reverse shot: Two or more shots edited together that alternate characters, typically in a conversation situation. Over-the-shoulder framings are common in this type of editing.

Long shot or extreme long shot: A framing in which the scale of the object shown is very small; a building, landscape, or crowd of people would fill the screen.

Medium long shot: A framing at a distance which makes an object about four or five feet high appear to fill most of the screen vertically (human figures are generally from the shins up).

Medium shot: A framing in which the scale of the object shown is of moderate size; a human figure seen from the waist up would fill most of the screen.

Two shot: Two people close together.

Medium close-up: A framing in which the scale of the object shown is fairly large; a human figure seen from the chest up would fill most of the screen.

Close-up: A framing in which the scale of the object shown is relatively large; most commonly a person’s head seen from the neck up, or an object of comparable size that fills most of the screen.

Extreme close-up: A framing in which the scale of the object shown is very large; most commonly a small object or part of the body.

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