

UNHAPPY MEDIUM: FILMIC TOMBOY NARRATIVE AND QUEER FEMINIST
SPECTATORSHIP

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the ways in which American discourses of gender, sexuality, and emotion structure filmic narrative and the ways in which filmic narrative informs those discourses in turn. It approaches this matter through the figure of the tomboy, vastly undertheorized in literary scholarship, and explores the nodes of resistance that film form, celebrity identity, and queer emotional dispositions open up even in these narratives that obsessively domesticate their tomboy characters and pair them off with male love interests. The first chapter theorizes a mode of queer feminist spectatorship, called infelicitous reading, around the incoherently “happy” endings of tomboy films and obligatorily tragic conclusions of lesbian films; the second chapter links the political and sexual ambivalences of female-centered sports films to the ambivalent results of Title IX; and the third chapter outlines a type of queer reproductivity and feminist paranoia that emerges cumulatively in Jodie Foster’s body of work. Largely indebted to the work of Judith Butler, Lauren Berlant, and Sara Ahmed, this project engages with past and present problematics in the fields of queer theory, feminist film criticism, and affect studies—questions of nondichotomous genders, resistant spectatorship and feminist potential within linear narrative, and the chronological cues that dominant ideology builds into our understandings of gender, sexuality, narrative, and emotions.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lynne Stahl was born and raised in Lawrence, Kansas. She attended Colorado College in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where she double majored in English and Hispanic Studies and graduated with honors. She earned her M.A. in English in 2012 and her Ph.D. in 2015, both from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

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INTRODUCTION

Tomboys Untamed

“She’s gonna ruin my wedding!” shrieks Leona Threadgoode of her tomboy sister Idgie, whose refusal to put on a dress—and the protuberant bathos of whose grimy skinned knees render the delicate frock absurd when she finally does—evidently imperils not only her own trajectory towards heterosexual adulthood but that of everyone around her. Leona flies into this hysterical refrain once again, moments later, when Idgie launches herself at a neighborhood boy who mocks her ungainly appearance.

The film *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), Jon Avnet’s adaptation of Fannie Flagg’s 1987 novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, recounts the story of this disruptive tomboy and her journey into what may or may not be lesbian adulthood. Idgie is spunky, athletic, resourceful, and endearingly rough around the edges; she wears men’s clothing, supports herself financially, and shuns the idea of marriage. She also falls in love with another woman, and the film’s portrayal of the ensuing partnership led the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) to bestow upon it the 1992 award for Outstanding Film in Wide Release, intended to recognize “fair, accurate and inclusive representations of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community and the issues that affect our lives.”¹ *Tomatoes* has drawn criticism from academic and popular audiences alike for its alleged erasure of the lesbian relationship between its two protagonists, which the novel treats more explicitly; when actress Sheila James Kuehl presented the award at GLAAD’s ceremony, she wryly remarked, “If you don’t believe us, read the book.”²

¹ <http://www.glaad.org/mediaawards/22/selections>

² Lu Vickers, “*Fried Green Tomatoes*: Excuse me, did we see the same movie?,” *Jump Cut* (1994). 25-30.

However ambiguous *Tomatoes* may be in depicting lesbian sexuality, it articulates an unequivocally queer political stance through its marked *disinterest* in heterosexual reproductivity. For a film that critic Jeffrey Lyons effusively claims “makes you feel good about life,” *Tomatoes* certainly goes out of its way to inundate “you” with images of death, destruction, and decrepitude in its opening scenes. In fact, these initial moments—up to and including Leona’s jeopardized wedding—more closely resemble a Hitchcockian thriller than the heartwarming melodrama-cum-female-buddy film that Lyons and others make it out to be: a camera rushing frantically over train tracks, a procession of run-down buildings in a deserted rural area, and the ghastly image of a dilapidated car rising from the depths of a swamp as if in homage to *Psycho*’s final scene.

Nor does this morbidity end when the narrative commences. We enter a nursing home, where an overweight couple visit a violently senile relative. Chased off by her inhospitable in-law, the wife, Evelyn Couch (Kathy Bates), chats instead with another elderly resident, one Ninny Threadgoode (Jessica Tandy), who proceeds immediately to regale her hapless interlocutor (now munching an evocatively coprolitic chocolate bar) with stories of saline enemas and gallbladder removals. As their conversation takes a less visceral turn—but no more towards life and the future—Ninny introduces the film’s interior storyline, set in 1930s Alabama. This narrative revolves around her sister Idgie (Mary Stuart Masterson), the alleged wedding-wrecker, and Idgie’s sustained intimacy with a woman named Ruth Jamison (Mary-Louise Parker); from the very beginning of this storyline and others, the tomboy throws a wrench into the operations of heterosexuality, normative temporality, and linear narrative itself.

Tracing the Tomboy: Language, Culture, History

What, in the first place, is a tomboy? What, in fact, is her narrative? Michelle Abate has answered the latter question articulately in *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History*: its definitive feature is “tomboy taming,” a narrative process that seeks “to eradicate—ideally by choice, but if necessary by force—a gender-bending girl’s iconoclastic ways and have her adopt more feminine behaviors . . . with the onset of puberty.”³ A satisfactory answer to the former, on the other hand, proves surprisingly elusive, as even in the small amount of scholarly work on the topic, critics offer peculiarly ambiguous conceptions of what actually characterizes a tomboy—and “gender-bending” is rather too broad an adjective to be helpful. A vast range of traits and behaviors prompt attributions of tomboyism, from an affinity for horseback riding (*National Velvet*, Clarence Brown, 1944) to having short hair and spunk (*Paper Moon*, Peter Bogdanovich, 1973) to the act of entrapping and torturing pedophiles (*Hard Candy*, David Slade, 2005). As wide-ranging and inconsistent as the qualifying criteria for tomboys seem to be, the category of “tomboy films,” too, eludes definitive characterization. Small though the “canon” of tomboy cinema is, critics have attributed to it such aesthetically, generically, and tonally distinct films as Victor Fleming’s Hawaiian romance *Hula* (1927), George Stevens’s phallic-female screwball *Woman of the Year* (1942), Matthew Robbins’s *The Legend of Billie Jean* (1985), a campy adventure set to a Pat Benatar soundtrack, and *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), Clint Eastwood’s solemn boxing saga.

In such narratives, tomboyism tends to be permitted—even endorsed—but only conditionally, on the assumption that it and its attendant behaviors and attitudes will eventually be dispensed with in favor of conventional femininity and heterosexuality. *Fried Green*

³ Michelle Abate, *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 31.

Tomatoes is exceptional among filmic tomboy narratives in that its characters—Leona’s nuptial tantrum aside—and its storyline express little anxiety over Idgie’s gender deviance and the threat it might pose to her heterosexuality; it is her morose emotional state after her brother Buddy’s death that leads her family to attempt to “fix” her, not her predilection for overalls, unkempt hair, and rambunctious recreation. Their efforts to do so entail bringing in Ruth as a playmate, a proper model of pious, complaisant femininity whose gentle mien and churchgoing ways mask the rebellious streak she too possesses.

I begin with an exceptional tomboy narrative because its relative permissiveness—arguable extirpation of lesbianism notwithstanding—allows a rare view into the progression of a tomboy character through adulthood and because the particularities of its deviations from convention demonstrate so clearly that anxieties around tomboyism stem on a fundamental level from anxieties about reproductivity and the heteronormative social order (many of which themselves hinge upon the specious presumption that deviant gender expression precludes parenthood). *Tomatoes* shows no concern, unlike most Hollywood films, for biological reproduction and the propagation of the heteronormative nuclear family; it makes occasional nods at Idgie someday settling down with a man, but she pays them no more heed than she does the swarm of bees that buzz harmlessly around her as she retrieves their honeycomb for Ruth in the film’s most homoerotically charged scene. *Tomatoes* provides a fertile starting point for this project because it evokes the many salient challenges that the figure of the tomboy poses to filmic narrative, and vice versa, it elucidates not the nature of the connection between tomboyism and lesbianism but the fruitful unresolvability of their mutual imbrication, and it engenders no small degree of spectatorial ambivalence—an ambivalence that derives from the pleasures of lesbian recognition and the frustrations of narrative and industrial limitations.

From literary and filmic versions of Jo March to Scout Finch to Katniss Everdeen, tomboy characters have long held the hearts of American readers and viewers, but not, evidently, their minds; only Abate's literary monograph and a handful of articles on the topic exist as of 2014. The *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for "tomboy" was last updated in 1888—a remarkably long interval without alteration, in light of how dramatically conceptions of childhood, masculinity, and femininity have shifted in the intervening period. Yet in a way, this denotative behindness is fitting, given how understudied tomboys are and how arbitrarily they are designated; the outdated term itself enacts a kind of what Elizabeth Freeman would call "temporal drag" on tomboys, framing them against antiquated gender expectations but also demanding productively that they be considered in relation to a long and often ignored history.⁴

The etymological history of the term "tomboy," for instance, presents a suitably incoherent narrative for a word so inconsistently deployed. Its roots reach back to the sixteenth century, when it meant "rude or boisterous boy," annexing the generic male "tom" and conveying a gendered redundancy, some excess of masculinity or roguishness beyond social control. Later on, it would undergo a sex change while retaining its connotation of delinquency; a 1579 sermon on St. Paul equates being a tomboy with being an "unchaste" female ("Sainte Paule meaneth that women must not be impudent, they must not be tomboyes, to be shorte, they must not bee unchast"). In the seventeenth century, it took on other meanings, genders, and moral hues as "a wild, romping girl," and "a bold or immodest woman." The term would soon lose its sexual charge, however, and assume a mimetic quality as a "girl who behaves like a spirited or boisterous boy."⁵ These descriptions variously impute to the tomboy animalistic,

⁴ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁵ "Tomboy," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed 1 September 2012.

debauched qualities as well as a dubious sexual morality. In a less deterministic vein, the latter definition acknowledges the capacity of female children to be unfeminine and admits to the fact that some boys are *not* “spirited and boisterous” (and, therein, that gender is not contingent upon biological sex). Yet it also proscribes a certain set of behaviors in girls (why not a “spirited or boisterous girl”?), implying that non-normative gender expression in female children must necessarily be derivative of boyish masculinity, and consistent with the ephemerality and anxiety that mark tomboyism’s tenuous subsistence within literary and cinematic convention.

Indeed, the typical filmic tomboy narrative is nothing if not bound by convention, and its inevitable ending one that initiates the theretofore exceptional protagonist into conventionality. For its ostensible simplicity and conformity, then, perhaps, scholars have dismissed narrative tomboyism as barren critical ground. In an essay that addresses precisely such silences in relation to cinematic representations and constructions of history in the twentieth century, Patrice Petro declares that “history is also about what fails to happen.”⁶ This project is deeply invested in failures of various kinds—especially representational failures—and their respective relations to the cultural imperatives of heteronormativity, dominant structures of feeling, and narrative and generic patterns. One particular failure that undergirds its arguments is the conspicuous critical silence around the tomboy, a figure who plays such motley and plentiful roles within American literature and culture—though this phenomenon might better be viewed as the failure of the academy to acknowledge the importance of tomboyism’s dynamic function in narrative.

Abate’s 2008 *Tomboys* is, to date, the first and only literary monograph on the topic. Abate’s book spans a long historical period, addressing the tomboy’s incorporation into the dime Western novels popular in the nineteenth century as well as the tomboy-cum-lesbian in 1950s

⁶ Patrice Petro, “Historical *Ennui*, Feminist Boredom,” in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York: Routledge, 1995), 197.

pulp fiction and the youthful tomboy's (re)entry into Hollywood cinema alongside the various feminist movements of the 1960s and 70s. Abate locates the tomboy as a figure in whom cultural discourses of race, sexuality, and gender intersect in provocative and problematic ways. Her book provides an illuminating historical and etymological account of the tomboy's development through various sociocultural environments; most helpfully, she lays out the curious, persistent racialization of tomboys in literature, who are regularly characterized as dark, swarthy, primitive, "natural," or who otherwise "acquire suggestions of nonwhiteness through their connections with African-American signifiers."⁷ She focuses primarily on the racialized aspects of the tomboy in narrative, and though she makes reference to the tomboy's consistently working-class status, she observes that "hoyden" would have been a more common term for a girl characterized by her breaches of bourgeois mores; I believe that the disappearance of "hoyden" from contemporary usage corresponds to a general consolidation of "undesirable" racial and economic attributes within the girlhood gender rebel.⁸

Abate has also edited a tomboy-centered special issue of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, attesting in its introduction to having been "surprised to discover how widely and consistently the subject ha[s] been overlooked. Scholars seeking information about tomboys . . . will find no listing for the topic in the Library of Congress or, perhaps more shockingly, *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing*."⁹ This issue constitutes an invaluable and much-needed contribution to the field; nevertheless, one would be wise to remain cognizant of the political stakes and performative implications of locating one of the few scholarly resources on tomboyism in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. The special issue has effectively—if

⁷ Abate, *Tomboys*, xxviii.

⁸ *ibid.*, xiv.

⁹ Michelle Ann Abate, "Introduction: Special Issue on Tomboys and Tomboyism, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 15:4 (2011), 408.

inadvertently—established the journal as the primary forum in which literary tomboyism would be discussed, entrenching the latter as a primarily sexual phenomenon (rather than a concern of narratology, history, gender, or economic class, for example, though many of those topics arise as well within the special issue). And while I subscribe to Abate’s notion that the critical silence around tomboys bespeaks a misogynistic and homophobic indifference towards a female figure whose function in narrative can tell us much about American constructions of gender, sexuality, race, age, and class, I also take heed of Sara Ahmed’s warning about the “risks in organizing a book around figures, as if the intelligibility of the figure preserves the coherence of a history.”¹⁰ I echo Ahmed’s precaution and have striven throughout this dissertation to frame the figure of the tomboy within historical contexts, as the product of interrelated attitudes, political milieus, sexual debates, and a consumer-driven market. I am not interested in identifying who does or does not “qualify” as a tomboy, nor in theorizing where tomboyism might lie on a binaristic spectrum of masculinity and femininity, but in the ways tomboyism functions within and alongside cultural currents and narrative patterns.

Further, as fascinating as Abate’s historical and archival work is in its own right, her book preoccupies itself too much (this critic thinks) with the personal lives of the authors it discusses and how they may or may not have translated and/or projected themselves into their literature, and it neglects to distinguish between child and adult figures, so that it becomes difficult to understand how, in Abate’s formulations, tomboyism differs significantly from butchness and lesbianism. Jack Halberstam, too, has written substantially about tomboyism—most extensively in *Female Masculinity* (2001)—but also primarily under the aegis of lesbianism. Even as it helpfully exposes cultural silences around deviant modes of female

¹⁰ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 18.

gender expression, the dichotomous structure to which the book adheres ultimately does little to trouble the very gender binary at which it chafes.

In this dissertation, I seek both to narrow and to expand the scope of Abate's and Halberstam's projects. I consider the ways in which not only race but also economic class structures the tomboy; femininity seems to be primarily the prerogative of wealthy little girls—or, at any rate, there appears to be no such thing in narrative as a well-off tomboy. I concentrate my inquiry on a much briefer timespan (approximately 1965-present) in order to explore more thoroughly the relationships among tomboyism, Second and Third-Wave feminism, and the emergence of “lesbian” as a visible and livable category of identity. I also limit my field of inquiry chiefly to the cinematic medium, whereas Abate and Halberstam include both film and fiction in their respective analyses. The market demands of the movie industry as well as medium-specific contingencies necessitate this separation, I believe, as the prospect of communal female activity (for example, a group of girls and women watching a movie about girls who openly defy patriarchal mandates) produces far greater anxieties than the comparatively private, individualized act of reading a novel. The non-textual viscosity of film, too, opens spaces for slippage, deviation, and suggestion markedly different from those available to fiction writers. To borrow from Seymour Chatman's germinal meditations on the specificity of film as a vector of interpretation, a viewer of film applies his or her own adjectives to a longing, lustful, envious, or otherwise adjectival gaze between Mary Stuart Masterson and Lea Thompson's rivalrous characters in John Hughes and Howard Deutch's *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987), for instance, where a sentence in a book (“Watts looked coldly at Amanda”) may be less

susceptible to resistant imaginings.¹¹ These malleable, redolent, open-ended moments strike me as exceptionally compelling in tomboy films, wherein audiences are aware—sometimes painfully so—that the narrative will end, as it conventionally does, with the tomboy protagonist’s initiation into a heterosexual relationship and an abrupt departure from much of her established personality in the process.

While recognizing these narrative constrictions, this project focuses less on the abject and abnegating aspects of tomboy representation than on the particular ways in which those representations leave—and sometimes create—room for sustained deviant possibilities in the same instant that they attempt to smother them. In this regard, it follows Ann Cvetkovich’s submission that “noticing and describing the places where it feels as if there is something else happening, and passing on strategies for survival” is exponentially more generative and more salubrious than simply staking a “paranoid watch for how forms of resistance are ultimately co-opted.”¹² I wish to move away, therefore, from endeavors to determine what the tomboy “is” or how she might be instrumentalized for various identitarian ends and instead towards a fuller understanding of how she functions in filmic narrative. To look at any literary figure or trope isolated from the various contexts of history, narrative, cinema, gender, sexuality, race, and economics is to impoverish that examination; all such figures and tropes of course constitute and are constituted by a larger set of representational practices and politics and ways of understanding.

I have limited this investigation, too, to United States film and culture, as categories and histories of gender and sexuality (not to mention ethnicity and class) vary so greatly from one

¹¹ Seymour Chatman, “What Novels Can Do That Films Can’t (and Vice Versa),” *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Autumn 1980), 121-140.

¹² Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 6.

nation to another that an effort to cast a wider net would necessarily come at the expense of many of the nuances and particularities so important to the tomboys that feature in American cinema. In the Spanish language, for example, the closest equivalent word to tomboy is “marimacho,” which has a more adult and directly sexual register; the *Real Academia Española* defines “marimacho” as “una mujer que en su corpulencia o acciones parece hombre” (“a woman who in her size or actions resembles a man”), and it serves colloquially as a derogatory term meaning “butch.” In French, the nearest translation is “garçon manqué,” a “failed” or “lacking” boy and an etymology indicative of a gender-normative cultural predisposition against tomboyism as modeled by much early psychoanalytic discourse. And whereas American viewers might perceive feisty, independent heroines such as those in Hayao Miyazaki’s *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Kiki’s Delivery Service* (1989), and *Spirited Away* (2001) to be tomboys, Japanese children tend to be subjected to less definitively gendering practices and more androgynous as a whole; deviance would likely be connoted by a girl’s verbal-linguistic rather than behavioral idiosyncrasies.¹³

Time plays no less significant a role than geography in determining the vicissitudes of gender and sexual identity. Sharon Marcus has noted that during the Victorian era, society discerned “no contest between what we now call heterosexual and homosexual desire; neither men nor women saw anything disruptive about amorous badinage between women, and therefore no effort was made to contain and denigrate female homoeroticism as an immature stage to be overcome.”¹⁴ The tropological tendency to imagine both tomboyism and lesbianism as phases doomed to expire when a girl transitions to “real” womanhood (a transition Sigmund Freud

¹³ Susan Napier, *Anime: From Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

¹⁴ Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 58.

theorized, in a formulation Judith Roof outlines as closely related to the “maturation” of a polymorphously perverse girl and clitoral orgasm to vaginal orgasm, that putative apex of psychosexual development), then, is clearly a historically contingent phenomenon that has dominated tomboy and lesbian narratives in film since the medium’s inception.¹⁵ Female friendship possessed a certain “narrative longevity” in contrast to the increasingly homosocially isolated quality of literary and filmic tomboys, from Capitola Black in E.D.E.N. Southworth’s *The Hidden Hand* (1859) to Katniss Everdeen in Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* (2008), both of whose closest companions are predominantly male.

As Abate demonstrates, the specific racial history of the United States inflects our conceptions of gender no less than do our ontologies of sexuality, and femininity is implicitly designated as a white prerogative within American literature dating back at least as far as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s dichotomous depiction of pure, innocent, consummately feminine (and white) Little Eva and crude, uncivilized, clever but corrupt (black) Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Not long after *Uncle Tom’s* publication, tomboy characters began to appear with relative frequency in children’s novels (*The Hidden Hand*, Louisa May Alcott’s 1868 *Little Women* and its sequels, Susan Coolidge’s 1872 *What Katy Did*, Mark Twain’s unfinished *Hellfire Hotchkiss* (1897), Lucy Maud Montgomery’s 1908 *Anne of Green Gables*, etc.), usually set on the frontier or in some other rural setting well-suited to outdoor roguery. Around that time, too, the regrettably obsolete noun “tomboyade” entered common parlance to refer to an “escapade in the manner of a tomboy.” Novelist Charlotte Mary Yonge details such adventures in *Womankind*, her 1877 treatise on the contemporaneous status of girls and women: “What I mean by ‘tomboyism’ is a wholesome delight in rushing about at full speed, playing at

¹⁵ Judith Roof, *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

active games, climbing trees, rowing boats, making dirt pies, and the like,” and she considers it “the best sign for future health.”¹⁶ Yonge’s acceptance of—even enthusiasm about—tomboyism as not only normal but in fact salutary for girls marks a sharp contrast, alongside Marcus’s work, to the tomboy films discussed herein, whose sexual conservatism and tendencies to conflate gender and sexuality belie the common presumption that the “old days” were necessarily more restrictive of girls and women than these enlightened times.

From Tyke to Dyke? Tomboyism and Sexuality

As Masterson’s performances in both *Tomatoes* and *Wonderful* demonstrate, tomboyism in contemporary discourses is bound up with sexuality as much and as confusingly as it is with gender. When the word “tomboy” started referring to females in the late 1500s, it connoted a voracious—indeed almost masculine—sexual appetite. So how has the trait of unchasteness transformed into one of worrisome *too*-chasteness, a distance from boys that provokes allegations of lesbianism?

One recent sociological study conducted in two coed elementary schools found that students considered some female classmates to be tomboys and some as only “a bit tomboy.” The students surveyed interpreted motives for girls who played soccer as rooted in one of two performative phenomena: if not tomboyism, then hyper-heterosexuality, a form of “showing off for the boys.”¹⁷ If tomboyish behavior, such as enjoying soccer, neither serves as a totalizing identity nor proscribes normatively feminine behaviors and heterosexual desires, then why does the classification exist at all? It seems to function as a rogue holdover from the pre-sexological era, before the taxonomic crystallization of desires and acts as identities inseparable from sex

¹⁶ Charlotte Mary Yonge, *Womankind* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1877), 10.

¹⁷ Carrie Paechter and Sheryl Clarke, “Who Are Tomboys and How Do We Recognize Them?”, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 30 (2007), 345.

and gender, at least in the sense of its perceived impermanence and in the fact that it has been suggestively yoked to and determinedly distanced from sexual identity.

This critical investigation hinges largely upon questions of sexuality, principally the associations between tomboyism and lesbianism, which might be described from various perspectives as tenuous, complicated, fantasmatic, causal, threatening, obvious, cognate, retrospective, self-fulfilling, or non-existent. By lesbianism, I mean here female same-sex desire, whether in children, adolescents, or adults. I seek to “reveal” neither the identifying traits of tomboys nor those of lesbians (though I do make recourse to recurring cultural signifiers thereof), but rather to shed light on the ways in which American society has constructed and construed the relationship between the two in the wake of the academic and activist developments of feminism and queer theory and the increasing visibility—and, nominally, acceptability—of feminist and queer identities. In order to do so, I examine tomboy characters and lesbian characters, but equally—and perhaps more importantly—the narrative strictures, structural tropes, affective patterns, and modes of spectatorial attachment that chronically surround them.

The ambiguity with which *Tomatoes* treats Idgie’s development from tomboy to possible lesbian, for example, has provided audiences of various sexual and political persuasions ample fodder for contestation. Arguably a rare mainstream film that permits its tomboy to forego the conventional taming trajectory, *Tomatoes*’ (non)treatment of lesbianism has instigated heated debate among its various audiences. The film’s romantic content, such as it is, subsists primarily in intense gazes, not-so-subtly connotative cues (a softball game, late-night swimming sessions, a shared bedroom), and passionate professions of a love that dare not distinguish itself from platonic intimacy; this combination of ephemeral moments and motions undergirded by more

enduring sensibilities has been wielded as proof both for and against the film's "true" orientation. Halberstam deems the film to be a case *par excellence* of Hollywood's systematic "eradication of the butch and her desire,"¹⁸ Lu Vickers describes the homosexual dynamic as "obviously camouflage[d] to pass into the mainstream,"¹⁹ and Lee Lynch of *The Washington Blade* observes that "you didn't have to see [lesbianism], wouldn't see it, if you didn't want to."²⁰ Film scholar Naomi Rockler, too, regards *Tomatoes* as exemplary of a type of "strategic ambiguity" employed as a tactic that "helps maintain a social order that is oppressive to one or more groups."²¹

Many other critics—whether because the lesbianism has remained invisible to them or because they have simply preferred not to acknowledge it—describe Idgie and Ruth as "friends" (the "just" is implicit) or refer to the film as being about their deep "friendship" (see reviews in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Orlando Sentinel*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Seattle Times* as well as *People Magazine* and *Entertainment Weekly*, among others). Director Jon Avnet and actress Mary Stuart Masterson have expressed a consternation bordering on disingenuity as to why audiences should be so concerned over whether or not the women's relationship is romantic. Avnet remarks in one interview that "the sexuality had no interest for me . . . I think intimacy is the most frightening experience in our lifetime. Sexuality has so little to do with it." Masterson agrees: "I don't even think that's a relevant issue," and she adds defensively that "the way [Idgie] dresses doesn't mean she's gay" (qtd. in Keough 1992).²² Actress Mary-Louise Parker,

¹⁸ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 220.

¹⁹ Vickers, "Excuse Me?"

²⁰ qtd. in Vickers, "Excuse Me?"

²¹ Naomi Rockler, "A Wall on the Lesbian Continuum: Polysemy and *Fried Green Tomatoes*," *Women's Studies in Communication* (Spring 2001), 91.

²² qtd. in Peter Keough, "Southern Fried Movie Flies a Feminist Flag," *Chicago Sun Times* (January 5, 1992), 2.

on the other hand, claims that the tacit nature of Idgie and Ruth's romance in fact announces it, makes it "so obvious" by its conspicuous non-articulation. Moreover, Parker suggests that it is similarly "obvious . . . why a Hollywood production would deep-six lesbian sexuality."²³

Even while some critics wrangle over whether or not the characters are lesbians, others bemoan the film's participation in an "unholy trinity of lesbian tropes," wherein cinematic lesbian characters function primarily as mirrors of each other, one as a mother to the other (Ruth to Idgie, in this case), or one as a man to the other (Idgie to Ruth as a replacement for Idgie's deceased brother, Buddy, who had been courting Ruth up until his accidental death), all in the service of reestablishing heterosexuality in the end.²⁴ Chris Holmlund complains that in mainstream films, the "butch necessarily becomes always only a tomboy" and asserts that we "must still insist that no matter how wonderful representations of female friendship may be, they are not acceptable substitutes for representations of lesbian sexuality and love."²⁵ Although I agree whole-heartedly that self-avowedly lesbian depictions in film remain tremendously important, it strikes me as both unfair and overly simplistic to write tomboys off merely as dilute surrogates for lesbian characters. I do not take tomboyism as a necessary precursor of lesbianism nor view tomboys as proto-butches; no more would I consider an adult tomboy the neutered or defanged version of a butch lesbian, as Holmlund and Halberstam view her.

Lesbian representation—butch, femme, or otherwise—within narrative, commercial film has long stood as a site of contention among scholars (Teresa de Lauretis, Chris Holmlund, Elizabeth Ellsworth, Judith Mayne, Katharina Lindner, Amy Villarejo, and Gayatri Gopinath, to name only a few). I am not interested in determining whether a given film is or is not "really"

²³ Vickers, "Excuse Me?"

²⁴ Chris Holmlund, "Cruisin' for a Bruisin': Hollywood's Deadly (Lesbian) Dolls," *Cinema Journal* 34.1 (Fall 1994), 36.

²⁵ "Cruisin'," 44.

lesbian—the collection of aggregate contradictions and critical cross-purposes amid the reception of *Fried Green Tomatoes* effectively demonstrates the futility of such argumentation. Rather, I wish to explore how these ambiguities manifest themselves in filmic form, how the frustrations they engender might be more productively harnessed than in the is-it/isn't-it quagmire, what these films have to offer the viewers who also see a lesbian narrative, and the role the literary tomboy plays in mediating that narrative.

Other critical conversations—sometimes parallel to, other times intersecting with discussions around lesbian representational politics—warrant attention at this juncture as well. How does tomboyism relate to different forms of female gender deviance and transgressive expression? As Judith Butler—without whose work this project would be literally unthinkable—has famously argued, lesbians who act butch or masculine are not imitating men; no more, I contend, do unfeminine girls make a practice of imitating boys.²⁶ In delimiting the subgenre of tomboy films and, therein, the scope of this project's investigation, there is thus an important distinction to be made between girl characters who engage in boyish behavior (whatever that may entail) “naturally,” instinctively, or because they prefer it to certain aspects or standards of girlish behavior, and girl characters who assume boyish behaviors because a given situation makes doing so advantageous. Mayne is helpful on this point, explaining that lesbian readings of cross-dressing films would “require a convenient forgetfulness or bracketing of what happens to these images, plot and narrative-wise...where heterosexual symmetry is usually restored with a vengeance.”²⁷ Members of this subset of films include Elizabeth Taylor's aforementioned

²⁶ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993) 307-20.

²⁷ Judith Mayne, “Lesbian Looks: Dorothy Arzner and Female Authorship,” *How Do I Look?: Queer Film and Video* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 103.

character in Clarence Brown's *National Velvet*, who disguises herself as a boy when informed that females are prohibited from entering a prestigious English horserace (a doctor discovers her sex when she faints from the excitement of winning), Lisa Gottlieb's *Just One of the Guys* (1985), in which Joyce Hyser's character goes into undercover drag in an attempt (one that ultimately fails) to prove that her inability to secure a newspaper internship is the result of a male teacher's chauvinism, and Amanda Bynes's Viola in the *Twelfth Night* update *She's the Man* (2006), who rather than protesting the fact that her school lacks a girls' soccer team defuses an opportunity for resistance by making the apolitical decision simply to pass as a boy at another school. Herein, then, lies one of the reasons that "masculinity" falls short as a category descriptor appurtenant to the tomboy: as Taylor's *Velvet*, Hyser's Terry, and Bynes as Viola demonstrate, female masculinity is too readily instrumentalized or made reducible to an opportunistic drag show, to girls earnestly attempting to give a passable performance of masculinity in order to further their own material or heterosexual ends rather than as the exercise of defiant agency.

This distinction is not to be taken as a qualifying criterion of tomboyism nor a summary dismissal of cross-dressing narratives, but rather as a focalizing lens through which to better perceive the attendant formal and discursive structures of the tomboy narrative. In a parallel vein and with reservations, this study brackets transgenderism and transsexuality; there seems to me a significant difference between wanting to *be* a boy—or knowing that one *is*—and, as Halberstam writes, the "desire for the greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys."²⁸ For example, the title of Céline Sciamma's 2012 *Tomboy* (or at least the English rendering of its original name, *La garçonne*) would ostensibly stake a claim for the film's place within the canon of tomboy films,

²⁸ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 6.

insofar as any exists, but *Tomboy* more accurately presents a transgender narrative: the protagonist, Laure (Zoé Héran), calls herself Mikael, dresses as a boy in order to pass as one among her peers, and molds herself a synthetic phallus out of modeling clay before a swim outing. Tomboyish behavior might be (and has been, as with Jay Prosser's compelling essay on Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*), interpreted as a symptom of transsexuality; however, this project's interests are founded in a specific narrative and cinematic history that sees tomboyism as inextricably bound up with femaleness and lesbianism, not transsexuality (though no doubt the suppression of trans discourses within tomboy narratives could itself make a compelling study).²⁹ *Some Kind of Wonderful*, for instance (and whereon much more later)—which underwent several significant changes in director, cast, and tone as well as storyline—was initially imagined as a kooky sex comedy, but in this incarnation it also would have dealt with a much more serious issue than anything that occurs in the decidedly unkooky final product. Watts, the tomboy character, reveals actress Masterson in an interview, “was named Keith and she wanted to be male,” and she originally wore boys' briefs rather than boxers in the locker room scene.³⁰ The actress professes to have persuaded director Deutch and writer-producer Hughes that a tomboy is not “necessarily a woman who wants to be a man. It's somebody who's just not willing to be a slave to the feminine manipulative paradigm”—and something crucial lies in that distinction, nebulous though it may be, between Watts in boxers as opposed to boys' briefs.³¹ As tremendous a milestone as a mainstream transgender narrative would have been in 1987 (and even now, for that matter), its erasure, as Masterson's commentary implies, elucidates

²⁹ Jay Prosser, “‘Some Primitive Thing Conceived in a Turbulent Age of Transition’: The Transsexual Emerging from *The Well of Loneliness*.” *Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on The Well of Loneliness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

³⁰ Sara Vilkomerson, “Some Kind of Wonderful,” *Entertainment Weekly*, Oct. 12, 2012, 53.

³¹ Susannah Gora, *You Couldn't Ignore Me If You Tried* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2011), 205.

an important quality of tomboyism: that wanting to be (and being) masculine is not the same as wanting to be a boy or a man—and, further yet, that unfemininity does not amount to masculinity, either.³²

Many share Deutch and Hughes's beliefs, however, and find the prospect of female unfemininity considerably more fearsome than do the filmmakers' generally conservative Hollywood outlooks. In 2002, the Christian press Intervarsity Publications released a book that amplifies such anxieties, called *A Parent's Guide to Preventing Homosexuality* and written by decorated psychotherapist Joseph Nicolosi, who earned his doctorate from the California School of Professional Psychology, and his wife, Linda, whose qualifications remain unelaborated. The book presents itself as a theoretical and practical guide for addressing and correcting what it terms "prehomosexual" behavior—including tomboyism—in children, grounding its prescriptions and proscriptions on an axiom that at once evokes religious and evolutionary discourse: "We are all designed to be heterosexual."³³ The chapter "From Tomboys to Lesbians" depicts tomboyism as a phenomenon of female "gender disturbance" that entails "substitut[ing] active games and sports" for "the usual girlhood games," fantasies of being a "strong, heroic protector," toughness, sarcasm, and the "angry repudiation of skirts and dresses," all of which comprise a girl's "unconscious rejection of her feminine identity."³⁴ The book conflates gender, sex, and sexuality throughout, incorporating a contradictory assemblage of Freudian discourse that competes with its predominant rhetoric of individual choice and self-empowerment: "There

³² I am uncomfortable making exclusionary gestures. It should go without saying that this distinction is in no way a commentary on the importance of the film or of trans narratives more broadly, but rather a clarifying delineation to help achieve a greater degree of precision in my investigation of this question, wherein tomboyism is considered (however speciously) a precursor to lesbianism, not necessarily a symptom of transgenderism or transsexuality.

³³ Joseph and Linda Ames Nicolosi, *A Parent's Guide to Preventing Homosexuality* (Downer's Grove [IL]: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 12.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 147; 156.

is no such thing as a ‘gay child’ or a ‘gay teen.’ . . . Confusion about gender is primarily a psychological condition.”³⁵ In fact, the Nicolosis advise the reader that “gender non-conformity in childhood may be the single most common observable factor associated with homosexuality.”³⁶ They go on to locate the chief cause of gender nonconformity in girls, paradoxically, in the unhappy performance of normative gender roles—in their properly feminine mothers, with whom girls may disidentify upon coming to believe them weak, passive, or powerless, inferring from their mother’s subordinate social (dis)positions that “being a female is either undesirable or unsafe.”³⁷ “Unknowingly,” the Nicolosis write, “many mothers convey an unattractive image of femininity to their daughters.”³⁸ Lesbianism, by this logic, proceeds from internalized misogyny—a rather curious reason for women to begin loving other women and, one that moreover presumes a necessary (and self-contradictory) butch-femme structure in lesbian relationships.

In this same chapter, the book also links lesbianism (and, by implication, tomboyism) to feminist political movements, alleging that “these women [tomboys who became lesbians and then ex-lesbians] also developed a profound denial of gender differences (‘Women can do everything that men can do.’ ‘Who needs a man?’). This attitude often carried over into a political position of radical feminism and of resentment toward men in power.”³⁹ Pathologizing female independence and incursions into “male” domain, the Nicolosis emphasize the political—not just sexual—implications of tomboyism, which they see as extending far beyond the childhood shenanigans Yonge details. The Nicolosis hold what many would consider to be

³⁵ *ibid.*, 16.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 15.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 148.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 151.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 153.

extreme views (and views whose implicitly religious foundation frequently shows through their thin veneer of scientific objectivity), yet popular filmic tomboy and lesbian narratives bear out virtually all of the anxieties, assumptions, and clichés they present—and such narratives tend to be consumed enthusiastically (if ruefully) by queer and straight audiences alike. Indeed, filmic narrative over the past several decades suggests that the general public is no less wary of tomboyism’s potential threat to patriarchy and to heteronormative discourses than are the Nicolosis and their audience. While I do not find this book’s patronizing commentary particularly surprising or provocative in any substantial way, it conveniently draws out a number of salient aspects of tomboyism, gender, and sexuality and pertinent narrative tendencies that this project pursues in their cinematic manifestations. The Nicolosis muse anxiously that contemporary American society is on the verge of “cast[ing] all of history aside, in favor of the latest TV show about the glories of gender-bending.”⁴⁰ Their tract thus also lends credence to the power of popular culture—especially *screened* popular culture—to influence understandings of what does and does not comprise properly gendered behavior.

Although it might easily be discarded as pseudopsychological religious dogma, *A Parent’s Guide*’s approach to gender and sexuality *qua* emotional disorder reflects the orientation of much past and contemporary psychological work on the same topic. Further, and more ironically, the Nicolosis structure their argumentation along lines parallel to two major threads that have dominated queer and feminist thought since the time of the book’s publication: affect and temporality. The Nicolosis frame lesbianism as the result, typically, of overprolonged tomboyism: for a small percentage of girls, tomboyish behavior and the rejection of femininity continues through adolescence and carries over into their developing libidos, leading them to

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 14.

reject men as romantic partners lest these girls, too, become depressed and dissatisfied housewives.

Teen Sensations: Affect, Temporality, and Spectatorship

In the Nicolosis' estimation, tomboys are apt to become lesbians if their mothers demonstrate unhappiness: those "who become lesbians have usually decided, on an unconscious level, that being female is either undesirable or unsafe," and further, this evolution often happens "because [a girl's] mother appeared to the girl as either a negative or a weak identification object," and when "severe depression in the mother" leads to a "traumatic interruption in the early mother-daughter bond."⁴¹ These postulations, in which a mother's failure to model happiness in such a way as to indicate convincingly that motherhood constitutes a direct path to it, evoke Ahmed's recent work on affect and the relationship between normative gender/sexuality and normative trajectories of feeling. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed challenges the tautological structure of cultural discourses of happiness, wherein "happiness is associated with some life choices and not others" and is inferred to be "what follows being a certain kind of being."⁴² The housewife's duty, Ahmed notes, is "to generate happiness by the very act of embracing [the happy housewife] image" as the result of having followed the path of normative femininity to the good life.⁴³ Unhappy housewives and other discontented females may take up the mantle of the "feminist killjoy," viewed by society as "destroying something that is thought of by others not only as good but as the cause of happiness," in their expressions of anger and dissatisfaction.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 157; 148.

⁴² Ahmed, *Happiness*, 2.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 65.

Tomboys in film, too, tend to be characterized by a deep unhappiness that the heteronormative course of the narrative works to rectify, a pattern reflected in the Nicolosi's remarks upon tomboys' "angry repudiation" of gender norms and the supposed feminine path to happiness.⁴⁵ Moreover, tomboys in narrative are nearly always motherless, a phenomenon which indicates that the seemingly outré claims *A Parent's Guide* makes about a mother's impact on her daughter's gender expression and sexual identity hold no small amount of credence—possibly even prevalence—within American culture; they reflect dominant (and misogynistic) attitudes about the dangers of improper mothering and its potential to threaten the future of the nuclear family. Heterosexual mothers, and housewives particularly, it would appear, lie as much at the root of concerns about reproductive futurity as do their gender-bending daughters—and female discontent forms the basis of all these putative ills. For tomboyish mothers and housewives-to-be or not-to-be, the abandonment of this contrarian mantle and the achievement of womanhood and femininity are constructed largely as a matter of time, a shift that may be indulgently deferred only until puberty, when their continued absence begins to be perceived as a symptom of deeper "problems." As viewers lesbian or otherwise quickly come to understand, tomboys in film seldom emerge from their narratives as tomboys, and in this regard such narratives construe tomboyism as necessarily temporary and as something that ought to evolve seamlessly into normative heterosexual femininity.

The matter of temporality became a charged site of contestation within queer theory upon the publication of Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), wherein Edelman launches an acerbic critique of the "for the child" mentality that shapes contemporary

⁴⁵ Nicolosi 147.

politics and thereby forecloses possibilities for nonreproductive queers.⁴⁶ Edelman's polemical negativity would itself prove queerly generative, prompting scholars such as José Esteban Muñoz and Elizabeth Freeman to propose alternative modes of futurity less inimical to queer existence and, in the case of Freeman's *Time Binds*, one that harks back to the lesbian feminist movements of the 1960s and 70s that laid the groundwork for queer theory's emergence as a field of study in the 1990s. This dissertation, too, seeks to tease out moments of queer and feminist possibility in the temporal structures of literary and filmic texts, yet where Edelman champions circularity and the antisocial, Freeman chronological gaps and non-linearity, and Muñoz a forward-leaping utopianism, I locate such potential in the simultaneity, plurality, and multidimensionality of meanings within film—a medium in which narrative structure, however normative, may be contravened by formal technique, emotional predispositions of audiences, and all of the unquantifiable extradiegetic elements that emanate across time through celebrity culture and the Hollywood film industry.

The determinedly heteronormative, future-oriented bent of the cinematic set of tomboy narratives makes *Fried Green Tomatoes*, in which the theoretical threads of chronology and affect converge in a cacophony of thanatopic dissensus, seem all the queerer by contrast. Because—as it focuses so heavily on aging and decay, morbid humor, and the (post)menopausal female characters that inhabit its present-day narrative demonstrate—*Tomatoes* is not noticeably anxious about reproductivity, and it exhibits little anxiety about tomboyism's associations with lesbianism and its repudiation of obligatory femininity. Even the film's tagline (“The secret of life? The secret's in the sauce.”) speaks to its queer temporal cast, as this culinary secret in fact consists of barbecued human flesh, specifically that of Ruth's abusive husband Frank Bennett

⁴⁶ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004),

(Nick Searcy)—whose cibarious Christian name itself exemplifies the profane brand of gallows humor that suffuses the film’s emotional milieu. Evelyn’s narrative, too, centers on the development of her friendship with the elderly Ninny while the former navigates her way through what they call “the big change,” the same euphemism that might be used to refer obliquely to puberty in a typical tomboy story.

The questions of affect, attachment, and temporality that *Tomatoes* raises through its unhappy housewife figure, thanatopic currents, and there-but-not lesbianism—and that I explore throughout this dissertation—intersect with some of the predominant points of contention within queer and feminist scholarship over the past twenty years. When Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick initially theorized a distinction between paranoid and reparative reading in a 1996 article and later more fully in *Touching Feeling* (2003), she triggered a field-wide reassessment of critical practices and, in many cases, a departure from the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that interpretive procedures entail and this hermeneutics’ “anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever take the reader by surprise.”⁴⁷ Sedgwick emphasizes the importance of reading not with the aim of exposing what one suspects is present (and will thus no doubt find) but from a position that entails a “surrender” of this prejudice and one which allows for the experience of finding something unexpected, the admission of a non-omniscient critical perspective. Such a depressive position characterizes the work of a group of scholars whom Robyn Wiegman describes as queer feminist critics, among them the aforementioned Ahmed, Cvetkovich, Freeman, and Muñoz, as well as Heather Love and Lauren Berlant, who endeavor to rehabilitate injurious objects as sites of hope, pleasure, optimism or otherwise productive attachments, typically by “defining and analyzing the affective in temporal terms and

⁴⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queerer Than Fiction,” *Studies in the Novel*, 28.3 (1996), 279, and *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

vice versa.”⁴⁸ Many of these critics’ postulations comprise in large part the theoretical framework of this dissertation.

The Fruits of Suspicion: *Tomatoes* and Beyond

An integral piece of what I aim to achieve through this theoretical framework follows Sedgwick’s reparative imperative in “extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture . . . whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain” marginalized groups and individuals.⁴⁹ This project seeks to delineate the ways tomboy films repudiate their heroines and these heroines’ spectatorial kin on a narrative level and at once offer alternative and contradictory meanings through the very fact of their medium, through the layers of the diegetic, nondiegetic, and extradiegetic and the sensorial multivalence of cinema in its visual, aural, and linguistic aspects; in this regard, it proceeds towards reparative aims.

Yet some recent critical work has begun to view paranoid reading reparatively and even to elucidate the paranoid and sometimes appropriative aspects of reparative reading itself; Wiegman cautions that such reading “must be understood . . . as making rather significant demands on the object . . . on [the critic’s] behalf.”⁵⁰ In other words, the determination to perform a reparative reading follows a paranoid formulation along the lines of “I know there is something good I can take from this text, and I am going to find it.” Jackie Stacey sees value, as do I, in the very same practice of interpretation that Sedgwick cautions against, in “read[ing] between the lines and [seeing] beyond appearances” in order to “contradict the attribution of anxiety to individualized failure”—a kind of optimism in critical agency and its ability to effect

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁹ Sedgwick, “Queerer,” qtd. in Robyn Wiegman, “The Times We’re In: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative ‘Turn,’” *Feminist Theory* 15 (Spring 2014), 8.

⁵⁰ Wiegman, “Times,” 18.

change through the exposure of latent meaning.⁵¹ Yet she also—and importantly—advises against the abandonment of a text’s negative aspects, preferring a critical disposition that takes as its basis the oscillating pulls of these disparate textual elements and ideologies. Claire Hemmings, too, conceives a “co-constitutive” relation between paranoid and reparative readings and registers her own suspicions about contemporary orientations towards reparation and away from paranoia within the academic world: “is it accidental that I find myself drawn to thinking through affect rather than critique at a point when it is institutionally harder . . . to sustain a paranoid position invested in (my own) marginality?”⁵²

Spectation from a position of ambivalence—one that bears out “paranoid” hunches and impulses while remaining mindful of the cultural forces that both necessitate and impugn such paranoia—allows for viewers to see what *Tomatoes* and other tomboy films offer queer and feminist audiences in the way of sustenance even as it points to the relation between their alimentative aspects and the problematic ideologies of race, class, gender, and sexuality they reflect and perpetuate. The kind of reading this project pursues attempts to engage its objects holistically, without discarding their deleterious aspects—not masochistically, but because there is something affirming in watching charming and rebellious female protagonists, in empathizing with their doubts and frustrations, and in railing at the concessions their heavy-handed endings make to convention.

Such readings need not cajole the text into revealing “hidden” meanings, and no more must they capitulate the inclination to divine or identify elements that may be present despite social and narrative praxes that mandate their obfuscation. To view a scene in which, for instance, an adult tomboy character gingerly works her hand into the bee-blanketed crotch of a

⁵¹ Jackie Stacey, “Wishing Away Ambivalence,” *Feminist Theory* 15 (Spring 2014), 47.

⁵² Claire Hemmings, “The Materials of Reparation,” *Feminist Theory* 15 (Spring 2014), 28.

tree to retrieve and deliver a luminescent, dripping honeycomb to a female companion who stands paralyzed with terror and delight a few feet away as lesbian hardly demands the “terrible alertness” Sedgwick attributes to paranoid reading, but no more does it “make significant demands” on the object. This sequence is the most iconically “lesbian” moment in *Tomatoes*; it is the scene in which the tomboy becomes (or doesn’t) a lesbian in a tomboy film where lesbianism is at once “obvious” and invisible, or at any rate subsumed enough to remain plausibly unnoticeable. And the ambivalence of the scene itself is something about which to feel ambivalent—Avnet’s and Masterson’s comments convey an equivocal desire to attract lesbians and devotees of the novel as viewers, but at the same time to avoid alienating a heteronormative mainstream.

Fried Green Tomatoes is ultimately a film about finding vitality in the unremarkable life of an obese, childless, middle-aged woman (the veritable bottom of Hollywood’s proverbial barrel of movie roles), and it achieves this rejuvenation through a tomboy narrative—a queer one, at that—which manages to extend a broader cultural appeal than most self-avowedly lesbian films do. It does not preoccupy itself with heterosexual romance, children, and normative futurism but rather with the living, queer and otherwise, whom society tends to discard as paralytic, irrelevant, stagnant, deadweight dragging the present down. Irreverent towards convention and dissatisfactory to dissenters as it is, *Tomatoes* stands as a suitably multivalent foundation from which to build this project’s explorations of gender, temporality, sexuality, and affect through filmic tomboy narrative.

Initially taking a chronological step backwards from *Tomatoes*, this dissertation’s body engages with questions of paranoia, reparation, lesbian representation, and queer temporality through tomboy narratives in various contexts, beginning with the question of how tropes of

deviant gender and sexuality function in relation to (and sometimes in concert with) each other and focalizing this investigation through the lens of ambivalent attachment: why do gender nonconformists, lesbians, queers, feminist, and mainstream “straight” audiences continue to watch films that exasperate, anger, depress, and obstinately refute them and to sustain the relatively narrow market for these productions, which tend to be at “best” happily heteronormative and at worst overtly homophobic? The first chapter, “All Hard Feelings: Tomboys, Lesbians, and Frustrated Viewing,” draws on J.L. Austin’s speech act theory in tandem with queer work on affect to develop a concept of “infelicitous reading” with which to explore modes of unhappy spectatorship that resist and subvert narrative norms, deprivileging heteronormative termini and emphasizing queer potentialities over happy endings. I elaborate this reading practice, which circumvents repressive narrative strictures and hegemonically determined emotional trajectories, through close analysis of a set of representative tomboy films and a more comprehensive appraisal of the genre since the 1970s. With an eye to the ways tomboy stories illuminate the perceived relationship between tomboyism and lesbianism, these readings focus not only on the narrative treatment of tomboy characters but also and especially on moments of incoherence, deviance, or slippage from the overarching, normative storyline, as well as formal and other non-diegetic elements that permit them.

Chapter two, “Fair and Foul: The Politics of Ambivalence in Female-Centered Sports Films,” examines the gendered workings of a formula as old as the cinematic medium itself and one that has historically served as an acceptably masculine arena for male melodrama while subjugating its female characters to roles catalytic to the negotiation of male homosociality. When female athletes do appear onscreen, their performance of gender becomes a matter of as much narrative concern as their athletic competence, a focus perplexingly incongruent with their

resistive demeanors and physical empowerment. This chapter delves further into the narrative contradictions and incoherencies that “Unhappy Medium” outlines, performing an infelicitous reading on a generic level; I engage with such films as Michael Ritchie’s *Bad News Bears* (1976), Robert Towne’s *Personal Best* (1982), and Penny Marshall’s *A League of Their Own* (1992) as well as Lauren Berlant’s work on affect, convention, and the juxta-political tendencies of “women’s culture” to contend that female-centered sports films at once assume and eschew the possibility of their protagonists’ lesbianism and thereby create a liminal, infelicitous space for its continued imaginability.

This chapter links the turbulent history of women’s sport, within which participation has increased exponentially since the 1972 passage of Title IX only to see female leadership in sport decrease just as drastically, to the ambivalence of female-centered sports narratives. It views female-centered sports films—the close narrative and generic kin of tomboy films—as demanding of an ambivalent mode of spectatorship that understands without excusing the narratives’ constraints and shortcomings as products of specific historical moments, a chronically misogynistic, racist, and homophobic cultural atmosphere, and Hollywood’s paramount imperative to make a profitable product. One cannot simply discard the fact that *League* revolves largely around the redemption of a straight white man’s (played by the quintessentially all-American Tom Hanks, no less) wounded masculinity, for example, but nor need it negate the subtler ways the cover of that politically bland and normative narrative also enables the film to make much more subversive suggestions through such parodic moments as Rosie O’Donnell diving into a spectating soldier’s lap midgame to procure his hot dog through an impressive feat of oral agility in a smirking parody of heterosexual narrative conventions. This mode of polysemic understanding evokes Stacey’s hope that some combination of paranoia and

reparation could “provide a conceptual model for reading that is *grounded in ambivalence*”—or, in my own terms, a disposition of generous pessimism by which viewers might detach from such narratives and their contrivedly happy endings and turn back towards the histories these films so frequently obfuscate.”⁵³

In the third chapter, “Chronic Tomboys: Temporality, Survival, and Paranoia in Jodie Foster’s Films,” I consider these interconnected questions of gender, ambivalence, and temporality in relation to the very paranoid stance that strictly reparative readers would seek to discourage—and in relation to an object about which my own affective attachments have alternately and simultaneously included admiration, exasperation, desire, embarrassment, and irony: Jodie Foster’s body of work. I trace the attachments, agonies, and infelicities that permeate tomboy narratives into the films of an iconic tomboy actress with a consistently unhappy *oeuvre* and posit a mode of queer reproductivity enacted through Foster’s star image and a recuperation of feminist “paranoia” through the consistent critique of heteronormativity that her aggregate body of work performs: a certain residual quality that inheres in the star image itself constitutes an instantiation of queer temporality. Patriarchy sees a danger in tomboys who outstay their welcome, and their treatment in popular narrative from Nicolas Gessner’s *The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane* (1976) to David Fincher’s *Panic Room* (2002) reflects this masculinist paranoia—the fear that rebellious females left unrehabilitated into society could overturn the male-dominated social order. It regards them as threats to its supremacy and therefore mandates their “expiration,” a paranoid temporality that Foster’s *oeuvre* counters by itself performing a paranoid theorization of the systemic, virulent chronicity with which heterosexual and heterosocial relations subjugate females. Throughout this chapter, moreover, I

⁵³ Stacey, “Wishing,” 47.

address debates within queer theory about time, refuting antisocial currents—the push against the “for-the-child” sentiments predominant in contemporary political rhetoric—and proposing an alternative, recursive temporality, and within the field of feminist film studies, demonstrating a subversive potential within commercial narrative film.

Through these indeterminate relations, conflicted feelings, and resistant subjects, this dissertation explores the ways in which cultural discourses of gender, sexuality, and emotion structure narrative, and vice versa; tomboy films, from Foster’s earliest to *Fried Green Tomatoes*, shed light on these connections—the latter going so far as to put many of them on trial even within its own storyline. Facing interrogation about her role in Frank Bennett’s fate, Ruth responds to a prosecutor’s question about her relationship with Idgie in a manner at once touchingly simple and immensely complex: “She’s the best friend I ever had, and I love her.” Though Frank’s vanishment marks the occasion for the proceedings, Ruth and Idgie’s (non)romantic status becomes the tacit subject of the inquest; allegations of criminal guilt are displaced in this courtroom scene by suspicions of the lesbianism to which the film is unwilling to admit but unable to erase. Like that of so many tomboy films, Ruth’s syntax hovers between appositive and additive, multivalent phrasing in which the unspoken abuts the unheard. In presenting such generative moments of ambiguity, Ruth, Idgie, and their cinematic kin offer queer feminist possibilities within, through, and in spite of insistently homophobic and misogynistic narrative conventions.

CHAPTER ONE

All Hard Feelings: Tomboys, Lesbians, and Frustrated Spectatorship

As an independent film that found massive success with mainstream audiences—it grossed \$143 million domestically on a meager \$7.5 million budget—Jason Reitman’s 2007 teen pregnancy film, *Juno*, adds a twist to the conventional tomboy plotline that functions to alleviate immediately the implicit but pervasive threat such resistant females pose (or are perceived to pose) to patriarchy. A representative tomboy narrative of the “postfeminist” epoch, *Juno* is a witty, sensitive, lighthearted film that graces its eponymous protagonist (Ellen Page) with the characteristic tomboy traits of intelligence, sarcasm, and an obstinately independent mind. In it, this alternately snarky and vulnerable heroine becomes pregnant after having unprotected sex with her benign milquetoast of a boyfriend (Michael Cera); the narrative traces her pregnancy and the friendship she develops with a young yuppie couple who wish to adopt the baby. And, like its generic predecessors, *Juno* nullifies its tomboy’s consistently resistant demeanor with an ultimately heteronormative ending that satisfies narrative and moral expectations and does so by foreclosing deviant alternatives. A single, gently reproving line handed down by the film’s only traditional patriarch upon learning of his daughter’s condition aptly encapsulates the temporal limitations that attend resistant girlhood: “I thought you were the kind of girl,” Juno’s father (J.K. Simmons) tells her, “who knew when to say when.” His admonishment, although relatively forbearing as a parental reaction to teenage pregnancy, frames the film’s central dilemma in temporal terms, rhetorically locating the source of Juno’s problems in her own apparently deficient sense of temporality.

Such chronological discordance is inextricably bound up, in Juno’s story and in others’, with particular affective modalities appurtenant to queer spectatorship and to cinematic

depictions of queer female characters—specifically, of tomboys and lesbians, whose causal relationship mainstream filmic narrative simultaneously presumes and obscures. Recently in affect theory—and more pertinently, in work by theorists of affect with overt queer and feminist commitments—ostensibly positive emotions and feelings have been taken up as objects of inquiry, called into question for their construction as objective formations, and critiqued inasmuch as they are informed and conditioned by ideologies of race, class, gender, sexuality, physical ability, and other nodes of identity. This work also reveals how certain emotions are chronologically cued in the popular imagination; happiness ought to correspond to a particular, accomplished stage of one’s life, angst to those turbulent teenage years, an aura of innocent wonder to blithe childhood. Sara Ahmed interrogates the teleological structures and imperatives of happiness and considers the types of subjectivity they foreclose.¹ Lauren Berlant elaborates the “cruel optimism” that binds liberal-capitalist subjects to unfulfillable, even insalubrious, fantasies about the “good life.”² José Esteban Muñoz, drawing on Eve Sedgwick’s conceptualization of reparative reading, conceives “feeling brown, feeling down” as a politicized, productive mode of expression for minoritarian subjects, and he later connects this sense of depressive dislocation to a type of queer utopianism that resists the stultification of the heteronormative present.³ All of these provocations are especially salient when scrutinized alongside the emotional structures that characteristically attend tomboy narratives—ambivalence at best, abhorrence at their most malappropriated.

Tomboy stories almost invariably ‘tame’ their heroines and instantiate ‘happiness’ by pairing them off with male love interests; as such, these stories tend to generate ambivalence—if

¹Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

³ José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position.” *Signs* 31 (2006): 675-88.

not outright distaste—in viewers with queer and feminist investments, for whom such endings are dissatisfying and disappointing rather than happy. In this chapter, I explore how temporality functions in filmic tomboy narrative, its relationship to minoritarian subjects (and relations among those subjects), and its bearing on affective dimensions of spectatorship. While establishing the ways in which tomboy narrative illuminates the perceived connection between tomboyism and lesbianism, I develop and demonstrate what I am calling “infelicitous reading,” a spectatorial praxis that circumvents both repressive narrative strictures and hegemonically dictated emotional teleologies through the close analysis of a set of representative tomboy films and a more comprehensive assessment of that cinematic set since 1980. Readings of the teen comedies *Little Darlings* (Ron Maxwell, 1980) and *Some Kind of Wonderful* (Howard Deutch, 1987) explore the numerous entanglements of gender, sexuality, affect, and temporality; in the former, the working-class tomboy heroine remains “only” a girl (albeit a sadder-and-wiser girl) at the film’s conclusion despite having lost her virginity to the male lead, while in the latter, the working-class tomboy heroine surrenders her roguish charm and avowed contempt of material wealth for a passively feminine posture accessorized by a symbolically rich pair of diamond earrings. Yet the generative contradictions that inhere in the films’ respective structures also belie their loudly normative resolutions in various ways, offering ephemeral but potent (and indeed all the more potent for their brevity) glimpses of possible alternatives that undermine the putatively happy endings they present. By attending not only to the narrative treatment of these and other tomboy characters but also (and especially) to moments of incoherence, deviance, and slippage from the overarching heteronormative storyline, as well as to formal and other non-diegetic elements that permit them, this mode of viewing sanctions a queer affective condition that stands at odds with the supposed happiness of tomboy endings while still repudiating the

obligatory dolors of conventional tragic-lesbian endings and the suffocatingly narrow range of tropes of which mainstream cinema avails deviant female sexuality.

A Matter of Time

—“*It’s just time. Not like it means anything.*” —Watts, *Some Kind of Wonderful*

Little Darlings and *Some Kind of Wonderful* are very much products of the sociocultural and economic climates of their particular historical moments. The 1970s had seen a proliferation of teenagers having sex in films, while nationwide women’s rights movements and the increasing availability of female contraceptives brought female sexuality as a political issue to the attention of the general public at an unprecedented level. Also unprecedented, in a more reactionary way—and not unrelatedly, one suspects—was the number of female characters raped in films.⁴ The 1980s, then, occasioned a cinematic backlash as a side effect of religious, right-wing movements (most prominent among them Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority), and the “primarily ribald and explicit” treatment of teenagers’ sexual exploits shifted in the mid-eighties to “more sensitive and serious representations of teen relationships.”⁵ Virginity-loss comedies gradually came to be replaced by adolescent melodramas that placated economic widespread anxieties with heroic working-class characters who manage to overcome class constraints—or at least to overshadow them through the cover of heterosexual romance. In fact, some of the decade’s most iconic teen films would displace the crass sexual humor that characterized the comedies of the 1970s with solemnly treated class struggles: Adrian Lyne’s *Flashdance* (1983), John Hughes’s *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Pretty in Pink* (1986), and Emile Ardolino’s *Dirty Dancing* (1987), to name only a few. Along similar lines, Chris Jordan purports to examine Hollywood

⁴ For more on these trends, see E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film* (London: Routledge, 1990), and David Considine, *The Cinema of Adolescence* (Jefferson [NC], 1985).

⁵ Timothy Shary, *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 9.

trends that emerged and evolved during and around Ronald Reagan's presidency. While his claim that Reagan's mobilization of a Puritan work ethic catalyzed a pattern of white, working-class protagonists who redeemed that success ethic proves true to an extent (Sylvester Stallone's Rocky Balboa epitomizes such underdog heroism as a "natural aristocrat who achieves class mobility by redeeming the hostile racial other and the inner city from moral depravity"), he neglects to account for the several popular—and exclusively white—tomboy characters (or for any female-centered films at all) that emerged during this era, from television's Buddy Lawrence (Kristy McNichol) of *Family* (1976-80) as well as Cindy Webster (Julie Ann Haddock) and Jo Polniaczek (Nancy McKeon) of *The Facts of Life* (1979-88) to the big screen's Angel Bright (Kristy McNichol, *Little Darlings*), Billie Jean Davy (Helen Slater, *The Legend of Billie Jean*, 1985), and Watts (Mary Stuart Masterson, *Some Kind of Wonderful*).⁶ All of these protagonists are working-class as well but have seldom received critical attention except in a very small and exclusively female circle: they have been effectively excluded from a biased historiographic narrative that privileges working-class masculinity while erasing important female subjects of the same economic background—especially unfeminine ones.

This wholesale exclusion is particularly surprising given the historical abundance and popularity of fictional tomboy characters. Some thirty years before cinema began to develop as a narrative medium, one of the most beloved literary tomboys to date appeared; Jo March of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1869) would heavily influence cultural representations of tomboys from Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* (1932-43) to Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* (1964) to the aforementioned Jo Polniaczek of *The Facts of Life*, as well as critical work on the subject. Taking Jo March as her example, Karin Quimby asserts that the

⁶ Chris Jordan, *Movies and the Reagan Presidency: Success and Ethics* (Westport [CT]: Praeger, 2003), 64.

“tomboy’s plot always threatens to ‘turn queer,’” to “delay, cut off, or reroute the heterosexual end.”⁷ While contemplating a highly sought sequel to the book in a letter to her uncle, Alcott herself bemoaned the fact that “publishers are very *perverse* & won’t let authors have thier [sic] way so my little women must grow up & be married in a very stupid style.”⁸ Hollywood producers have carried this “perwersity” into their medium and expanded it, ensuring that tomboy characters are interpellated into a properly heterosexual trajectory (though its confirmation will suffice now, in the absence of marriage), usually via the acquisition of a boyfriend and/or the ostentatious softening of personality, the application of makeup, and the affectation of stereotypically girlish mannerisms. Quimby asserts that such plots as Jo’s are tremendously popular with readers because they provoke a “temporary imaginative investment in the possibilities of ‘perverse’ identifications and desires, only to contain—or repress—such desires with resolve,” thereby confirming the (presumed) heterosexual orientations of those readers.⁹

But what about the readers and spectators, tomboy, lesbian, or otherwise, whose identities are not confirmed but refuted, compromised, or altogether suppressed? Why and how do they take pleasure in texts that seem so insistent on distancing themselves from them? A fuller elaboration of attendant aspects of both representation and readership must precede further inquiry into these questions. Tomboyism in narrative is a mark of the uncivilized, the crass, and the rural, while femininity is cast as an aristocratic prerogative, at once necessitating and

⁷ Karin Quimby, “The Story of Jo: Literary Tomboys, *Little Women*, and the Sexual-Textual Politics of Narrative Desire” *GLQ* (2003): 3.

⁸ Louisa May Alcott, quoted in Elaine Showalter’s introduction to *Little Women*, (London: Penguin Press, 1989), xix. Cited in Mary Elliott, “When Girls Will Be Boys: ‘Bad’ Endings and Subversive Middles in Nineteenth-Century Tomboy Narratives and Twentieth-Century Lesbian Pulp Novels,” *Legacy* (15.1 1998), 95.

⁹ Quimby, 3.

demonstrating wealth, maturity, and an air of the urbane. The unhappy fates of tomboy characters are inextricably linked to their economic standing, and so, evidently, is the viewer's relation to the tomboy narrative. In the groundbreaking *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1966), Leslie Fiedler suggests that these fates ought not generate surprise in audiences. He describes the tomboy figure as a "rebel against femininity, who, as every genteel reader knows, will be transformed at the moment that she steps out of her overalls into her first party dress and is revealed as worthy of love!"¹⁰ Tongue-in-cheek though his characterization may be, Fiedler's qualification of the savvy reader as "genteel" is at once curious and telling: the adjective, however breezily applied, suggests economic plenitude and privileged class status, and Fiedler's tone in light of the larger and often iconoclastic stakes of his critical work bespeaks the trepidation with which queer readers and viewers may approach the inhospitable texts to which they nonetheless find themselves emotionally attached. Are we to infer, too, that affluent, worldly readers are somehow more in the know than those of lower classes? If so, this insight would stand at odds with many of the characters in tomboy narratives, including the notable and notably jaded, almost precociously streetwise and emphatically working-class tomboys in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974, Jodie Foster as Audrey), *Bad News Bears* (1976, Tatum O'Neal as Amanda Whurlitzer), *Little Darlings* and *Some Kind of Wonderful*, as previously mentioned, *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991, Masterson again, this time as Idgie Threadgoode), *Juno*, and *The Hunger Games* (2012, Jennifer Lawrence as Katniss Everdeen). Perhaps Fiedler simply means to illuminate the irony of such generally astute characters so often meeting fates that register as incoherent, illogical, or excruciatingly idealistic to the viewer even while being constructed as the girls' deeply desired ends. Or perhaps it is more revealing to look to the

¹⁰ Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), 333.

word's behavioral denotation—as they are “courteous, polite, obliging,” it may be that genteel readers not only know in advance how the story will end but also that they are too refined, too well-bred, to raise any objections or to criticize them as incoherent.¹¹ Quimby, following Fiedler, observes that the “demand that the tomboy [in narrative] exchange her overalls for a dress to signal her availability for heterosexual romance is a clear attempt to ‘order’ her ‘precarious’ gender development into an acceptable heterosexual narrative framework.”¹² The working-class connotations within Fiedler's and Quimby's invocations of overalls are particularly salient here, as are the chronological dimensions of the word “order.” A phase of gender “deviance” in girlhood is acceptable so long as it remains just a phase and is channeled, at the proper moment in time, into a larger normative arc. What useful role, then, might *disorder* play vis-à-vis tomboy narratives, in terms of both temporal and affective structures and narrative epistemology more broadly? If “every genteel reader knows” that at the end of *Wonderful*, Watts will become suddenly covetous of a pair of diamond earrings and stroll off into the sunset with her newly minted patriarch of a boyfriend, it seems that there must also be an important way of *not* knowing, or of refusing to know. This chapter, then, aims to develop further a notion that Quimby introduces, namely a queer reading praxis in which resistant readers return “again and again to the far naughtier beginning and middle of the narrative” and defer the tomboy character's marital capitulation.¹³ I append to Quimby's formulation an emphasis on the productive, performative *failures* of such readings.

What if the tomboy never puts on the party dress? Does that seemingly trivial act of sartorial stubbornness finally and irrevocably tip the “precarious” scale of her sexuality towards

¹¹ “Genteel,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed 30 June 2014.

¹² Quimby, “Jo,” 2.

¹³ *ibid.*, 4.

homosexuality? What exactly is the nature of the relationship between tomboyism and lesbianism? The answer, of course, will vary greatly depending upon whom one asks. According to one study, over fifty percent of adult heterosexual women claim to have been tomboys in elementary school,¹⁴ yet critics such as Jack Halberstam and Michele Abate tend to take for granted the tomboy's masculine queerness or her status as a clef for her author's closeted homosexuality; Abate also notes a "matter-of-fact association of tomboyism with lesbianism" in such films as Maria Maggenti's *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995) and Rachel Talalay's *Tank Girl* (1995).¹⁵ While the topic is far too large, complex, and ultimately unanswerable for any single project, an exploration of their affinities in a smaller venue—namely, Hollywood film—reveals useful parallels bounded by common temporal and affective structures. Despite their evident overlap with the genre of lesbian films (to the extent that either might be considered a genre to begin with)—in audience, in character, in sensibility—tomboy films as a whole deal per force with different subject matter than do the former, because as little as Hollywood is willing to countenance lesbianism onscreen, it is even less likely to produce (let alone market successfully) a movie about openly queer children. Instead, tomboy narratives are typically targeted towards teenage audiences—as *movies* rather than films, lighthearted *bildungsromane* that virtually always blossom into heterosexual romances.

Tonal differences notwithstanding, mainstream lesbian films—again, insofar as they comprise a legible cinematic category—maintain as ambivalent a rapport with their primary audiences, popular and intellectual alike, as do tomboy films. From Teresa de Lauretis to Judith

¹⁴ Dianne Elise, "Tomboys and Cowgirls: The Girl's Disidentification from the Mother," in *Sissies and Tomboys: Gender Nonconformity and Homosexual Childhood* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 147.

¹⁵ Michele Abate, *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), xxii.

Mayne to Richard Dyer to college freshmen who may be scrutinizing their own sexual inclinations, viewers of these films consistently express dissatisfaction and perplexity with them. For many, lesbian films are a guilty pleasure—guilty because they often lack aesthetic merit, feature dubious acting and embarrassingly trite screenwriting, and enact any number of maddening clichés—the pathologically infatuated lesbian in *Notes on a Scandal* (Richard Eyre, 2006) and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (Beeban Kidron, 2004); the suicidal lesbian in *Lost and Delirious* (Léa Pool, 2001) and *Chloe* (Atom Egoyan, 2009); the ethically troubling student-teacher same-sex romance that would likely be condemned outright if it involved a man in *Loving Annabelle* (Katherine Brooks, 2006) and *Bloomington* (Fernanda Cardoso, 2010).¹⁶

Ingrained cultural anxieties about girlhood and latent or emergent lesbianism manifest themselves in the chiasmic discrepancies between tomboy characters and lesbian characters. Hollywood’s lesbians look nothing like tomboys, and they are seldom invested in resisting patriarchal and heteronormative discourses, nor in politics on any significant level; examples include the characters played by Denise Richards and Neve Campbell in *Wild Things* (John McNaughton, 1998), Meryl Streep in *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002), Penelope Cruz in *Head in the Clouds* (John Duigan, 2004), Heather Graham in *Gray Matters* (Sue Kramer, 2006), and even those in less mainstream productions such as Michelle Krusiec in *Saving Face* (Alice Wu, 2004), Piper Perabo and Lena Headey in *Imagine Me and You* (Ol Parker, 2005), and Neca Zadegan and Traci Dinwiddie in *Elena Undone* (Nicole Conn, 2010). One conspicuous—and heavily qualified—exception is Patty Jenkins’s *Monster* (2003), in which Charlize Theron and

¹⁶ The lesbian subplot in *Bridget Jones* constituted a pronounced deviation from the novel: the main character’s romantic rival not only announces her lesbianism to Bridget but throws herself at her—an alteration lacking any motivation except, conceivably, to solve what produces may have considered the “dilemma” of plausibility in love interest Mark Darcy’s ultimate choice of overweight, generally flawed Bridget over the supermodellesque Rebecca.

Christina Ricci play lesbians who do not meet traditional standards of female beauty.¹⁷ But this film derives from the true story of Aileen Wuornos, a former prostitute who was convicted of murdering seven men; the unglamorous appearance of the lesbian characters in *Monster* bespeaks their disadvantaged class positions and is acceptable because their story casts them as villains and, unequivocally, not potential models for behavior—their non-heterosexual path implodes without any need for superficial impositions or corrections.¹⁸

So on the one hand, Hollywood figures tomboys as unfeminine females while trumpeting their heterosexuality, and on the other it presents lesbians as uniformly feminine and conventionally beautiful—however, just as I seek not to prescribe ontological criteria for tomboyism, no more is it my goal to suss out what does or does not qualify as a lesbian film. Following Judith Butler’s recommendation to let it remain “permanently unclear what that sign [lesbian] signifies,” numerous feminist and queer scholars have offered methods of critical inquiry into the epistemological and phenomenological aspects of “the” lesbian, lesbianism, and “lesbian” as a modifier rather than a noun that are nuanced and productive without being

¹⁷ Theron gained nearly as much attention for her rapid post-*Monster* weight-loss as she did for the performance itself; curiously, at least part of her motivation to slim down was her subsequent role in *Head in the Clouds* as a bisexual woman in a lesbian relationship, which she quickly ends when a man enters the picture.

¹⁸ Certainly other exceptions exist both within and outside of the United States. Lisa Cholodenko’s *The Kids are All Right* (2010), Cheryl Dunye’s *The Owls* (2010), and Jenji Kohan’s massively popular Netflix original series *Orange is the New Black* (2013-) offer challenging and subversive narratives that openly critique some of the more pernicious film and television tropes that dominate mainstream lesbian media; European cinema has also produced a number of such films, including Marleen Gorris’s *Antonia’s Line* (Netherlands, 1995), Lukas Moodysson’s *Fucking Åmål* (Sweden, 1998), Céline Sciamma’s *Water Lilies* (France, 2007), Zoltan Paul’s *Frauensee* (Germany, 2012), and Abdellatif Kechiche’s *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (France, 2013). However, my optimism about them is tempered by the recognition that such successful and politically meretricious commercial films of the 1980s—for example Robert Towne’s *Personal Best* (1982; on which much more in chapter two) and Donna Deitch’s *Desert Hearts* (1985) seem to have triggered as much if not more backlash as progress.

prescriptive or proscriptive.¹⁹ While acknowledging an incontrovertible importance in the “representational presence” of films that portray openly lesbian characters, Amy Villarejo warns that “to present lesbian as image is to arrest the dynamism such a signifier can trigger.”²⁰ Other critics, such as Chris Holmlund, Terry Castle, and Halberstam, argue in various ways for the fundamental primacy of representation within a milieu that seeks so voraciously to deny female—and especially lesbian—presence.

Unhappy Endings and Infelicitous Readings

—“*Why am I rarely happy with any narrative that represents or suggests the presence of lesbian sexuality?*” —Judith Roof

In a rigorous study of sexuality, narrative, and lesbian representation, Judith Roof outlines the inherently “reproductive” nature of linear plots and the fundamentally conservative thrust of coming-out stories that subscribe to a politics of visibility and unveiling. “Visibility,” she warns, “does not necessarily signal a change in ideology or structure.”²¹ Indeed not, as the lesbian films noted here suffice to demonstrate, but Roof’s notion of visibility seems to posit a unified readership, barren of imagination, which recognizes homosexuality only when it is explicitly announced. Although Roof does incorporate visual media into her analysis (including compelling readings of television’s *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Paul Verhoeven’s 1992 *Basic Instinct*, and Blake Edwards’s 1982 *Victor/Victoria*), she focuses exclusively on their storylines and discounts the myriad ways in which cinematic form may signify in conjunction with a given narrative. Tomboy films afford (or threaten to afford) *glimpses* of lesbianism, fugacious impressions from which a much more potent image can animate itself in the mind of

¹⁹ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (London, Routledge, 1993), 308.

²⁰ Amy Villarejo, *Lesbian Rule* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2003), 14.

²¹ Judith Roof, *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 104.

the spectator than, for example, the one first solidified and subsequently dissolved in *Kissing Jessica Stein*'s title character (Jennifer Westfeldt).²²

Such glimpses are precisely what heteronormative narrative conventions work to obfuscate, and the result is an arduously conflicted viewing experience for queer female audiences; the most notable parallel between lesbian films and tomboy films, then, relates at once to affect and temporality in the turbid emotions their endings generate. Indeed, the apparently obligatory and universal-among-lesbians yet inevitably agonizing experience of viewing the popular canon of lesbian film, such as it is, prompted the popular online news platform BuzzFeed to compile an annotated list entitled “10 Lesbian Movies You Love to ‘Hate Watch’ On Netflix.” Similar publications appear on AfterEllen.com and in the Lesbian Life section of About.com, highlighting both the pleasurable qualities and loathsome aspects (of Sophie Laloy’s 2009 *Je te mangerais*: “Another movie about a dysfunctional and manipulative relationship between women”; of Cassandra Nicolaou’s 2004 *Show Me*: “Show me a lesbian movie that does not associate lesbianism with murder, unhealthy threesomes, cutting, or sibling incest”) of such films and evincing a widespread, simultaneous attachment to and discontent with this cinematic subset. In the United States, lesbian films that “make it” to the mainstream, whether produced by large studios or smaller independent outfits, offer what boils down to two basic endings: (re)integration into the heteronormative social order, or death—usually by either suicide or homicide.

Because they are typically marketed towards younger audiences, tomboy films generally have “happy” endings that offer hope in the form of heterosexual romance—what Lauren Berlant

²² In this 2001 comedy directed by Charles Herman-Wurmfeld, the protagonist’s first same-sex relationship quickly succumbs to a terminal case of lesbian bed-death, after which she moves blithely on to a male love interest, her nice-guy co-worker who has been waiting patiently all along.

might call a “cruel optimism” that, despite its salutary appearances, actually works against the interests of those who seek it.²³ Ultimately, whether tomboy and lesbian films end happily or in tragedy is irrelevant: their conclusions are merely two faces of the same coin that redeems the films into the heteronormative cultural economy. Sara Ahmed investigates the affective dimensions of this cultural economy in *The Promise of Happiness*, interrogating the notion of happiness from a queer, feminist standpoint and challenging its unquestioned primacy as a universally good and desirable goal. Most provocatively, Ahmed points out the tautological structures of happiness and goodness and their deployment as ideological cultural directives: “happiness is imagined as being what follows being a certain kind of being . . . by finding happiness in certain places, [the discourse of happiness] generates those places as being good.”²⁴ Happiness, she writes, is “often described as a path, as being what you get if you follow the right path.”²⁵ That path, as aficionados of tomboy and lesbian narratives know all too well, translates in narrative to precisely the heteronormative trajectory that invariably curtails a resistant heroine’s errant behavior. *Unhappiness* in film, on the other hand, is administered punitively to those who persist in resisting, who have the gall to make their resistance endure beyond the mere “phase” status convention accords it. “Good” behavior (behavior that does not make others unhappy) is seen as both a cause of happiness and an effect of it; being “bad” is “thus to be a killjoy,” which is a critical strategy indeed for cultivating potentialities of alterity, to “open . . . life, to make room for life, to make room for possibility.”²⁶ Ahmed recuperates the epithet “killjoy” for feminists, but here I would extend the notion of being seen as the destroyer of happiness into a different purview—into the realms of film narratology and spectatorship. The

²³ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2011).

²⁴ Ahmed, *Promise*, 26.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 9.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 20.

happy endings of tomboy films (and those lesbian films that end with happily homonormative assimilation) and the morose finales of their lesbian counterparts constitute a point of dissent from which to imagine and articulate possibilities other than the stultifying dichotomy of marriage or death.

If happiness is the promised reward for following the right path, as Ahmed suggests, one might argue that mainstream tomboy and lesbian films are always necessarily *compromised*. Indeed, she goes on to point out that historically, unhappy endings have formed the very grounds of possibility for the public dissemination of queer stories: Gold Medal Books, for example, published lesbian pulp author Vin Packer's first novel, *Spring Fire*, only on the condition that it would "not have a happy ending, as such an ending would 'make homosexuality attractive.'"²⁷ The same conditions applied in Hollywood; in the declining days of the Hays Code, enforcers deemed William Wyler's 1961 adaptation of Lillian Hellman's play *The Children's Hour* acceptable because its depiction of homosexuality was "tasteful"—that is, Shirley MacLaine's character hangs herself upon identifying and admitting to her same-sex desire.²⁸

Ahmed touches on the question of happy endings in narrative but leaves room for it to be answered more fully and through a narrower lens—here, one that views them in the context of queer female representation and spectatorship. Of course, to call an ending "happy" or "sad" or "bad" is to assign it a subjective value; one man's satisfying narrative closure is another lesbian's self-abnegating marriage plot, and an ending that sees a formerly feisty tomboy go figuratively limp in the arms of her newfound white knight is in essence no less disheartening than another lesbian suicide. And still, as evidenced by the viral proliferation of internet articles like

²⁷ *ibid.*, 89.

²⁸ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child: Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 28.

BuzzFeed's and the growing field of scholarly work on lesbian film and lesbianism in film (not to mention the increasing production of and market for such cinema and television), we continue to watch these films.²⁹ José Esteban Muñoz has productively linked related types of magnetic ambivalence and pleasurable melancholy to a distinctively queer mode (or, more accurately, rite) of spectatorship. He opens his essay "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down" with a consideration of performance artist Nao Bustamante's 2003 video installation, *Neapolitan*, a primary component of which is an eleven-minute long videotape loop that shows Bustamante breaking into tears while watching the ending of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío's *Fresa y chocolate*—a 1993 film about, aptly, the unhappy relationship between homosexuality and the Cuban nation-state. Muñoz attributes to the installation a "depression that is not one," a type of "feeling down" specific to minoritarian subjects who for a variety of reasons "don't feel quite right within the protocols of normative affect and comportment."³⁰

The female's physiological multiplicity to which Muñoz obliquely alludes, her "immediate auto-eroticism," as Luce Irigaray has famously written, is "disrupted by a violent break in the brutal separation of the two lips by a violating penis."³¹ In Bustamante's performance, this disruption is enacted precisely by the conventionality of the film's pointedly contrasting endings—the happy heterosexual couple counterposed to the gay character's solitude and exile. Such endings are, as discussed above, not only commonplace but virtually obligatory in lesbian film and tomboy film, promising, as Muñoz writes, only a potential future of "reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality."³² Yet what Bustamante's installation emphasizes is

²⁹ The BuzzFeed piece, for example, has over 300,000 views.

³⁰ Muñoz, "Feeling Brown," 675-6.

³¹ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 24.

³² Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

not the melancholy of the film's ending, nor indeed the irreconcilability of the queer subject to his own society and the nation-state—but the performance of repetition, the looped act of watching and of the viewer experiencing an unabated emotional reaction every single time, an experience very much akin to that of the chronic queer and feminist audiences of tomboy and lesbian films who consistently subject themselves to these films knowing—genteel or not—that the outcome will be depressing, frustrating, insulting, or incoherent. Susie Bright expatiates on this spectatorial predilection in Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's *The Celluloid Closet* (1995):

It's amazing how if you're a gay audience and you're accustomed to crumbs, how you will watch an entire movie just to see somebody wear an outfit that you think means that they are homosexual. The whole movie can be a dud, but you're just sitting there waiting for Joan Crawford to put on her black cowboy shirt again.³³

Repetition, Muñoz writes, is the “most obvious depressive quality” of Bustamante's piece. He sees her project as a “corrective in relation to the homophobic developmental plot.”³⁴ The recurrent narrative patterns in tomboy and lesbian films suggest that the repeated act of spectatorship within a genre—or more accurately a subset of commercial American film—achieves the same effect that *Neapolitan* performs, an emotional reaction both wrenching and pleasurable, maddening and rapturous, and one whose repetitions also create intervals—spaces for interruptions and imagination and resistant readings that proceed from a depressive position.

Judith Butler has famously used the notions of repetition, interruption and failed performance in conceptualizing potential modes of and spaces for gender insubordination, drawing on speech act theory to do so. A highly influential text taken up by such figureheads of postmodern thought as Jacques Derrida and Eve Sedgwick in addition to Butler, J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1975) lays the foundation for speech act theory, one of whose

³³*The Celluloid Closet*, dir. Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman (Columbia TriStar Home Video, 1995).

³⁴ Muñoz, “Feeling Brown,” 684.

chief interventions is the unyoking of certain utterances from truth-value.³⁵ Austin's elaboration of these performative utterances defines them as instances of speech that "do not 'describe' or 'report' or constatae anything at all, are not 'true or false,'" and whose very uttering "is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as saying something."³⁶ Rather, performative utterances achieve an action or condition; they make an apology or extend condolences or establish a contract. A successful performative is "happy" or "felicitous," and one that fails—whether because of incorrect procedures, incompleteness, an absence of proper authority in the would-be executors, or a failure of intent on the part of a participant—Austin deems "infelicitous."

Etymologically speaking, to be felicitous is to be happy, but it also refers—fittingly, in this context—to reproductive capacities: "fruitful, fertile." Moreover, the word's Latin root is "dhe," equivalent to the "fe" of "fecund," "female," and "fetus." Felicity means both "happiness" and "that which causes or promotes happiness."³⁷ This tautology evokes Ahmed's characterization of what she calls the "science of happiness" as both culturally constructed and performative; "by finding happiness in certain places," she observes, "it generates those places as being good, as being what should be promoted *as* goods."³⁸ Austin's terminology invokes "happiness" rather than truth because these utterances are not strictly truth-evaluable. To this point, as Ahmed argues, the relationship between happiness and truth is uneasy at best; that is, what is conceived as happiness and presumed to be coterminous with good may be neither necessarily good nor universally happy-making, and it behooves queers and people of color—

³⁵ See, among her other works, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1989), and *Bodies that Matter* (London, Routledge, 1993).

³⁶ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 5.

³⁷ "Felicity," *OED Online*, accessed 15 July 2013.

³⁸ Ahmed, *Promise*, 6.

and, I submit, tomboys—to harbor healthy suspicions about happiness and its trappings and to conceive of happiness as an ideologically informed and demographically tendentious state of being. It bears noting here, too, that Austin’s most famous example is quintessentially heteronormative: “I do” is a happy performative when all of Austin’s conditions of felicity—those “necessary to the ‘happy’ functioning of the performative”—are fulfilled and the marriage ceremony is executed completely, by the proper authorities, and between marrying parties who do intend to observe their vows. When these conditions of completeness, correctness, and sincerity are not met, the performative utterance is rendered *infelicitous*, as, for instance, would be a lesbian mother’s introduction of her non-biological daughter as her daughter—or any reference to herself as a mother, in absence of the proper paperwork and procedure, an unhappy scenario indeed.

Austin’s word choice draws several fruitful connections among affect, meaning, performativity, and audience, and such readings as those that Quimby and Muñoz begin to explore and enact are examples of what I am calling, after Austin and via Ahmed, “infelicitous reading,” acts of spectatorship that may be left incomplete or invalidated by the course of the narrative over time, or that may reject the authority of some aspect of the text. But the infelicity of these readings does not inhere solely in their failure to be fulfilled by the narrative; such a mode of spectatorship illuminates the extent to which categories of filmic and literary epistemology rely on heteropresumptive affective cues and emotional ideologies. In the dramatic tradition, comedies end with happy resolve—usually marriage or a secular equivalent—whereas tragedies conclude with schism, separation, bereavement. For infelicitous readers, on the other hand, the very development that constitutes comedy’s defining feature, a happy ending enacted through the romantic union of hero and heroine, also constitutes a disappointing,

frustrating, or maddening loss—the negation of lesbian possibility. An infelicitous reading, then, is one that does not proceed according to the logical conventions laid out by the narrative, and nor does it conform to generic expectation. Instead, like Bustamante in *Neapolitan*, it dwells too long on some parts while skipping over others, it fast-forwards to the sex scene or the fleeting glance of forlorn desire, and it and loops them indefinitely. Suspended in time, it is not in fact false, yet neither is it precisely fulfilled or made “happy” by the narrative’s ending. Nor is an infelicitous reading properly a deferral, because rather than simply postponing the imminent conclusion, it envisions the possibility of a different outcome altogether.

What is one to do with infelicitous readings? Whimsical though they might sound, such readings are the same ones that queer females must make on a regular basis in the process of courtship: to willfully discount another woman’s previous (and in some cases current) heterosexual narrative and prompt the latter to countenance other potential interpretations of her trajectory. While this resistant hermeneutic strategy opens itself to accusations of *bad* reading, of arbitrariness, of disrespect for the integrity of the text, and to invalidation for all of those putative ills, it is a mode befitting of subjectivities that have been chronically oppressed, repressed, and suppressed in art, literature, and history, around whose proclivities and misbehaviors lacunae stretch, rebellions falter, and desires are distorted. It is an importantly different kind of wishful preservation from what occurs in moviegoers who might purchase and repurchase tickets to James Cameron’s blockbuster *Titanic* (1997) to watch the epic, romantic sinking scenes again and again. At the end, after all, Jack is still Jack even though he is on the ocean floor—in fact, he has become a subaquatic monument to his already idealized sprit of heterosexual romance and self-sacrifice. Rather, infelicitous readings keep alive the characters before they meet their intractably heteronormative fates; they inscribe and animate them with

subversive desires when, for example, a character's attitude, dress, behavior, affect, and attendant formal cues would seem to proclaim her homosexuality even as she declares her love to a man—or in the case of openly lesbian characters, when a text performs a particularly pernicious cliché that rings hollow to the viewer (or worse, one that resounds in its too-familiar implausibility).

I do not wish to suggest, as some scholars have, that lesbian films should not have “happy” endings, nor that lesbian films that do end well for their characters and queer audiences are somehow disqualified from being “truly” lesbian.³⁹ On the contrary, I believe very strongly in the importance of representing livable, even enjoyable situations, so long as those representations do not occasion the repression, erasure, or betrayal of other types of queer lives that less frequently find expression in mainstream media. Neither Ahmed nor I are intending to proscribe happiness in queer subjects or to cast melancholy as some kind of ethical imperative. Ahmed draws a crucial distinction between being “happily queer” and being a “happy queer” by way of emphasizing this point:

The queer who is happily queer still encounters the world that is unhappy with queer love, but refuses to be made unhappy by that encounter . . . the risk of promoting happy queers is that the unhappiness of this world can disappear from view. To be happily queer can also recognize that unhappiness; indeed to be happily queer can be to recognize the unhappiness that is concealed by the promotion of happy normativity.⁴⁰

How does being happily queer translate to the performance of unhappy readings? What might an infelicitous reading look like? It is a version, perhaps, of what Ahmed calls for as a necessary part of the queer struggle and for negotiating between a bearable life and the/a good

³⁹ See Rachel DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1985; Judith Roof, *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1996; Renée C. Hoogland, *Lesbian Configurations* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1997.

⁴⁰ Ahmed, *Promise*, 117.

life, a struggle for queers to have “space to breathe . . . with [which] breath comes imagination.”⁴¹ However, I would argue that it is rather imagination that begets the space to breathe, and that in imaginatively resisting narrative strictures one also gains traction against the oppressive norms that enforce those strictures and other phobic conventions; infelicitous reading anticipates the tomboy’s inevitable doom but reads through, around, or up to the text’s heteronormative fulcrum. In the sections that follow, I attempt to demonstrate through two filmic tomboy narratives what such readings might look like and how they can offer more than disappointment and frustration to viewers with queer and feminist orientations.

Little Darlings: The Future Isn’t “Bright”

Quimby attributes a tendency to “read with a trepidation” to those resigned yet hopeful viewers; this trepidation and the paranoid mindset to which it corresponds constitute key components of infelicitous reading, and the negative affects evoked therein echo resoundingly in *Little Darlings*, a tomboy film structured primarily by feelings such as anxiety, resentment, and disillusion.⁴² *Little Darlings* hit theatres in 1980, at the height of Hollywood’s wave of teen-sex comedies; its foregrounding of female characters makes it not only a generic outlier but also a prominent constituent of the relatively miniscule canon of female buddy films. As in *Some Kind of Wonderful*, the central conflict in *Darlings* arises from class difference, but unlike the Hughes-Deutch collaboration, in this film economic boundaries operate tacitly and therefore all the more insidiously. Enemies from the start, rich-girl Ferris Whitney (Tatum O’Neal) and tough-kid Angel Bright (Kristy McNichol) initially appear to be opposites in every way. Ferris has a doting daddy, absent (and promiscuous, we later learn) mother, sophisticated feminine wiles, and the contented assurance that the world will do her no wrong. On the other hand, Angel (“Don’t

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 120.

⁴² Quimby, “Jo,” 11.

let the name fool you,” she twice tells the boy she wishes to seduce) smokes cigarettes, is possessed of little but a mother with a nonchalant attitude towards sex and parenting, and has become accustomed to casual harassment from males, and knows how to deal with it—most often, that is, with a swift kick to the crotch or its verbal equivalent, as she demonstrates in the film’s opening scene when she fells an idle male catcaller. In constructing Ferris and Angel as polar opposites, the film allies feminine girlhood with affluence and snobbish sophistication, and tomboyism with poverty and petulance. Socioeconomic and attitudinal differences aside, the girls share two key traits: general isolation from their peers, and an undesirable status precipitated by their respective refusals or inability to conform to the standards of adolescent girlhood. As has been the case in American narrative dating back to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), femininity is cast as the prerogative (and duty) of the wealthy while female boyishness connotes shortcomings in finances and family life.⁴³

Egged on by the other campers and precocious ringleader/aspiring actress Cinder (Krista Erickson), Ferris and Angel initiate a contest to see which one of them can first have sex with a male; their cabinmates place hundred-dollar wagers on the outcome. Ferris targets the camp’s handsome, charismatic swim coach, Gary (Armand Assante), with whom she fancies she will drink wine, speak French, and make idyllic love. Constantly fawned over by the camp girls, the dreamy Gary would certainly be a lofty conquest, and his universal anointment bespeaks Ferris’s simultaneous unquestioned sense of entitlement and her sexual naïveté. Angel, by contrast, sets her sights on a more realistic—and therein less ideal—partner: Randy (Matt Dillon), the grungy, dirt-bike riding flirt from across the lake who lives up to his name. Ferris tries to draw on her urbane upbringing as a means to obscure the age difference between herself and the would-be

⁴³ Femininity is also, as Abate argues, chiefly the prerogative of white girls. For an expansive discussion about tomboyism as a racialized construct, see *Tomboys*.

object of her adolescent affections, spouting lovelorn lines of Shakespeare and critiquing Gary's choice of vintage, whereas the latter pairing appears to be more a function of socioeconomic class than any genuinely romantic affection or attraction. After all, Randy reminds Angel several times that she is interchangeable, that there are "plenty of women around here." Angel finds herself disillusioned and disappointed with her own naive idealism, her chosen partner, and the sexual experience itself. Further, sex has only heightened her sense of isolation, rather than bringing her closer to quintessential heterosexual bliss: "I feel so lonesome," she comments wistfully to Randy, moments after they have consummated their accelerated relationship.

Ferris, too, feels the sting of romantic disappointment, but hers results more from rejection than from Angel's dejection. Her desire for Gary manages to survive his gentle refusal of her advances, kept afloat by a series of less than dissuasive remarks to her: "I think I'd fall madly in love with you," he responds sweetly to Ferris's "If I were 21 . . . ?" hypothetical. Whereas Angel's experience crumbles the ideal of sex for her, Ferris maintains that ideal safely in the knowledge that her life will lead her through a natural progression to sex and to happiness, and with her last words to Gary, she tells him to "wait till I'm 21, just wait."

It is curious, then, that the film makes a point at the end to distinguish the apparent maturity levels of the fifteen-year-olds, with Gary telling Ferris as she leaves camp that she is "quite a woman" and Angel's mom greeting her daughter with an affectionate but diminishing "How's my girl?". Why, if losing one's virginity is to be considered (by this film and by society more generally) initiation in to womanhood, does Ferris assume that title while the "fallen" Angel does not? Angel even appears to parent her own mother in the final scenes, in spite of her imputed girlhood: "I think you better straighten your act out. What's all this crap about sex being nothing . . . I'm gonna keep my eye on you." Her

mother's implied promiscuity renders the elder Bright immature as well, an inadequate parent from whose absence her daughter has benefited. Yet the tomboy, who has been sexually initiated and undergoes tremendous emotional development over the course of the film, remains a child in its eyes—even while the ever-ingenuous daddy's-girl Ferris ascends to adult status. This contradictory logic seems tied to the film's opening scene, in which a cigarette-smoking Angel trudges through a run-down neighborhood, stopping briefly to fend off a young man's uncouth advances with an unhesitating kick to the crotch. She resists patriarchy physically and attitudinally, and does so from a working-class situation. The adult world would only recognize her as a woman if her narrative conformed to the typical tomboy trajectory, entailing her domestication and submission to male dominance. Because she is still unfeminine, she must remain a child in society's eyes, clinging obstinately to behavior that is supposed to disappear with time.

Even the non-narrative image the film's movie poster presents effectively conveys the girls' individual dispositions, depicting Angel and Ferris leaning back-to-back, so close together that they appear conjoined, wearing identical attire that belies the distinctions the poster draws. Ferris is afforded more space, perhaps because Tatum O'Neal would have been a



Figure 1.1: *Little Darlings* film poster, 1980

bigger box office draw at the time, or perhaps in accordance with her character's generally privileged position. Angel glances backwards and affectionately towards Ferris, who looks directly into the camera as though fully and smugly aware of her top billing. The latter's arm is raised, highlighting her breasts, while opposite her Angel's arm conceals the tomboy's chest; this conspicuous positioning supports the film's ultimate insinuation that despite the asymmetry of their experiences, Ferris already possesses among her other, material riches a capacity for womanhood that Angel lacks.

Indeed, questions of media, womanhood, and teen sexuality had risen to the forefront of the public conscience at the time of the film's release. As Kristen Hatch notes, the production and distribution of *Little Darlings* coincide with a broad shift in American culture: the exchange of sixties and seventies sexual liberation ideology (however racially and heteronormatively constrained), civil and women's rights movements, and the popular acknowledgement—embrace, even—of adolescent sexual activity in film and real life for the much more reactionary, abstinence-heavy attitudes, politics, and programs of the Reagan-Bush era.⁴⁴ If in the 1970s onscreen depictions of teens, girls especially, grew markedly more sexualized than they had ever been previously, then *Darlings* stands as a conservative, cautionary tale advising the same demographic to leave sex for adulthood.⁴⁵

On one hand, *Little Darlings* breaks down romantic ideals about sexual intercourse—a salutary and demystifying move enacted through a rare female agent who initiates a sexual encounter. On the other, it presents no libidinal alternative for the character whom it has

⁴⁴ Kristen Hatch, "Little Butches: Tomboys in Hollywood Film" in *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations in Girls' Media Culture* (Peter Lang, 2011), 82.

⁴⁵ A 1980 article in *People* magazine demonstrates considerable anxiety over the "onscreen chastity crises" faced by McNichol as well as O'Neal and Jodie Foster in other films, expressing concern that such actresses might have "succumbed to some of the lures of [their] age and stardom. See Karen Jackovich, "Tatum and Kristy Come of Age," *People*, March 31, 1980.

disabused of any romantic illusions, only a deferral of what was for her a wholly abject experience. It offers nuanced, assertive female protagonists and respects their emotions as well as their choices, but it also portrays those as the only acceptable emotions and choices—Cinder, the lone non-virgin camper, is an unredeemable bitch, callous, manipulative, and hypersexualized from beginning to end. Nowhere on the camp's horizon can a positive depiction of sex be found, especially not among its females. Randy is a womanizer, ready to take up with Cinder the moment Angel breaks off their relationship. Ferris expresses resentment towards her invisible mother, who has fled the constraints of marriage and family. The film concludes with Angel lecturing her own mother to take sex more seriously. On the opposite end of the spectrum from the debauched, fallen-woman model, it presents the camp mother as a cliché nun-spinster type, puritanical, repressed, and choleric at every turn: clearly there exists a very small range of sexual behaviors that yield happiness for females, despite their evident determination to find it through exclusively heteronormative venues.

Yet for all the plot's sobriety and evident anti-sex posture, the eroticized marketing of *Little Darlings* itself constitutes an infelicitous performance, one that may actually open the door for a productively infelicitous reading—infelicitous not only in an emotional sense but because the weight of its possibility upends the narrative's moralistic leanings. Branding it as a raunchy, girls-gone-wild variety of sex comedy, the film's tongue-in-cheek title promises the viewer a lurid revelation about not-so-innocent girlhood and sexuality, as does the tagline "Don't let the title fool you" and the title's Spanish rendering as *Faldas revoltosas*, for instance, which translates roughly to "Naughty Skirts." Commercial innuendo notwithstanding, the film's tone is generally much more tasteful than its marketing would suggest: the sex scenes, both would-be and actualized, are treated sensitively, as are the various reconciliations between friends and

rivals. As it happens, the most lurid (if only implicitly so) scenes are two emotionally intense moments between Angel and Ferris, both of which strike a markedly campier—and, frankly, more (homo)erotic—note than any of the openly romantic scenes, opening up channels for those same queer flickers that the storyline seeks to extinguish throughout.

It is easy enough to perform a lesbian reading of this film through these scenes, but to what end, if not a typically frustrating finale? If there is a lesbian subtext, it accomplishes little more than to explain the fizzle of Angel's sexual encounter with Randy. Much more interesting, however, are two related considerations: first, how that subtext is relayed stylistically, and second, the association between other, purportedly non-sexual aspects of the girls' identities and their bearing on the reception/perception of the girls' sexuality. Marilyn Farwell writes on the vexed topic of lesbian subjectivity in narrative:

The lesbian subject appears to be a narrative impossibility; 'she' is the most silenced and the most threatening figure for narrative representation because 'she' exceeds the constructed boundaries for woman's otherness. The narrative, then, works to prevent and exclude primary female bonding. But instead of proving the lesbian subject's non-narratability, this exclusion . . . demands that we analyze instead its unique relationship to the narrative system.⁴⁶

Lisa Dresner describes the specter of lesbianism in *Little Darlings* as “the club used to bully Angel and Ferris” into their virginity-loss contest.⁴⁷ The wielder of that club, precocious, vampy Cinder, suggests smugly that the girls' virginity owes to the fact that they are both “probably lezzies”—an allegation forceful enough to make Ferris throw Angel under the proverbial bus (“Maybe *she* is, but *I*'m straight”) and to incite Angel to physically attack Cinder. The latter has, in effect, sped up the clock of normative sexuality, exemplifying the insidious

⁴⁶ Marilyn Farwell, *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 16.

⁴⁷ Lisa Dresner, “Love's Labor's Lost? Early 1980s Representations of Girls' Sexual Decision Making in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Little Darlings*” in *Virgin Territory: Representing Sexual Inexperience in Film* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 179.

workings of heteronormativity: the specter of lesbianism may quickly settle on a female who is not at the moment engaging in any kind of (hetero)sexual activity; the contest and the film itself, therefore, become not about desirability or exploration or coming-of-age, but about the characters establishing their own heterosexuality to an ever-dubious public.



Figure 1.2: A nearly indistinguishable Angel (left) and Randy (right)

Cinder's allegations of lesbianism are forgotten as soon as the contest begins, though given Angel's evident disappointment in her tryst with Randy, one might reasonably expect her to wonder about the possibility of their veracity. The device of suggesting lesbianism only to refute it works here (and later again in *Some Kind of Wonderful*) to reassure viewers of the film's straight bent, so to speak, and to preclude homosubversive readings by acknowledging, if only superficially, the existence of alternative sexualities. Nevertheless, the point of this reading is not merely to argue that Angel and/or Ferris may be lesbians. Rather, I contend that the film posits a mode of female agency that is queer in its final refusal of the mythical ideals of normative heterosexuality and that comes with the price of unrecognizability as an adult female (a recognition that, even if accorded, would amount to "a gift given from the straight world to

queers, which conceals queer labor and struggle”) as well as unhappiness; the tomboy rejects—at least for the moment—the trajectory that her peers, themselves guided by the larger social milieu, have dictated for her, and the viewer’s attention is directed to that mode by a series of distinctly homoerotic cues.⁴⁸

Indeed, homoerotic elements shine through even in Randy and Angel’s ostentatiously heterosexual relationship, cuing the viewer to hone in on other queer twinklings throughout the film. Randy looks remarkably like Angel, sharing her haircut, aloof manner, and much of her (tom)boyish wardrobe. He addresses her frequently as “man” and confides that what he likes best about her is the fact that he “can talk to [her] like a guy but [she’s] a girl.” Presumably, we are to infer that Randy means he relishes the singular liberty he feels in discussing stereotypical “guy” things with Angel—sports, cars, sex, and all those masculine indelicacies that he would hesitate to bring up in girlier company. His subsequent gravitation towards the consummately feminine Cinder as the next phase in his own maturation cements Angel’s characterization as terminally immature for not having yet given up her youthfully boyish predilections, but it also serves to mobilize the queer undercurrent in the narrative that tugs at certain scenes over the course of the film.

Although their pursuit outwardly forms the core of the film’s storyline, the exchanges between Angel and Randy and Ferris and Gary take a backseat to the girls’ interactions; *Little Darlings*’s marketing as a teen sex comedy results in a relatively rare exploration of girlhood homosociality. The film displays little concern for Randy and Gary’s characters, both of whom merely fulfill narrative functions, and the more fully developed story centers on the ways teenaged girls negotiate relations with one another. Indeed, it is contingent upon the summer

⁴⁸ Ahmed, *Promise*, 106.

camp setting, which forces the would-be pariah tomboy (who in a school setting could easily avoid other girls) into group interactions and activities. As a consequence of the inadvertent novelty of the narrative situation, the tension between the opposites-who-attract—one the epitome of stereotypical feminine girlhood, the other boyish enough to be one of Randy’s male friends—becomes erotically fraught and their bickering flirtatious rather than catty. This charged dynamic produces a sweetly coy tone in scenes between Angel and Ferris that escapes the heteronormative plot’s control, flying in the face of the slow-paced solemnity of the film’s one-on-one heterosexual interactions. As Roger Ebert has noted, in spite of its many indelicate moments and raunchy advertising campaign, *Darlings*’s potentially lewd sexual scenes “are handled so thoughtfully and tastefully that they almost seem to belong to another movie,” and the film “somehow does succeed in treating the awesome and scary topic of sexual initiation with some of the dignity it deserves.”⁴⁹

Ebert is right to point out the tonal discontinuity between the scenes of intimacy and those of adolescent carousal; the film’s heterosexual moments are consistently accorded more dignity than its homosocial—and especially its homoerotic—scenes. A food fight between Angel and Ferris, for example, marks the initial relaxation of the girls’ rivalry into friendship, and it has the feel of a tawdry porn setup and comprises a thoroughly unserious moment “serious.” This cafeteria battle is the film’s most delectable scene and also the one in which Bedrich Batka’s cinematography announces itself most loudly. Significantly, it occurs directly after the girls have stolen an entire condom machine from a men’s restroom for Ferris and Angel’s protection: preparation and imminent release. In the dining hall, Angel leans purposefully across Ferris’s chest to grope for the salt, spilling some on her nonplussed rival in

⁴⁹ Roger Ebert, rev. of *Little Darlings*, 1980.

the process. Ferris then reaches past Angel, knocking a drink into her lap; the camera cuts to a close-up of Angel's milk-soaked crotch as one of the girls lets slip what can only be described as a moan. After a smirking Ferris pats Angel's chest dry, the spat degenerates into a full-on food fight, replete with pancakes, syrup, butter, juice, and a final topping of whipped cream. The girls' ill-concealed smiles throughout are a rare sight in the film; leering, smirking, glaring, or crying comprise the predominant range of expressions.

The eventual transformation of the girls' rivalry into friendship, catalyzed by the food fight and its tonal disjuncture, is occasioned by the respective minor traumas they undergo: Ferris is rejected and humiliated by her would-be lover but has the promise of the future to sustain her, while Angel feels only disappointment and disillusionment—and it is Angel with whom chronic viewers of lesbian and tomboy films are likely to empathize, well-acquainted as they are with such sensations as spectators. The exceptional feeling of exuberance in the food fight scene, therefore, is all the more persuasive: it is a moment of girls being happily queer that carries out one of the potential coups of an infelicitous reading, that “might not make the alternative possible, but . . . aims to make impossible the belief that there is no alternative.”⁵⁰

Although the film does not finally pair Angel happily off with a male love interest, the alternative it would seem to pose to heterosexuality is neither queerness nor sexual experimentation but sexual hiatus, temporary delay without deviation. But at the same time, the decidedly melancholic heft of Angel's ending accentuates by contrast the vivacious homoeroticism of the food fight and other charged moments throughout the film, such as Cinder's still unrefuted imputation of lesbianism. To view *Little Darlings* infelicitously, then, is to view it through the disappointment and dissatisfaction of an ending that stands in such stark

⁵⁰ Ahmed, *Promise*, 163

contrast to the homosocial and homoerotic scenes it ostensibly seeks to leave behind as Angel begins to develop into a woman who can perform the appropriate heterosexual happiness that her experience with Randy has failed to engender.

... ***Kind of Wonderful: Love and Abjection***

Riding the wave of John Hughes's massively successful chain of films that play heavily on conventional Hollywood-high school typology, such as *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), and *Pretty in Pink* (1986), *Some Kind of Wonderful* preoccupies itself much less with female homosociality than *Little Darlings* does and more with each character's superation of his or her assigned type. Yet as it does in *Darlings*, the rigidly heteronormative ending buckles against the pull of the infrequent but powerfully suggestive moments between women that the film presents. In typical John Hughes fashion, *Wonderful* deconstructs some high school stereotypes, reinforces others, and builds romantic bridges across class lines. Dubbed by reviewers an "assembly-line feature" filled with "stock characters" and reduced to "*Pretty in Pink* for the opposite sex," the Hughes-Howard Deutch collaboration met with substantially less success than its much beloved predecessors,⁵¹ earning only eighteen million dollars—a paltry sum compared to *Club*'s 38 million dollar box office gross and *Pink*'s forty million, yet Mary Stuart Masterson's performance as the tomboy Watts has earned it an unofficially preeminent position of esteem in the eyes of tomboy, former tomboy, and lesbian viewers. Its plot trajectory, admittedly, does closely resemble that of *Pink*: where in the latter a working-class girl finds herself torn between the suits of a preppy snob and an eccentric class equal, *Wonderful* depicts a working-class boy who wins the attentions of Amanda Jones (Lea

⁵¹ Respectively, Pat Graham, rev. of *Some Kind of Wonderful*, *Chicago Reader*, 1987; Richard Harrington, rev. of *Some Kind of Wonderful*, *Washington Post*, 1987; Rita Kempley, rev. of *Some Kind of Wonderful*, *Washington Post*, 1987.

Thompson), a conventional popular beauty, and Watts, his longtime friend and co-outcast. However, possibly in an effort to maintain the male protagonist's agency and prevent his reduction to a sex object, *Wonderful* adds a second love triangle, pitting underdog Keith against Amanda's philandering rich-boy ex, who wants her back at all costs. The film's gender politics are far too complex to call it the "for the opposite sex" version of anything, whatever plot structures and white-washed class motifs it has in common with Hughes and Deutch's other work and despite its too-perfectly romantic ending. Indeed, *Wonderful*'s queer possibility stems from the normativity of that ending; the infelicitous sustenance the film offers entails the repudiation of a final plot twist that effectively voids precisely the pleasurable attitude, dress, behavior, affect, and attendant formal cues of its tomboy character; a film dominated by negative emotions—envy, resentment, contempt, despair—its last twist to set all right with a happy ending opens a space for alternative, unhappy readings.

The film's opening shots of our working-class hero, Keith (Eric Stoltz), introduce his character on both socioeconomic and personal levels. Walking home across the railroad tracks, he strides defiantly towards an oncoming train, which blares its horn until he finally steps aside at the last minute with a smirk. Intermittently, we cut to Watts drumming away, her choice of instrument representative of her role and her dilemma within the film: the heart and soul of the proverbial band, yet always in the background overshadowed by its flashier members. Watts is Keith's best and only friend (Keith, incidentally, is a singer), and the film quickly establishes her aggrievement at Keith's sudden and superficial desire for Amanda, whom Watts describes as "guilt[y] by association" of "spit[ting] on everyone." In keeping with much of the Hughes/Deutch *oeuvre*, *Wonderful*'s main political interest lies with issues of socioeconomic disparity, particularly within younger generations. However, the film's divergent depictions of

female characters ultimately manufacture those concerns as the purview of patriarchy, a battle for white men to fight. Where Keith's father persistently encourages his son to attend college (an insistence that becomes one of the film's central conflicts), his mother does little more than set dinner on the table. Keith's snooping teenaged sister Laura (Maddie Corman) latches onto the coattails of her brother's social "success" when she is not telling her younger, adage-spouting sister to shut up. The Nelson family dynamic is one of rivalry, disconnect, and volatile temporary alliances—but it is notably the only family portrayed in the film: we get no backstory on either Watts's or Amanda's family, except that Amanda's social ambitions exceed her family's middle-class means, while Watts's relations are markedly and perpetually absent. "I don't like to eat alone," she retorts when Keith asks why she never dines at home.

By furnishing Keith with a nuclear family to be redeemed, the film makes him the only character who *can* be heroic, consigning his female peers to roles as mere accessories to his romantic heroism. The film is littered with petty antagonists whose *raison d'être*, at least in Keith's eyes, is to make his life difficult for no reason; among these are his father (John Ashton), fellow outcast Duncan (Elias Koteas), Amanda's spoiled boyfriend, Hardy (Craig Sheffer), her snooty friend Shayne (Molly Hagan), and the school's detention monitors. Amanda, too, faces teenage travails—usually brought on by her own misbehavior—yet where Keith's troubles (and solutions) are always class-related, Amanda's negative interactions instead register as gender-inflected exchanges; the film casts gender issues as the primary domain of females. More specifically, they are exchanges that favorably underline Amanda's femininity: first, one of the most tired of the film's stock characters, a cantankerous female gym teacher (Lee Garlington as an Ahmedian killjoy replete with wind pants, polo shirt, and whistle) sentences Amanda to

morning detention for absconding from class with Hardy, and second, the hapless, balding detention monitor who proves utterly unable to resist her flirtatious pleas for clemency.

Whereas Amanda is constantly accompanied by friends and admirers, the film isolates Watts from everyone but Keith and the amorous skateboarder, Ray (Scott Coffey), whom she enlists briefly in a failed effort to provoke Keith's jealousy. Watts is greeted with enmity and antagonism from virtually every character except said skateboarder (though his overtures are hardly more sympathetic than Shayne's overt hostility), who works tirelessly to seduce her with a repertoire of charming lines: "A lot of guys I know think that you're . . . confused. But I know it's just an act . . . because you radiate this sexual vibe and I know that if you wanted, you could be a girl like *that*," indicating with a snap of his fingers the mere instant it would take for her to be revealed with his assistance, harking back to Fiedler's words, as worthy of love.

For all of Watts's determined nonconformity, it is Amanda to whom the film awards a chance to liberate herself from the status quo as male underdog's prize and, more largely, from the inevitable heterosexual pairing-off of a popular, pretty girl. At the film's end, Amanda finally and gently rebuffs Keith, returning the diamond earrings and telling him that "It's gonna feel good to stand on [her] own." Seemingly unfazed, Keith chases down Watts and affixes the earrings on her, a gesture more acquisitive than it is generous or affectionate. At the same moment that it gives Watts the man she wants, the film imbricates her in a logic of patriarchy and stereotypically "feminine" materialism that perjures her character, and she confesses now to having wanted all along the earrings Keith has bought for Amanda with his intended college money. "You look good wearing my future," he tells her, inconsistency with the independence from his father's desires that he has just fought so doggedly to secure notwithstanding, evidently

preferring a woman whom he can bend to his whim and who has proven her willingness to suffer for him: a sound investment indeed.

It is Keith's future indeed that Watts now wears, as the diamond studs have been marked as a signifier of the affluent lifestyle he so covets; additionally, in professing that she wanted them all along, Watts stages a dramatic departure from her own character, who has shunned such ostentatious accoutrements and the class elitism to which it corresponds throughout the film. The economics of happiness in *Wonderful* might most aptly be described as trickle-down: bourgeois Amanda's liberation is bought at Watts's expense, first in her conscription as the would-be couple's chauffeur, and again at the end as the narrative writes her into a life of petty materialism and heteronormative economic reliance upon her new boyfriend. Where Amanda emerges empowered, wiser, and freed from the culturally-enforced paradigm heterosexual coupling, Watts takes her newly vacant place as a social climber, materialistic and financially dependent on her man—a man who has to this point discounted her opinion, ignored her declarations of love for him, and exploitatively enlisted her services in romancing another woman. This transformation marks a definitive end to her tomboyish independence and, more subtly, an implication that the adult tomboy cannot exist, at least not as a legible, heterosexual, agential being. Rather, her tomboyism must *expire* in order for her to be recognized and taken seriously. For Watts, gratification comes after—after repeated humiliations at school, multiple painful and ignored avowals of her love for Keith, sweet but masochistic constriction into chauffeurship for Keith and Amanda's date, she finally gets the guy she wants, and only then at the cost of her principles—her obstinate independence, her self-possession, and her disdain of society's materialistic tendencies: everything that qualifies her as a tomboy except her boyish hairstyle, though now even its short, rough cut serves to highlight her new earrings.

In countermand to the precarious, finite temporality of tomboys such as Watts who might turn into lesbians or be perceived as protolesbians, there exists a preemptive move, an insidious narrative tactic to counter lesbian possibility and to squelch potential lesbian readings of tomboy films as or before they germinate. Duncan, Keith's leather-clad ally, speculates freely about Watts's sexuality, commenting that she has "a little bit too much up front to be a guy, so [she] must be a lesbian." As in *Little Darlings*, *Wonderful* paradoxically attempts to put to rest anxieties (or hopes) about Watts's characteristically lesbian traits through the very act of giving voice to the possibility of her homosexuality. This suggestive interpretation is not necessarily to claim Watts as a lesbian, though it does underline that possibility, but to work through the homoerotic moments that the film so posits so strikingly and the homophobic ones with which it instantly rebuts them. Watts's sexual autonomy as well as her general agency are repeatedly undermined within and outside of the film, which insistently deprives her of the traits so integral to her tomboyism. Duncan, unable to reconcile her assertive demeanor with her biological sex, brands her a lesbian. Ray claims she is "confused," Keith turns a blind eye and deaf ear to her demonstrations of love for him—most painfully obvious during their "practice" kissing session—and critic Susannah Gora describes her as "unwittingly sexy."⁵² Yet for all its punkish, thrift-store style, Watts's look appears carefully calculated to suit her personality and, in fact, no less high maintenance than that of Amanda Jones; the tomboy dyes her hair, wears an array of earrings and bracelets, and rolls her pant legs crisply. Her self-presentation is no accident, but it cannot be ascribed aesthetic value by a society that exclusively privileges feminine stylings for women.

⁵² Gora, *You Couldn't*, 205.

Masterson herself has expressed doubts about what she experiences as a sort of narrative violence against her character in the sudden and unconvincing nature of Watts's transition from boys' underpants to diamond studs, revealing in a 2012 interview that "All anyone says to [her] a quarter of a century later is 'I love that part where you get the earrings!'" Evidently audiences at large find Watts's abrupt transformation gratifying, but the actress opines that this ending is "so weird. That materialistic aspect is not who Watts is." Indeed, the film's closing scene is a more normative iteration of the final scene in Hughes's earlier hit *The Breakfast Club*, in which Molly Ringwald's popular princess character gives misfit John Bender (Judd Nelson) one of her expensive diamond earrings. The dissonant responses this interview elucidates demonstrate the arbitrary nature of an ending's supposed felicity: to Masterson, Watts's capitulation renders the conclusion incoherent; to others it constitutes an endearing gesture that engenders her happy ending.

While the latter group, Fiedler's genteel readers, perhaps, may expect and appreciate the bedizened finales of Watts and her tomboy kin, those omitted from the category—the unworldly, discourteous, ingenuous, or unladylike—must contend with the jolt of the putatively *unexpected* narrative turn. Yet Quimby, acknowledging the difficulty of articulating the "insistent readerly responses" that reject heteronormative endings such as Jo March's "in favor of the far more queer middle," suggests that girlhood readers along with adult lesbian and queer critics read with a sense of anxiety colored by irony, "for the dread that lesbian or queer readers experience is that the tomboy will not fulfill their *queer* narrative expectations."⁵³ I am not sure that Quimby gives such readers enough credit. Like their fictional counterparts, they are jaded, familiar and exasperated with the normative tropes that impel Watts and Angel to defend themselves against

⁵³ Quimby, "Jo," 4.

accusations of lesbianism (though, notably, neither one explicitly denies the attributions each of their antagonists levy) and those that send them home with boys—or at least loudly orient them in that direction—at the movies’ end. The irony lies not in the frustration of naïvely hopeful queer expectations, but in queer feminist readers and viewers maintaining deep affective attachments to such texts despite knowing full well their protagonists’ extremely limited range of possible fates. Lack of gentility notwithstanding, such a reader has known from the beginning that Watts will not profess her love for Amanda and depart with her for a friendlier locale and better company than the dueling phalluses that teem through the high school’s halls.

This epistemological incongruity suggests multiple ways of knowing a text, or knowing about it. With regard to happy endings, there is a reassured type of knowledge that corresponds to reading with the grain, having faith—indeed never questioning—that Watts’s fate is for the best and that she is on a direct path to happiness with Keith. But to the eye that allows for—that looks for—desires beyond heterosexuality, and to the viewer who shares Masterson’s perplexity at the film’s conclusion, Watts’s professions of love for Keith in the ending and in earlier scenes appear unconvincing at best. And it is precisely this eye to which *Wonderful* addresses its most provocative statements—first through Keith’s gazes at Amanda, intent to the point of discomfort, and later through Watts’s point of view, which offers an alternative reading of the film’s romantic triangulations. Even though it strives to quash the possibility of lesbianism through exchanges with Ray and Duncan, the film’s formal elements throughout supply a number of visual and aural cues keep it alive, if unspoken.

Beyond Watts’s distinctive self-presentation and the specter of lesbianism that materializes through it, *Wonderful* is in many ways a film about looking—looking across lines of propriety, gazing beyond surfaces, staring in taboo places—and it repeatedly cues the viewer to

pay close attention to elements of visibility. The irony of the film's respective gazers' positions vis-à-vis their objects lies in the relative accessibility of that object. While Keith watches Amanda lovingly (or with a pathological voyeurism—the film makes it hard to draw a distinction), he must do so from a distance, at least initially, and always at the peril of angering her rich, chauvinistic boyfriend. Duncan and Keith forge their own misfit alliance through a visual exchange, trading approving glances at one another's artwork while serving the detention they have earned for their earlier confrontation (later, upon learning of Amanda's agreement to go to dinner with Keith, Duncan tells his new friend to "punch her apron one time for me, man"). This male-bonding scene, repeated elsewhere when Ray, too, congratulates Keith on his conquest, is directly followed by a visual exhibition of the workings of female homosociality.

The subsequent scene features Watts, whose gaze is a jealous one (and/or a desirous one—again, a finer distinction than the film will permit), taking a long and hard look (what we might call "ogling" were she a man) at Amanda undressing in the nominally private female space of the gym locker room, the camera traveling slowly down the latter's half-clothed profile. As a member of the same sex, Watts is afforded a much closer view of Amanda but denied the recognition of anything but the heterosexualized envy behind it. Unfeminine as ever in boxer shorts and a baggy t-shirt, Watts gazes at Amanda with an indecipherable expression as the latter primps and preens; the point-of-view shot lingers first on Amanda's voluminous locks and then travels slowly down her half-naked body. The camera cuts back to Watts running her hands through her own choppy hair with a forlorn expression, but no sooner than it has evoked the specter of lesbian desire, the film dutifully sends in the gender police: Shayne breaks Watts's reverie, commenting loudly that she has "never seen a girl wearing boys' underpants before."

Yet although the film's ending places Watts decisively on a path to heteroromantic fulfillment and Keith's ideal future, a doleful synth-piano arpeggio accompanies the shot that immediately precedes our heroine's blissful union with him. These spare notes link it aurally to the earlier locker room scene, wherein a (p)reprisal of its melancholic tune also punctuates Watts's wistful gazes at Amanda. And now in this ending scene, Keith's own suddenly wistful gazes come to prominence; a close-up on his face cuts to a fleeting flashback of him and Watts kissing during their "practice session" to prepare the former for his date with Amanda. But the two appear in profile—the cinematic equivalent of a third-person perspective; though this memory and its insertion between two shots of Keith would seem to signal his point of view, the flashback belongs more to the viewer than to Keith's recollection. Moreover, while it ostensibly works to remind the audience of the narrative buildup to this eventual pairing, its referent—a contrived kissing drill—distinguishes it as one of the more implausible scenes in the film and an obviously calculated teleological device, and its reinvocation here highlights the film's artificial imposition of heterosexual convention. The ending's formal recursivity sustains an infelicitous reading that points the viewer back away from that ending and once again, to draw on Quimby's words, toward the "far more queer middle."⁵⁴ These temporal wrinkles in the final minutes not only allow viewers to seize on the incoherence of the ending but also loop them back to a moment of lesbian possibility. In this regard, *Wonderful*'s finale is itself infelicitous despite its happy resolution, for in reorienting viewers back towards the middle, its form undermines the completion and closure of the narrative's heteronormative teleology.

Although Quimby divides tomboy narratives into queer middles and normative endings, *Darlings* and *Wonderful* complicate this distinction: in both films, it is in fact the ostentatiously

⁵⁴ Quimby, "Jo," 11.

heterosexual resolutions that terminate while the films' moments of queer possibility are continuously called back, perpetually regenerated by the emotional and logical dissonances inherent in these endings. To read infelicitously, then, in *Little Darlings*, *Some Kind of Wonderful* and elsewhere, entails not simply pointing to what may be queer nor bemoaning perfidious tropes and tendencies, but actively interrogating the ways a text's temporal logic works (and doesn't work) in tandem with its narrative, recognizing emotional ideologies and teleologies that play out alongside the queer possibilities to which it momentarily admits, and relishing and enriching those moments when its form tempers or contradicts the conventions it enacts; it is ultimately, to return appropriatively to the reproachful words of Juno's father, a matter of knowing when to say when.

CHAPTER TWO

Fair and Foul: The Politics of Ambivalence in Female-Centered Sports Films

Joseph Sargent's 1979 *Goldengirl* combines political elements, science fiction, musical numbers, Cold War paranoia, romance, and sports to present a sensational hybrid narrative wherein women's athletics becomes an arena in which competing male wills battle for control—in this case, control over a woman who amounts for these men to little more than intellectual property. Susan Anton plays Goldine Serafin, this 6'2 Amazon of a woman whose adoptive father, as it turns out, has engineered her to achieve an unparalleled level of athletic prowess, to which her blonde locks and gorgeous face are apparently incidental. Dr. Serafin (Curd Jürgens) has prediegetically subjected her to a regimen including, besides strenuous cardiovascular training, a sort of reverse corset to expand her ribcage and augment her lung capacity as well as regular injections of an experimental drug called Pituitary Stimulant Hormone. At one point, Goldine blithely reveals to her manager Jack Dryden (James Coburn) that her behavior has been engineered as well; in practice press conferences, her parents would hook her up to a vibrator and reinforce desirable (i.e. charming yet substanceless) answers with affirmative pulses. "Boy, I made a lot of progress that way," she reflects cheerily, "Now I don't need the vibrator anymore. I get the same response just from hearing the questions, and when I have the answers ready . . .". The second half of the film features numerous shots of Goldine falling down and moaning in pain rather than artificially conditioned sexual pleasure as her father's injections begin to wreak havoc on her endocrine system. Goldine heroically overcomes both her new kidney problems and this continued sexualization, going on to set a new world record at the 1980 Olympic final in Lenin Stadium. The ambivalent ending—she sets one record but fails to win the other two events for which she has been engineered—gestures towards Goldine's liberation post-Olympics,

when she delivers a condemnatory speech that appears to deliver her in turn from under her father's thumb and her manager's directives. However, she proposes to use this newfound freedom to pursue love, her flirtation with Dryden having failed, rather than anything beyond the scope of her own romantic fulfillment—an ambition that somewhat dampens the film's purportedly progressive impulses.

Regrettably obscure though *Goldengirl* remains—perhaps in part because of its failure to foresee the United States' non-participation in the Moscow games around which it centers—it stands as an example *par excellence* of a consistently perplexing cycle of films. It features a normatively—indeed preternaturally—feminine protagonist whose relationship to men becomes the focal point of the plot; it constructs a political backdrop against which that female protagonist is actually removed from the realm of the political and wherein her athleticism serves patriarchal political ends; its curious attempt to commingle discordant tropes and elements from a variety of genres render it at once completely incoherent and utterly fascinating. In spite of all its narrative contortions and dubious vision of female liberation, it retains a certain ambivalent appeal in the simple feat of portraying a female competing successfully in sports. I will argue here that the confused and confusing nature of female-centered sports films (too disparate a subset to be accurately described as “the” female-centered sports film) bespeaks deep-seated cultural anxieties about female sexuality, physicality, unfemininity, and the history of institutionalized sport but still offers a productive mode of attachment to tomboy, lesbian, and otherwise unfeminine viewers.

In the previous chapter and the introduction, I have discussed at length the distinctive conventions of the filmic tomboy narrative: incoherently happy endings, rebellious girls tamed into heterosexuality, problematic associations with racial and economic signifiers, isolation,

motherlessness, representations of female independence and empowerment tempered by contradictory plot developments. In this chapter, I examine a related type of incoherence, performing an infelicitous reading on a cinematic subset, wherein the conservative (sometimes even reactionary) conventions of post-Title IX female-centered sports film fail, at the end of the day, to nullify the films' feminist and queer potential. Female-centered sports films as a collective, I argue, are very much bound up with the conventions of filmic tomboy narrative and also with the anxieties that circumscribe lesbian films; a tomboy may be defined by her interest in sports—particularly sports that she is not, as a female, supposed to be interested in, or sports that put her into direct competition with boys (Michael Ritchie's *Bad News Bears*, 1976; Richard Michaels's *Blue Skies Again*, 1983; Noel Black's *Quarterback Princess*, 1983; Stan Dragoti's *Necessary Roughness*, 1991; Karyn Kusama's *Girlfight*, 2000; Davis Guggenheim's *Gracie*, 2007), and at the same time, tomboy narrative typically exhibits a compulsion to demonstrate perpetually her femininity (equated speciously with heterosexuality) throughout. Just as Hollywood's lesbian characters are uniformly feminine, so too are its female athletes consistently girlish and often ostentatiously boy-crazy as well: ironically, sports film narrative actually counters cultural stereotypes about sports in this regard—though likely more for fear of their veracity than from any conscientious desire to avoid pigeonholing individuals. I contend, further, that concomitantly with the self-conscious evocation and obfuscation of lesbianism that tomboy films such as *Little Darlings* (1980) and *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987) perform, so too do female-centered sports films at once assume and eschew the possibility of their protagonists' lesbianism and thereby create a liminal, infelicitous space for its continued imaginability. However, a suspicious understanding of these films' politically and representationally dubious tendencies does not render them powerless, nor does it simply make them vectors of false hope

and what Lauren Berlant calls the “cruel optimism” that binds subjects affectively to visions of a “good life” that is in the long run bad for them.¹ Rather, a chiasmically conceived outlook of generous pessimism wherein these films’ refutation of queerness is acknowledged—even anticipated—but also leveraged as license to *detach* from the narrative and instead focus on the cultural apprehensions and vulnerabilities that their conservative tropes and conventions symptomatize. Through readings of Penny Marshall’s baseball film *A League of Their Own* (1992) and Robert Towne’s pentathletic *Personal Best* (1982), this chapter seizes on the incoherencies and anxieties of female-centered sports films and envisions through such pessimism a kind of female flourishing within a genre that flounders. Its generosity entails a willingness not to dismiss these films and their often androcentric narratives outright, but to bear with them in order to sustain their queerer and more feminist moments; the pessimism occasions a turn away from the endings that such films posit as the brighter future and towards the specific histories that have given rise to the narrative and real-life limitations that impel them.

The ambivalent politics of female-centered sports films, which usually purport to celebrate female participation in sport even while subjugating that participation to male interests and ends, underscore the impossibility of ever fully “liberating” women’s sports (or women themselves) from their moorings in heteronormative, racist American capitalism. Extending the practice of infelicitous reading beyond individual narratives to the ongoing cycle of female-centered sports films, I argue that their consistent ambivalence—alternately positive and denigrating depictions of women, independent-minded characters who finally sacrifice their own interests in service of the nuclear family, perpetually compromised athletic success, the phobically defensive posture of insistence that athleticism need not preclude femininity and

¹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

heterosexuality—reflects the tumultuous and often regressive development of institutionalized women’s sport in the United States and deconstructs the heteronormative mindset that equates presentism and futurity with progress. By taking male leadership and centrality in sport for granted, contemporary female-“centered” (a misleading modifier that ought to reside in perpetual scare quotes) sports films mask the actual history of women’s administrative leadership in sports and their decades-long, eventually losing battle to maintain sovereignty. They obsessively bury the memory—and, therein, the conceivability—of a time when women controlled women’s sports, but in doing so they may also call attention to that occlusion—just as tomboy films preserve the possibility of lesbianism through their ostentatious attempts to put it to rest.

Indeed, conflicting and contradictory attitudes towards acceptable female comportment prove as fundamental to—even constitutive of—female sports narratives as to the history of female sport in the United States: I argue that a part of these films’ underlying bipolarity stems from their anxieties about that history and their future-driven plots that resolve exclusively with heteronormative endings. These multifarious ambivalences—narrative, spectatorial, historical, and otherwise—manifest themselves on numerous levels that I explore herein: 1) the vexed associations between and among sports, unfeminine women, and lesbians, the latter two of which these films both appeal to and antagonize, 2) the positive and negative effects of Congress’s 1972 passage of the Title IX amendment, which mandated equal resources for males and females in institutions receiving government funding, 3) the subsequent assimilation of institutionalized women’s sports into male-controlled organizations such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), 4) the commercial exploitation and heterosexualization of female athletes upon which the sports industry relies to increase profitability, 5) the convention of losing in

female-centered sports films, which at once resists a profit-focused binary win/loss structure and circumscribes female athletic success, and 6) ambivalence within female athletic motion itself.

The previous chapter frames ambivalence as an affective disposition predominant in tomboy and lesbian spectators of tomboy and lesbian films; the mode of infelicitous reading I propose here does not entail precisely a failure of happiness but more aptly a refusal of it, a way of taking pleasure in finding different ways to form an attachment to a text, especially unhappy—antagonistic—attachments. For queer female audiences, the affective expectation underlying the aesthetic structures in tomboy and lesbian film is disappointment, or any number of its synonyms. To expect to be disappointed is a characteristically queer disposition, one that stems here from the temporal limitations on tomboyism.² For these viewers, it is the *discomforts* of convention that are predictable; these films do indeed “provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold,” but this queer attachment would more productively be called generously pessimistic than cruelly optimistic, as I have indicated above, a mode no less binding but one that entails negative affective expectations and the anticipation of refutation rather than affirmation, and generous because it willingly endures inimical tropes in order to give new life and meaning to tired narrative patterns.³

In theorizing this misdirected futurism, Berlant attributes to the intimate public of women’s culture an investment in a perpetually “unfinished business,” and suggests that despite the discontents of the moment, “tomorrow is another day” and one “in which fantasies of the

² See for example Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position.” (*Signs* 31: 2006), Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003).

³ Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 6.

good life *can* be lived.”⁴ For tomboys, on the other hand, society dictates a markedly different temporality: a tomboy’s today poses a threat to her tomorrow as a happy heterosexual, apolitical citizen. Whereas for women’s culture and its filmic and literary protagonists, narrative serves as a vehicle of transition into the optimistic promise of a better, more fulfilling tomorrow, the tomboy’s narrative is the last day of her life, marked by the grim revelation that she must change her ways (though, it bears noting, this revelation occurs only on the viewer’s part, as the transformation tends to be portrayed not so much as an epiphany experienced by the character as a natural, spontaneous evolution). Instead of an empty promise of the good life, these films typically deliver a negated life, a narrative trajectory that demonstrates a specific demographic’s inability to flourish. Generously pessimistic readings of female-centered sports films, then, entail looking backwards not only to the queerer moments of the narrative at hand but also to those moments outside of and prior to the text itself. If “it gets better” constitutes the normative temporal disposition that characterizes cruel optimism, then “it *was* better (but also worse)” encapsulates the ambivalent backwards and sideways looking orientation of generous pessimism, which not only entails a certain paranoid awareness about what these films are up to, but also a loss of faith in the power and politics of litigation, legislation, and the notion that equal opportunity is reducible to the equal funding that Title IX brought. It also entails acknowledging the fact that although more girls are playing sports than ever before, this statistical sign of “progress” may not be a good thing in the long run. Queer and feminist spectators *should* feel ambivalent about female-centered sports films, I argue—even more so, perhaps, than about lesbian films—because they obscure a past in which women actually possessed greater (albeit imperfectly wielded) influence and control over women’s sports than they do now.

⁴ *ibid.*, 2.

Feminist scholars of sport have documented in numerous studies the pronounced ambivalence, too, with which sports writers and commentators treat female athletes, whom they frequently describe “in contradictory terms—on the one hand as ‘powerful, precise, courageous, skillful, purposeful and in control’ and yet at the same time, as ‘cute, vulnerable, juvenile, manipulating, and toy- or animal-like.’”⁵ Scholars of sports film, however, have often expressed more unequivocally negative views of female centered-sports films. Emphasizing the ways in which these films do various disservices to women, Aaron Baker argues that female sports narratives “center on how women can participate in sports yet retain a femininity defined primarily by their support for the needs of others, especially men and children.”⁶ While it is easy and to some extent tempting to accept this and other similarly dismissive claims about female-centered sports films, I believe that the cycle of films deserves further and more sustained attention than Baker and others give it for the incoherencies and contradictions and strange particularities in the ways it enforces these narratives of nurture. Baker’s chapter on gender in American sports films pays little more than lip service to women’s sports films, focusing primarily on the latters’ strategies for working out crises of (male) masculinity and providing little analysis to justify his cavalier attitude towards them. Seán Crosson, too, is brusque and doubtful about what female sports films have to offer:

The threat that such strong women may pose to patriarchy is contained through three principle means in the sports film: through the . . . negative or comic portrayal of women in positions of authority; by positioning leading sporting females clearly under the

⁵ Jeffrey O. Seagrave, Katherine L. McDowell, and James King III, “Language, Gender, and Sport: A Review of the Research Literature” in *Sport, Rhetoric, and Gender: Historical Perspectives and Media Representations*, ed. Linda Fuller (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 35.

⁶ Aaron Baker, *Contesting Identities: Sports in American Film* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 77.

guidance (and authority) of men; or by the sexual objectification of women for principally male gratification.⁷

Crosson rebukes *League* for its “ostensibly progressive depiction of women in a male-dominated sport . . . repeatedly undermined by familiar and regressive portrayals of female characters.”⁸

The work of these two prominent theorists of sports film reflects a broader scholarly silence around female-centered sports films not unlike the intellectual gap surrounding tomboy narrative. Little scholarship exists on the subject, at least in the humanities, beyond Katharina Lindner’s work and the several articles about *Personal Best* cited herein. One begins to suspect, therefore—especially given the disproportionate amount of crucial attention accorded to male-centered sports films—that dismissals such as Baker’s and Crosson’s amount to an easy out, merely another way to avoid contending with unfeminine females and the modes of resistance they create. As I will discuss later in this chapter, *League* admits of an appreciably more nuanced outlook on women’s professional baseball, female athletes in general, and cinematic typology than Crosson’s disdainful assessment of its cloying narrative would suggest.

If the above critiques are apt, who is left to like female-centered sports films (and why would they)? Do these films compose a part of what Berlant outlines as normative women’s culture? These questions are, unfortunately, unanswerable in any quantifiable way, as box office demographics at this level of detail are virtually impossible to come by, and online movie-streaming services such as Netflix are legally obligated to protect user information. Nevertheless, a brief survey of popular entertainment publications provides some sense, on a less formalized level, of who is watching and (dis)liking what in terms of gender. Fewer than half of the films listed in *Entertainment Weekly*’s 2010 piece “30 Sports Movies That Women Love”

⁷ Seán Crosson, *Sport in Film* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 112.

⁸ *ibid.*, 120.

actually entail girls or women playing sports, and only a handful of those might reasonably be considered female-centered.⁹ This and other articles seem at once to presume and to originate from a normatively feminine audience—or so their use of terms like “chick,” privileging of “tearjerkers,” and generally sentimental leanings indicate. The subtitle, for instance, promises to reveal “. . . why *The Rookie*, *Bend It Like Beckham*, *Hoosiers*, and *Cutting Edge* are “chick flicks” at heart. The list features numerous films in which women do not play sports at all, including, in addition to *The Blind Side*, *Damn Yankees!* (1958), *Breaking Away* (1978), *The Black Stallion* (1979), *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *The Natural* (1984), *Hoosiers* (1986), *Wildcats* (1986), *Bull Durham* (1988), *Field of Dreams* (1989), *White Men Can’t Jump* (1992), *Rudy* (1993), *Cool Runnings* (1993), *Jerry Maguire* (1996), *Varsity Blues* (1999), *Remember the Titans* (2000), *The Rookie* (2002), and *Seabiscuit* (2005). Author Kate Stroup describes those films on the list that do feature female athletes as “silly but satisfying” and “pure ‘70s cheese” (*Ice Castles*, 1978), “lovably ridiculous” (*Cutting Edge*, 1982), and “fluff” (*Wimbledon*, 2004).

As *Entertainment Weekly*’s list demonstrates, to define a satisfactory corpus of female sports films is an impractical quest (one to which Baker and Crosson give only cursory thought), and all the more so in light of extant debates over whether such activities as dance and cheerleading “count” as sports. While I have no interest in denying them that status, I omit films featuring dance and figure skating from my analysis here because the cultural perception of dance as an acceptable (even desirable) channel of feminine athleticism is such that the homophobic anxieties that make other female-centered sports films so complex and intriguing tend to be vitiated from the outset. Most female sports films are taxonomically comedic or romantic—and therefore intrinsically less likely to be taken “seriously” by the American public

⁹ Adam Markovitz, Kate Stroup, and Kate Ward, “30 Sports Movies That Women Love” (*Entertainment Weekly*, March 2010).

and by Hollywood itself than the “male” genres of war, drama, Western, or even male-centered sports films, an imbalance indicative of what Lindner identifies as “attitudes and beliefs within the film industry about the kinds of stories that can or cannot be told in relation to female athleticism and what it connotes.”¹⁰ Female sports films face a peculiar quandary in their presentations of strong women—even more than do female-centered action films, as Lindner points out:

Sports are a (mediated) spectacle—even outside the context of cinematic representation – that cinematic spectators are likely to be familiar with. Spectators may even have engaged in some form of athletic activity themselves at some point in their lives – whereas a previous engagement in the spectacularly violent and often ‘fantastic’ action of the action cinema, for instance, is much more unlikely. It is for these reasons that cinematic depictions of muscular female boxing bodies constitute a . . . more threatening transgression of gender boundaries than the muscular action heroine.¹¹

Indeed, female boxers in film (who tend to be more muscular and less feminine than their cinematic kin in other sports) occupy a liminal space between sports and action genres and are typically accorded more respect than other cinematic athletes. The boxing film practically stands as a genre of its own, and male boxing films such as Martin Ritt’s *The Great White Hope* (1970), Jon Avildsen’s *Rocky* (1976), Martin Scorsese’s *Raging Bull* (1980), Ron Howard’s *Cinderella Man* (2005), and David O. Russell’s *The Fighter* (2010) have historically received considerable critical acclaim, each of them garnering at least one Academy Award nomination. Clint Eastwood’s *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), too, is one of the few female sports films to be met with significant praise and attention, due in no small part to the big names attached to it and their ability to prevent its reception as a “woman’s film.”¹² Yet in it, for all of star Hilary Swank’s

¹⁰ Katharina Lindner, *Spectacular Physicalities: Female Athleticism in Contemporary Cinema* (Ph.D. Thesis: University of Glasgow, 2008), 110.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 307.

¹² Tania Modleski compellingly classifies *Baby* and other of Eastwood’s films as “male weepies” in “Clint Eastwood and Male Weepies,” (*American Literary History*, 22: 1, 2009), 136–158.

nuance and ability as an actor, the female protagonist demonstrates a remarkably shallow range of emotions, an inexpressivity linked to but not wholly accounted for by her working-class status; hysteria and excessive emotion may be hallmarks of femininity, but her character's emotional flatness also bespeaks Hollywood's reluctance to portray women who are chronically angry and made powerful by that anger, unless it directly serves the needs of heteropatriarchy—as becomes the case, for example, in rape-revenge or fierce-mother storylines.

This problem of “inappropriate” affect poses an obstacle for female boxing films as a whole: cinematic male boxers are typically underdogs driven by rage and resentment at their disadvantaged socioeconomic situations (see above list); as Sara Ahmed and Elizabeth Freeman argue, anger, irascibility, and frustration are emotions unbecoming of women and generally associated with trenchantly feminist figures.¹³ In Karyn Kusama's *Girlfight* (2000), the protagonist is an angry young Latina woman (Michelle Rodriguez) who boxes in spite of and to spite her abusive father's wishes. In his review of the film, Roger Ebert remarks tellingly that Rodriguez is “ideally cast in the movie, not as a hard woman or a muscular athlete, but as a spirited woman with a temper, and fire in her eyes.”¹⁴ This dissociation of the character's physical and emotional dispositions frames her interest in boxing as a misguided channel for her pathological rage, which her romance with male boxer Adrian (Santiago Douglas) eventually dispels. As the plot proceeds, the resolution of Diana's anger becomes more the point than her athletic prowess, potential as a boxer, and ability to transcend adverse economic conditions—a feat of fantasy around which the *Rocky* franchise revolves.

¹³ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) and Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Histories, Queer Temporalities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁴ Roger Ebert, Rev. of *Girlfight* (2000).

Female boxing and team-sport films coexist uneasily within a sparse and disparate narrative category whose plotlines feature women working towards something—together or individually—that has nothing to do with men, at least in theory. As such, they present a compelling departure from the romances that chiefly comprise the texts of women’s culture and speak in generative counterpoint to Berlant’s notions of intimate publicity and cruel optimism as they pertain to this sphere of *unfemininity* and those females generically excluded from or relegated to the margins of women’s culture. In *The Female Complaint*, Berlant explores related dimensions of incoherence, ambivalence, and convention within “women’s” genres. She develops the notion of the intimate public sphere of women’s culture, in which sentiment largely replaces political action and ambivalence emerges as a predominant mode of attachment. An intimate public is an affective collectivity in mass culture that “legitimizes qualities, ways of being, and entire lives that have otherwise been deemed puny or discarded.”¹⁵ Within it circulate texts, attitudes, and emotions that both express and compose its members’ “particular core interests and desires.” As such, the intimate public sphere “turns citizenship into a collection of simultaneous private worlds” and evacuates their political wherewithal, offering its citizens a sense of belonging and apolitical connectedness; it promises a brighter future and “a better experience of social belonging partly through participation in commodity culture,” that is, attachment to these self-affirming texts.¹⁶

How do ambivalence and the promise of a new tomorrow play out for those whom filmic convention assigns either frustration or forced happiness and for whom an ending entails not a promise of the future but literal or symbolic death rather than a feeling of sustenance,

¹⁵ Berlant, *Complaint*, 3.

¹⁶ Jenny Rice, *Distant Publics: Development Rhetoric and the Subject of Crisis* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 68.

recognition, and belonging? For those on the margins of “women’s culture” or apart from it altogether, at whose expense these affirmative impressions often arrive? “To love conventionality,” writes Berlant of the attachments an intimate public forms around mass texts, “is not only to love something that constrains someone or some condition of possibility: it is a way of negotiating belonging to a world.”¹⁷ What happens, then, when that something is predicated on the negation of its own central aspect—when that negation becomes the terms of the negotiation? The convention with which filmic tomboy narratives provide women’s culture, as I have outlined, consists in the contrived, ostentatiously heterosexualized endings that define them, the superation of the plot’s gendered “blockages”—the protagonist’s resistance, her unbelonging, her potential unheterosexuality. The female-centered sports film works for such viewers, then, as a narrative form in which the binding conventions of women’s culture fail to contain fully those blockages whose overcoming is “central to any genre’s successful execution.”¹⁸

The fulfillment of narrative expectation for tomboy and lesbian viewers is met not with pleasure or belonging but with dread, anger, frustration, or resignation. In tomboy films and female-centered sports films, resistant females function as variations to be absorbed, a modification of the conventional feminine protagonist the absorption of whose deviant behavior becomes the plot’s focal point—and both tomboyism and female athleticism seem to be variations that convention cannot fully absorb. However, the brighter future that texts of women’s culture purport to offer entails not only the sacrifice of the tomboy/athlete’s present, but also the disavowal of a past whose erasure may hold more feminist possibility than the conventionally forward-minded trajectories of the former.

¹⁷ Berlant, *Complaint*, 3.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 19.

Unconventional Wisdom

“When placed alongside the male, the female basketball player is a slow pygmy . . . if judged on the same spectator interest criteria as men’s athletics, women’s athletics will always be considered an inferior product”—Donna Lopiano, former AIAW president and CEO of the Women’s Sports Foundation

A pivotal moment in this past constitutes the present in Michael Ritchie’s *Bad News Bears*, wherein the local Little League’s manager—a surly caricature replete with visor, close-cropped hair, and whistle—gripes to the equally crotchety Coach Morris Buttermaker (Walter Matthau) in the opening scenes about the strain under which recent legislative action has placed her resources: “Goddam class-action suits are gonna be the ruin of this country. It wasn’t so bad when the courts made us take in the girls. At least the ones that came could play, but now this.” “This,” we soon learn, is the consequence of a local father’s successful lawsuit forcing the town’s competitive league to add an additional team so that boys who had failed to make the initial cut might now be allowed to play. Brief though her peevish commentary is, it contextualizes the film within the legal battles of the period and characterizes female leaders in sport through this rare specimen of representation as politically backwards, petulant, and thoroughly antagonistic. That this criticism comes from a (short-haired, markedly unfeminine) woman immediately provokes spectatorial suspicion: why, in this 1976 family movie, might the filmmakers vocalize opposition to equal access in the voice of a woman, whose sex had so long been fighting for any athletic opportunities, let alone equitably funded teams? On one level, the line immediately antagonizes her to the viewer, but on another it productively raises the hackles of those who might perceive the logical implausibility of a female protesting equity in sports and sets up a resistant reading of the narrative that follows.

Title IX, the 1972 amendment to the Higher Education Act of 1965 and the metric of ostensible legal equity to which the manager alludes, prohibited discrimination based on sex

within any educational programs or activities that receive federal funding. As such, it is often cited as a triumphal turning point for girls and women, an uncontested milestone of equality that justly rewarded the hard work of Second-Wave feminists and paved a clear way for female athletes in the decades to come. While female participation in sport has increased massively since the amendment's passage—by some 900 percent in high schools, according to a 2006 estimate—its repercussions, particularities, and the conditions that conduced to its passage belie its celebrated status as unambiguously beneficial, a status that obscures important complications within the historical and contemporary development of sport for females.¹⁹ Prior to Title IX, ninety percent of female teams and athletes were coached by women; now, only about forty percent of women's college teams (along with a minute three percent of men's college teams—and zero in the NFL, NBA, MLB, or NHL) are—roughly the same percentage as before Title IX. The situation is not improving so much as unfolding along a troubling sexed division of labor. Indeed, ESPN reports that since 2000, NCAA institutions have opened up 1,774 women's head coaching jobs and filled nearly seventy percent of them with men. These statistics indicate, among other things, the rigid limits of the courts' fallacious equation of “opportunity” and “funding” and suggest that the legislative realm of rights discourses and politics proper can perhaps ultimately do little to change the structures that compromise opportunity for females in athletics and beyond.²⁰

Female athleticism had stood as a battleground for gender politics long before sex discrimination in the workplace was made illegal—indeed before women even had the right to vote; decades prior to the emergence of female-centered sports films as a discernible cinematic

¹⁹ National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education, “Title IX at 35: Beyond the Headlines” (NCWGE, 2008).

²⁰ Kate Fagan and Luke Cyphers, “The Glass Wall” (*ESPN*, 2012).

cycle and the establishment of organized women's sports existed as such, feminist politics and sports had become inextricably linked.²¹ Elusive as a clear-cut characterization of tomboyism has proven, both athletic and feminist inclinations stand as a consistent thread within it, too. In 1895, Elizabeth Cady Stanton observed that "many a woman is riding to the suffrage on a bicycle," and in 1913, a group of British women's suffragists invaded a (men's-only) golf course late one night, carving a series of political messages onto the green with razor blades: "Votes for Women," "Votes Before Sport," "No Votes, No Golf."²² Along with increased wages, greater equity in employment, and improved access to childcare, first-wave activists demanded sports for girls and women.²³ Although nowadays female athleticism is often channeled through objectifying, (hetero)sexualized venues such as cheerleading, the Lingerie Football League, and the much-anticipated swimsuit issue *Sports Illustrated* publishes annually, the notion of female spectator sports was once reviled. Men were barred from watching the first intercollegiate women's basketball game, a contest between Stanford University and Berkeley (which today boast two of the nation's top all-around women's athletics programs) because "public female sweat" had been "deemed indelicate" by university officials.²⁴ Over the course of the twentieth century, by contrast, certain types of female sport have been redefined as sexy—something to bring out the best of femininity, to perform gracefully and in a manner pleasing to the male eye.

²¹ Although tomboy narratives such as Ralph Murphy's *Mickey* (1948) and Roy del Ruth's *On Moonlight Bay* (1951) incorporate sports as a means to establish the heroine's tomboyism, entire plots around female sports remained rare until the 1970s and are still relatively uncommon.

²² Mariah Burton Nelson, *The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 12-15.

²³ *ibid.*, 13.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 14.

In the early days of female rowing, for example, competitors were judged on their “form and grace” rather than on speed.²⁵

As institutionalized sports developed through the first half of the twentieth century and into the 1970s, athletic programs for girls and women were primarily controlled and administered by female-run organizations, most notably the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics (AIAW). Such groups followed a predominantly participatory agenda rather than the competitive, win-above-all orientation of men’s organizations. The former philosophy, commonly referred to as the educational model of sports, saw athletic activity in moderation as an integral part of education and as something to which every student should have access. Yet even while its proponents encouraged female athleticism, they nonetheless rooted their ideals in a fundamentally conservative notion of sexual difference that anxiously enforced the moderation aspect, restricting practice times for females and instituting inclusive event formats that necessarily compromised athletic achievement and limited the degree of excellence female athletes might attain.²⁶

As the country’s most prominent amateur sports organization, on the other hand, the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) produced many of the male athletes who would represent the United States at the Olympic Games. In the years following World War Two, its main competitor for control over amateur sports was the Amateur Athletics Union (AAU), which had historically excluded women from “strenuous” athletic events—namely, anything that entailed running more than half a mile—for fear that such activity would

²⁵ *ibid.*, 17.

²⁶ Ying Wushanley, *Playing Nice and Losing: The Struggle for Control of Women's Intercollegiate Athletics, 1960-2000* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004).

jeopardize women's reproductive health.²⁷ Amid growing Cold War tensions and the United States' 1956 and 1960 Olympic defeats at the hands of Soviet athletes, the NCAA saw an opportunity to expand its reputation (as well, non-profit status notwithstanding, as its net worth) and cement its position as the preeminent American amateur sports organization by increasing the number of its athletes who might achieve Olympic glory. That opportunity consisted largely in the potential gold-medal mine of female sports. Eager to plumb this "new" resource, male officials hardly even bothered to affect any genuine interest in the advancement of women's sport for its own sake: as administrators such as Thomas J. Hamilton, who chaired the United States Olympic Association's development committee remarked at the NCAA's annual convention in 1961, "Obviously some other nations have outreached us in the women's events and will continue to garner the medals unless we give our girls more opportunities for participation and better training."²⁸ They did so by funneling money into prestigious tournaments and offering scholarships to attract female athletes to NCAA-affiliated institutions.

Threatened by the NCAA's appealing affluence and obstinate that the monetization of sport would destroy its integrity, AIAW leaders fought in court against the right of the former to do so "in the name of protecting women from commercial exploitation and male control."²⁹ The passage of Title IX in 1972 finally assured the NCAA's legal ability to provide scholarships to women; as a result, NCAA-affiliated institutions lured away the best female athletes while the AIAW, philosophically reluctant to offer scholarships and fiscally unable to do so in any case, saw its membership drop sharply as a result. By 1978, the latter had of necessity abandoned its anti-commercial principles and subscribed fully to the same capital-seeking modes (scholarships,

²⁷ Jeré Longman, "A Leading Pioneer" (*New York Times*: October 2011).

²⁸ Wushanley, *Playing Nice*, 24.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 77.

advertising, television deals, etc.) as the NCAA, but it was too little too late—the organization folded in 1983, unable to entice member institutions with financial compensation for participation in its events, as the NCAA did with increasing regularity and in increasing quantities. In earlier talks about a hypothetical merger, NCAA executives had refused to grant women equal representation in the prospective organization’s leadership.³⁰

As big a blow to female athletics as its demise was, neither had the female-controlled AIAW proven an optimal solution. Female leaders viewed the NCAA, for example, as too driven by power and capital, yet their inclusive mentality also mired female athletes “in the mediocrity of the [physical education] classroom or in the sloppy playing of uncoached intramural teams.”³¹ Further, the AIAW’s initial anti-scholarship position had the inadvertent side effect of excluding those female athletes who could not otherwise afford to attend college. Outlooks and opportunities for pre-Title IX female athletes were far from ideal, certainly, but the notions of a less exploitative, more inclusive model and guaranteed gender equity in leadership retain considerable appeal and potential.

A Losing Tradition

Forty years after Title IX, female sport participation is at an all-time high; girls and women are becoming faster, stronger, and more proficient at their sports, many of which were restricted to males for the majority of the twentieth century. In their current forms, though, the perceived success and market viability of both female sport and female-centered sports films depend heavily upon homophobic and misogynistic discourses, the exclusion of females from positions of power, and narrative conventions that deny filmic female athletes the same kinds of success accorded to their male counterparts. For better or for worse—or both—female athletes

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*, 35.

do a lot of losing in film. While losing heroes in male-centered sports films (e.g. *Rocky*, *Bull Durham*, *Friday Night Lights*, *Cool Runnings*, *North Dallas Forty*) are certainly not unheard of, the last-second loss in their female-focused counterparts is in fact paradigmatic and the absence of unequivocal triumph conspicuous in its persistence. From *Bad News Bears* to *A League of Their Own* to *Bring It On* to *Million Dollar Baby* to *Whip It!*, the athletic protagonists conventionally lose in female-centered sports films, yet these endings are by no means sad; rather, they settle on a pleasurable ambivalence, a warm feeling of belonging where the lines between losing and winning blur.

In these films' invariably heteronormative endings (and, usually, beginnings as well as middles), the real "loser," perhaps, is the queer or feminist viewer whose sympathies the narrative tends to write out, to disown. Many movements and advances in feminism and queer theory as well as critical race theory have been catalyzed in no small part by feelings of disbelonging and are very much invested in finding ways not to be included in the types of mass intimacy these various intimate publics accord. In *League*, Dottie (Geena Davis) drops the baseball at a crucial moment (intentionally? we are left to wonder), allowing her newly traded sister score the winning run for Rockford's opponent. Maggie Fitzgerald dies at the hands of another boxer in *Baby*, but Frankie achieves a reconciliation with his daughter as an inadvertent result. Amanda Whurlitzer (Tatum O'Neal) and her *Bad News Bears* lose in the championship game but come to accept themselves and their differentness. In *Her Best Move*, Sara (Leah Pipes) passes the ball at the last second, losing her shot at the national team but graciously "giving" it to her rival, Regina (Jhoanna Flores). The protagonists in *Bring it On* place second, ending their victorious streak but enabling an unlikely friendship with their competitors. In Jessica Bendinger's *Stick It* (2006), the gymnasts take turns winning and forfeiting events in the

final competition to protest the sport's gender-biased standards of excellent. And so on: however enthusiastic and rebellious these talented nonconformists have been throughout, they must finally settle for less than the feats of athleticism and competitive spirit o which they have fought so hard to prove themselves capable. To those who disbelong, then, these endings present an opportunity for acts of spectatorial detachment and a consideration of why and how the films condition female viewers not to aspire to or hope for victory.

While the dehierarchized resolutions these films offer work subversively in *Personal Best*, as I argue below, its recurrence in virtually every female-centered sports film becomes troubling as the link of non-winning (and a complacent outlook thereon) and femaleness is essentialized. To accept loss in such films is itself an ambivalent venture at once subversive and acquiescent: to achieve happiness (or generative infelicity) in an outcome other than victory is to refuse the binary structure of victory and defeat, yet at the same time it entails a certain concession, an acceptance or embrace of one's own relative insufficiency that harks back to the contrasting male and female models of sport. The history of institutional girls' and women's sport reflects this ambivalence, most notably in the former prevalence of the educational "sport-for-all" model that saw athletics as part of a well-rounded education and as something that should be kept separate from the corrupting forces of commercialization. The losing endings in female-centered sports films, by contrast, enact the domesticating/disciplinary gesture of the tomboy-taming trope: just as tomboys cannot maintain their resistant behavior without being (perceived as) lesbian, female athletes in film may achieve a limited degree of athletic prowess but must not "win" lest such success impinge upon their feminine passivity—yet by insisting on loss and making their heroines content simply to participate, these films perpetually restage the

question of ambition versus participation and, however inadvertently, manifest nostalgia for the educational model to which the NCAA and Title IX effectively put an end.

(Juxta)Politics in Action

Although they seldom address Title IX, sports *qua* institution and industry, or long-waged battles for gender equality (which they treat as something to be dealt with on individual rather than structural levels) directly, female-centered sports films are often obliquely bound up with broader, overtly nationalistic narratives. This phenomenon links them to the “juxtapolitical” tendencies of women’s texts as Berlant defines them, which approach or gesture towards but stop short of political engagement. Yet, as I will demonstrate, the “active antagonism” Berlant cites as a requisite of politicality and which she professes to see little of in women’s culture inheres within female athleticism itself, making female-centered sports films necessarily political even when they seek to erase any such associations.³²

Why, given sexist antipathies towards female athleticism and the threat it is presumed to pose to patriarchal dominance, are these films so consistently framed through historical events, national crises, or other salient concerns of a given political era? And why are the behaviors and actions of the female characters within them not only depoliticized but depoliticized *through* their adjacency to the realm of the masculinized political? Berlant uses the term “juxtapolitical” to characterize that which “flourish[es] in proximity to the political” but is not political, that which feels political but is removed from the political sphere—intimate publics are juxtapolitical, generating a sense of community through emotional rather than political expression. Gendered generic conventions largely exclude female-centered films from the overtly political milieux of war, Washington D.C., or international scenarios. The frequent

³² Berlant, *Complaint*, 11-8.

framing of female-centered sports films vis-à-vis jingoistic discourses and the nation-state per se highlights the conflicted and circumscribed relations between and among them; I borrow Berlant's term here in a slightly different context and in the interest of illuminating how political backdrops function in female-centered sports films—how female athletes in them are positioned next to scenes of politics while remaining excluded from them and appearing to flourish in that exclusion. Legal and political activism have brought female sport to a certain point—that of approximate fiscal equality—but the unmitigated biases and circumscriptions of contemporary female athletics and sports narratives bring to light the limitations of civil rights discourses.

Personal Best, for example, takes place around the 1980 Olympic Trials, an event from which no United States athletes would ultimately proceed to the Olympics, since the US and numerous other countries boycotted the Games in protest of the Soviet Union's refusal to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. Although the boycott is mentioned several times throughout the film, the athletes themselves never comment on it or its implications for them—an implausible silence, given the relatively brief peak of an elite athlete's career and the preeminent status of the Olympics as the acme of athletic achievement; these uncomplaining women are presented as being too involved with personal matters to spend time developing political opinions. In Don Weis's *Billie* (1965), the eponymous heroine's story develops in relation to her father's political career and as a threat to it. While she fights to compete on her high school's all-male track and field team, he campaigns for mayoral election on a platform that bemoans the younger generation's disdain for proper femininity and its abandonment of traditional gender roles. The plotline of *Bad News Bears*, as noted above and maybe most insidiously, develops as the result of equalizing legislation that mandates opportunities (here, too, in the form of financial resources) for a wider (i.e. more racially and physically diverse as

well as financially needier) group of youths (i.e. boys plus one emphatically heterosexualized tomboy in Tatum O'Neal) to play organized sports; its juxtapolitical milieu is one in which the "problem" of American diversity and democratic accessibility—the "problem," as one boy so poetically phrases it in a line that was, needless to say, excised from the politically-corrected 2005 remake, consists in being a bunch of "Jews, Spics, [n-words], pansies, and a booger-eating moron." Noel Black's *Quarterback Princess* (1983) stars Helen Hunt as Tami Maida, a high school student who wishes to play on her school's football team. She proves her ability to excel at football while, crucially, maintaining her femininity; her election as homecoming queen takes precedence in the end over her athletic aptitude and pioneering spirit; as her mother insists, "we don't want women's lib." Even while cementing Tami's heterosexuality, the film ambivalently holds its heroine at arm's length casting the (sort of) gender-transgressive girl as Canadian and therefore definitively not "American," ineluctably different.

Another juxtapolitical framework comes to the fore in Norm Hunter's soccer comedy, *Her Best Move*, wherein a fifteen-year-old soccer phenom named Sara Davis appears intent on becoming the youngest player to make the United States women's national team. That ambition is soon revealed to belong more properly to her father, himself a former soccer star, estranged from his wife, who suffered a knee injury that ended his career prematurely and whose subsequent embitterment has resulted in estrangement from his wife. Sara's story, then, is another iteration of the familiar male-redemption plot in which a female athlete's pseudo-transgressive behavior is conditionally permitted in the service of restoring a patriarchal figure's damaged masculinity (see also *Billie*, *Bad News Bears*, *Necessary Roughness*, *League*, *Million Dollar Baby*, *Little Giants*, etc.). Sara's main competition for the national team—and the story's chief antagonist—is also one of the few people of color in the film, a high school teammate of

Brazilian heritage named Regina. Whichever one of them ends the season as their team's leading scorer will earn a spot on the US squad (an absurdly implausible scenario); in this way the sports team becomes not a space for female community and mutual strengthening, but a competitive, bellicose venue in which these girls become bitter enemies, seeking to outdo and undo each other with petty feats of spite. Clichéd cattiness aside, however, the film is not without some valid critiques of American youth sports culture. In the vein of *Bad News Bears*, it casts Sara's father as ruthlessly competitive and her family as devastated by the fallout of his old injury and consequently wounded masculinity. Moreover, it pits Sara's normative and achievement-obsessed family against Regina's much more relaxed and loving family, unsundered by individual narcissistic drives. Unfortunately, this (still racially suspect) critique comes at the cost of Sara's own drive and ambition when, in the big game, she passes to Regina so that the latter can score the clinching goal while Sara demonstrates her putative maturation by quitting soccer to join the dance team—a cooperative rather than antagonistic venture, and one that renders a frustratingly heteronormative ending and defuses the strength of Sara's previously transgressive character.

For Berlant, “active antagonism” stands as a definitive requisite of politics, and it also happens to be one of the few consistent traits of iconic tomboy characters across a wide range of films: Watts in *Some Kind of Wonderful*, Kit Keller in *League*, Angel Bright in *Little Darlings*, Amanda Whurlitzer in *Bears*, Billie Jean Davy in Matthew Robbins's *The Legend of Billie Jean* (1985), Maggie Fitzgerald in *Baby*, Sarah Altman in *Panic Room*, and Jodie Foster and Ellen Page in any number of roles all share activeness and a consistently antagonistic demeanor as the hallmark of their personalities. Lindner, too, herself a former professional soccer player and a queer feminist scholar, designates a “highly antagonistic mentality” as “an inherent and explicit

aspect of sports.”³³ Berlant observes that such antagonism, which she finds nowhere in texts of women’s culture, “threatens the sense in consensus,” the senses of community and continuity that prop up and perpetuate the intimate public of women’s culture. The “juxtapolitical sites” in the latter’s texts work to maintain a sense of collectivity; they serve fantasies of belonging without being politically mobilized and see the political sphere as a “field of threat, chaos, degradation” rather than as a “condition of possibility.”³⁴ So why are tomboys so often situated in juxtapolitical contexts, particularly in sports films? I wish to suggest that it is this dissonant pairing of female transgression and the juxtapolitical that productively threatens not simply the sense in consensus but the sense of these narratives more broadly.

“Consensus” is the past participle of the Latin verb “consentire”; the latter means “to agree,” and a consensus is a “collective unanimous agreement” or, in physiological terms, the “concord of different parts or organs of the body in effecting a given purpose.”³⁵ The connotation of pastness is salient here, intimating that this agreement was made long ago by some unknown authoritative body and has come to be taken as common sense—the consensus, for instance, that unfeminine women are lesbians, that female athletes are lesbians, that lesbians are bad, that narratives about potentially lesbian women must foreclose the viability of lesbianism and associated types of resistant behavior along with it. As the unruly narratives detailed herein indicate, female-centered sports films “make sense” neither as a collective body of films nor, in many cases, as individual narratives. They leave massive plot holes in order to advance from point A to point B (*Personal Best*, *Stick It!*, *Move*), they profess confusingly contradictory attitudes toward female participation in sport (*Billie*, *Move*, *League*, *Baby*, *Bears*,

³³ Lindner, *Physicalities*, 41.

³⁴ Berlant, *Complaint*, 11.

³⁵ “Consensus.” *OED Online*. Accessed 6 April 2014.

Quarterback Princess), otherwise strong and independent protagonists make uncharacteristic capitulations and compromises (*Love and Basketball*, *League*, *Billie*), or their portrayals of “history” mask complicated and often unpalatable truths about the practices and evolution of women’s sport (*League*, *The Mighty Macs*, *Goldengirl*). Thus this cycle of films, whose constituent texts seem unable to agree on much of anything either within themselves or categorically, might best be seen as moving on from consensus, refuting the notion of a heteronormative arc of “progress,” and therefore as wholly political, for all their ambivalence, if not in a traditional manner.

Properly American girls do not really want to achieve Olympic-level success, we infer from narratives like *Her Best Move*; they would be better off following the “normal” course of development, abandoning resistant childish behavior and brash ambition for its more properly girlish counterpart, joining the dance team and entering the world of teen romance. Rather than seeking a prominent position on an elite, international level, Sara sacrifices her opportunity, talent, and years of hard work for the sake of heterosexual normality—her family’s as well as her own—and the film portrays this decision unequivocally as the right one. Yet for many in its target audience, one suspects, this and other female sports endings will register as so preposterously capitulatory, given the obvious respective gender codings of dance and soccer, that they seem more likely to incite eye-rolls and irritation than nods of affirmation.

Eye-rolls and irritation, not coincidentally, also comprise the dominant *modus operandi* of Kit Keller (Lori Petty), the token tomboy and sometime antagonist of *A League of Their Own*, who feels constantly fed up with her maddeningly irreproachable sister’s fairytale narrative and through whose irritation viewers may also become productively fed up with the generally saccharine storyline. Likely the most commercially successful and critically acclaimed female-

centered sports films in history (though, notably, it garnered no Oscar nominations), Penny Marshall's *League* may also best encapsulate the internal dissonances and obfuscated transgressions of the genre. A *Rolling Stone* review of *League* comments—in an ostensibly laudatory tone—that “the story has the makings of a stinging feminist manifesto. That, however, is not what director Penny Marshall delivers. Marshall's take is uniquely her own—lots of laughs, lots of heart and very little sermonizing.”³⁶ In other words, this reviewer sees *League* as a good film precisely because it is not a “serious” film, because it does not try to take up issues or to wax political, and because—stingless as it is—watching it causes no philosophical discomfort to the viewer. While this critic may be correct in describing *League* as fun to watch and devoid of that obnoxious feminist rhetoric, he (and many others who have called it sentimental, sappy, cloying, etc.) seems to miss entirely the potent antagonism that suffuses virtually every scene in the film. Through its ostentatiously heteronormative treatment of its characters, the foundation of antagonism upon which nearly every relationship in it is built, and the narrative's bi-chronic structure, *League* and its ambivalent politics and ambivalence about politics simultaneously uphold and undermine normative discourses of gender, sport, and progress.

The main, 1940s narrative stems from a group of male business tycoons' decision to harness female athleticism as a means to fill the spectatorial void created by the temporary dissolution of Major League Baseball (MLB) during World War II. After a present-day frame scene in which an elderly Dottie Hinson (Geena Davis) agonizes over whether or not to attend a reunion for the All-American Girls' Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL), the film jumps to the thick of wartime—a setting to which it orients the viewer through jingoistically narrated

³⁶ Peter Travers, qtd. in Linda Fuller, “The Vamp, the Homebody, and the Upstart” in Fuller, *Sport*, 194.

documentary footage of famous professional baseball players announcing their intentions to enlist in the army: “Yankee star Joe DiMaggio promises to give those Nazis a jolt . . . baseball’s biggest stars say, ‘Look out, Mr. Hitler—the Yanks are coming! Not to mention the Indians, Red Sox, and Tigers!’” Meanwhile, the recruiters hail female players through patriotic claims that locate the latter group’s civic duty on the baseball field in performing as substitutes in a game that appropriates war rhetoric while men exclusively control the terms of the literal war. These women are themselves deployed as stand-ins for male political agents while those men are away enacting politics on a global scale; the League forms as a collection of (exclusively white) women willing to endure mandatory etiquette lessons, absurdly impractical uniforms, and profiteering chauvinists in order to earn money playing baseball. The only serious objections to female participation in baseball that the film represents come from other women—from snooty, comically uptight and outdated stereotypes of aristocratic femininity, ignoring the patriarchal forces at work behind them and themselves acting as the source of gynophobic attitudes towards sports. Whatever offense the AAGPBL caused any such real-life protesters notwithstanding, the league drew higher attendance than the MLB at one point, remarkably, but it folded in 1954 due in part to cuts to its promotional budget and in part to the advent of television, which enabled consumers to stay home and watch their men’s team of choice rather than attend a women’s game live. Former members and league historians also speculate that the league’s reduced emphasis on player femininity, which had been treated with such exigency in the 1940s, hurt its standing in the public eye and amid the national tenor of reinvigorated postwar traditional family values.³⁷

³⁷ *Official Website of the AAGPBL* (<http://www.aagpbl.org/>, 2005).

While it is wholly unsurprising that this mainstream, feel-good patriotic film set in the 1940s and focused on an organization obsessed with maintaining traditional values does not overtly entertain the possibility of lesbianism, the lengths and contortions (sometimes literal) to which it goes to demonstrate that the athletes it depicts are heterosexual is striking—striking enough, in fact, to *evoke* lesbianism at certain points. In the opening scene, as she discusses the reunion with her daughter, Dottie remarks that her sister, Kit, is now “always off with that husband of hers,” and thus preemptively confirms the heterosexuality of the most tomboyish character and the one (with the exception of Rosie O’Donnell as Doris Murphy, on whom more presently) most likely to read as lesbian. The film paints the female players as rabid for heterosexual interaction throughout; indeed, in one putatively comical episode, they poison their strait-laced chaperone so that they might sneak out to a bar—where a drunken Marla Hooch (Kim Cavanagh) ensnares Nelson (Alan Wilder), her moon-eyed soon-to-be husband. Marla leaves the team during its playoff run for their wedding.

However, many queer moments nonetheless manage to escape heterosexuality’s vise grip on the film. At one point, low attendance threatens to shut down the league. As a remedy, the women are asked to spice things up a bit; the film documents their successful attempts to do so in an erotically charged montage sequence. Dottie herself leads the way, descending gracefully into the splits while catching a pop fly. In another shot, Doris dives into the stands after a foul ball, falling face-first into the laps of two soldiers on leave, and she emerges triumphantly with the ball in hand and one of their hot dogs in her mouth. On an infelicitous register, the comical implausibility of O’Donnell’s phallic encounter—since her public coming-out in 2002 and unofficially acknowledged lesbianism long before—makes this absurd moment poignant in its

tacit acknowledgment of the film's erasures of lesbianism in women's baseball.³⁸ Yet this and other intangible elements also perform a playful flirtation with lesbian representation in their implicit recognitions of the historically silenced presence of lesbianism in the League and in women's sports more broadly: Kit's resolute tomboyism, O'Donnell's queer resonance, and the pronounced butch-femme dynamic that distinguishes Doris's friendship with Mae Mordabito (Madonna).

The spectacular montage progresses from an erotic to a political charge, its antagonistic undertones now mocking the jingoistic images and dialogue the narrative presents. Next, several of the players are shown launching baseballs at cardboard cutouts decorated with caricatured drawings of Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini—a heavy-handed staging of patriotism that itself amounts to a caricature of political agency. This comically juxtapositional gesture and others demonstrating the league's unblushing appeals to the women's patriotic spirit throughout the film are laughably patronizing: bookended by news footage of male professional baseball players, including Joe DiMaggio, discussing their duty to go fight the Nazis, unctuous recruiter Ernie Capadino (Jon Lovitz) makes his wheedling pitch to Dottie: "Your country needs you . . .". Yet none of the women truly appear to be motivated by a sense of duty. They play because they like to play—or so we are left to suppose, as the film steers clear of any direct speculation as to the women's reasons for playing, though it provides several possibilities. For Dottie, the league serves (at least initially) first and foremost as a distraction from her enlisted husband's absence. For "All the Way" Mae, it provides an escape from her hellish job as a nightclub dancer. Marla,

³⁸ O'Donnell has stated that she told a writer for *Cosmopolitan* that she was a lesbian in 1992 but that the magazine opted not to run the disclosure; she remarks in a 2014 interview that "He said, 'Are you gay?' and I said yes . . . I didn't necessarily come out career-wise but everyone in my life knew, everyone in the world knew. It's just that at that time nobody printed it." Greg Hernandez (*Gay Star News*, 2014).

with her homely countenance and shy demeanor, appears doomed to small-town spinsterhood; her father sees her future as hopeless without baseball as an escape mechanism.

The women's apparently apolitical motivations align with Susan Cahn's characterization of female athletes as their participation in organized sport became increasingly common:

The majority of women athletes understood that their athletic ability made their femininity suspect. But in various ways they rejected or embraced only selectively the gender norms of mid-twentieth-century America.

This refusal almost never took the form of political action or critique, however. Given public hostility toward aggressive, mannish athletes, many women in sport accommodated, sometimes willingly, to pressures that they demonstrate their femininity and conform to gender conventions inside and outside of sport. Almost none saw themselves as feminist or working-class dissenters in revolt against the tyranny of middle-class gender and sexual codes. Most women simply enjoyed sports and, feeling lucky to have the opportunity to play, spent little time developing a public stance against gender inequality in sport or society.³⁹

Yet Cahn's account of this professedly apolitical stance is belied by the fact that these women's participation *was* transgressive, that it *did* trigger changes in both policy and attitude, that merely crouching behind home plate or running out onto the court was in effect a political stance. Further, this disavowal of politicality parallels the defensive posture reflexively adopted against claims or presumptions of female athleticism's synonymy with masculinity and lesbianism (the specious nature of the synonymy posited between those latter terms notwithstanding): it is too easy to forget that being political or acting politically does not necessarily entail declaring that one is being political. Among the most foundational tenets of the feminist movements in the 1960s and '70s was the notion, of course, that the realm of the political is not delimited by government buildings, congressional committees, or even the production of policy; simply to be a female athlete—to “exhibit” one's body in the course of an athletic career, to “invade” the space of what has been claimed as incontrovertibly male

³⁹ Susan Cahn, *Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sports* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 243.

domain—is to risk one’s safety even as a political protester might.⁴⁰ It is a physical act, and one that tends to incur punishment, whether physical in turn or rhetorical. Moreover, to return to Berlant’s chief criterion for politicality, antagonism is a broad term, and very little “activity” is required on the part of females to antagonize a misogynistic, homophobic public sphere that has historically sought to advance women’s sport only that it might outduel the Soviet Union in a series of meaningless if richly symbolic competitions.

League’s opening shot positions this public sphere as the domain of male athletes for which the AAGPBL constituted an exceptional breach necessitated by the extenuating circumstances of war. It features two young boys playing basketball, naturalizing athletic activity for males; where female athleticism is a sexualized spectacle—a notion towards which the rest of the film seems both resigned and critical—for boys it is innocent and everyday, something for the camera to pan casually across as it establishes the idyllic suburban milieu. The frame narrative into which this opening leads works ambivalently, ending as the now-elderly reuners enjoy a pickup game of baseball among themselves. Yet the future it shows in Dottie’s grandsons, rather than granddaughters, playing basketball, juxtaposed to the AAGPBL’s enshrinement and eulogization in the Baseball Hall of Fame casts female sport as a thing of the past, an isolated historical necessity wherein women obligingly rose to the occasion to fill the void that World War Two created before fading compliantly back into the shadows of domesticity. But in spite of the narrative’s normatizing gestures, the fact remains that the League did exist, did offer women gainful and active employment outside the home, and enjoyed

⁴⁰ The phrase “female athletic career” is almost a contradiction in terms, as very few female athletes can earn enough money playing professionally to support themselves. See for example Mollyhall Seeley, “What Noora Rätty’s Retirement Says About Women’s Hockey” (*The Pink Puck*, 2014), <http://thepinkpuck.com/2014/02/16/what-noora-ratys-retirement-says-about-womens-hockey/>.

wild success for some time. Produced twenty years after Title IX and primarily set thirty before its passage, *League* stands as a posthumous tribute to women's transitory official entry into and subsequent expulsion from the exclusively masculine domain of baseball and the allegorical politicality of its status as "America's game." It exposes the binds of female athletes who capitulate to heterosexualized demands in order to generate the necessary spectators and revenue to perpetuate the existence of such organizations, and, in casting the women's professional league as a highly but fleetingly successful thing of the past, it reveals the current sparsely attended and highly contingent state of women's sports to owe more to the inability or refusal of male executives to publicize and sustain general interest in female sport than to any deficiency in quality or skill level on the part of female athletes.

Bringing Out the *Best*

Although *League* depicts the mandatory etiquette lessons and stringent dress codes to which the AAGPBL subjected its players as archaic and misguided, American anxieties over the gender expression of female athletes have continued unabated long after the League's dissolution. In practice and in the movies, female athleticism is acceptable only so long as men remain in control—and that control entails no small degree of sovereignty over female bodies. While Title IX's equal funding mandate can hardly be called a bad thing, the NCAA's takeover of female sports forced the former's own model—driven by profit, victory over all else, and standards of physical excellence suited to valorize males and construct females as biologically inferior and inevitably second-rate—upon female sports as well, which has hurt their cause as much as helped it. Denied the emotional gravitas Hollywood accords male athletes in narrative and seldom capable of or allowed access to the set of masculine feats of spectacularity (dunking, football, an almost exclusive focus on *ESPN*'s daily highlight reels), female sport often

prioritizes the spectacularity of its athletes as more sexual than athletic and of its filmic narratives as more concerned with performing heterosexuality and generating feelings of feminine belonging than presenting heroism.

Fears over femininity and sexuality continue to inflect sports and haunt young female athletes today, perhaps even more than before Title IX. The research of sports law scholar Erin Buzuvis, for instance, indicates that since the 1970s, when lesbianism became more recognizable and more openly political as an identity category, the prevalence of ponytails (as opposed to short hairstyles) has increased significantly among female athletes.⁴¹ Hollywood film redoubles this phenomenon: not a single main character—and very few minor characters—in a female-centered sports film since 1972 has had short hair. Trivial though this pattern may seem, it suggests that cultural fears of being perceived as lesbian or associated with lesbianism may be even more potent now than they were a hundred years ago.

In her consideration of obligatory femininity within women's sport, Lindner observes the tangible sense of discomfort that the nature of female-centered sports films produces: "the sports film's demands for bodily realism are incompatible with cinema's gendered representational conventions; demands for 'believable' athletic action sit uneasily with normative depictions of the female body as object."⁴² Such unease, of course, figures prominently in the realm of live sports performance as well. Much of the perceived difficulty in sustaining successful female sports organizations lies in the demand placed upon the athletes to excel in two arenas that conventional wisdom holds as mutually exclusive: athletics and heterosexual femininity. Jack McCue, manager of former WNBA all-star Chamique Holdsclaw, elaborates on what he sees as

⁴¹ Erin E. Buzuvis, "Survey Says ... A Critical Analysis of the New Title IX Policy and a Proposal for Reform" (*Iowa Law Review*, Vol. 91, 2006).

⁴² Lindner, *Physicalities*, 314.

the fundamental dilemma of successfully publicizing women's sports: "We want boys to look at Chamique and be able to say 'Wow she's cool' and at the same time she's a great athlete. But at the same time she's hot."⁴³ Holdsclaw's attorney, Lon Babby, adds, "With the WNBA . . . I think some of the success of the league depends on women like Chamique Holdsclaw capturing the imagination of the public. At some level, she bears a responsibility for helping to grow the league."⁴⁴ Clearly "capturing the imagination" functions euphemistically here for women grooming themselves into acceptable objects of heterosexist fantasy, and these male executives just as clearly see erotic appeal as the duty of the female athlete if she wants her sport to remain a marketable venture.⁴⁵ And by no means does the increasing acceptability of muscular femininity liberate female athletes from the pressures of heteronormative society—on the contrary, it can create different and sometimes greater pressures. The male-founded and owned Lingerie Football League (renamed to the Legends Football League in 2013, though otherwise unchanged), for example, reasserts patriarchal dominance over muscular female athletes by making the only venue in which women can (realistically) earn money playing football one in which their scantily clad bodies colliding becomes more the point than their athletic ability.

Even as media representations obsessively cement the feminine heterosexuality of female athletes, female-centered sports films tend to shunt those characters to the periphery. Morris

⁴³ Street and Smith Sports Group, "Handler's Stress Holdsclaw's Game... On and Off the Court" (*Sports Business Daily*, April 1999).

⁴⁴ Susan Burris, "She Got Game, But She Don't Got Fame," in *Sport*, Fuller, 95. Ironically, Holdsclaw was outed as a lesbian after an arrest for aggravated assault against her ex-girlfriend Jennifer Lacy.

⁴⁵ No doubt race plays a central role in this "dilemma" as well; numerous studies suggest that the American public's inability to reconcile the apparent contradiction between athleticism and femininity may be compounded by its tendency to view femininity as the prerogative of phenotypically white and economically-advantaged women. See, for example, Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: NYU Press, 2011).

Buttermaker is by no means alone as a crotchety male figure in a female-centered sports film. On the contrary, critically and commercially successful male-centered sports films paradigmatically center on crises of masculinity, failure, or some tragic flaw by which the male lead has sabotaged himself and his athletic career. The vast majority of sports films focus on male teams and/or characters, and even among those with female protagonists, nearly one-third also feature central male characters; such films are as narratively invested—if not more so—in their male protagonists as in their female leads.⁴⁶ When women play prominent roles in androcentric sports films, they customarily do so as love interests who begrudgingly tolerate or openly object to their corresponding men's participation in sport, or as vampiric presences who interfere with men's ability to perform.⁴⁷ Even in more female-focused sports dramas, the narrative often revolves around the redemption of a patriarchal male figure or group of figures—the alcoholic wash-up Jimmy Dugan (Tom Hanks) in *League*, the alcoholic wash-up Buttermaker (Matthau/Billy Bob Thornton) in both Ritchie's and Richard Linklater's respective 1976 and 2005 versions of *Bad News Bears*, the regret-ridden misanthrope Frankie Dunn (Clint Eastwood) in *Million Dollar Baby*, to name only a few.⁴⁸ A female character doubting herself and struggling to come to grips with her own impotence and mortality, by contrast, is not the makings of a moving storyline—it is the stuff of everyday experience for girls and women in the United States. In putting men at the center of their narratives, these films raise the unsettling question of whether female sport as it exists within the United States and the American popular

⁴⁶ Lindner, *Physicalities*, 325.

⁴⁷ Ron Briley, Michael Schoenecke, and Deborah Carmichael, *All-Stars and Movie Stars: Sports in Film and History* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 2008), 115.

⁴⁸ One notable exception to the unofficial male-as-coach rule, ironically, is the true story from which *The Mighty Macs* takes its plot, wherein Coach Cathy Rush led Immaculata College to the first collegiate women's basketball championship—a tournament hosted under the auspices of the AIAW, incidentally, not the NCAA.

imagination is ultimately good for women—and in doing so, they accurately reflect the contemporary hierarchy of institutionalized women's sports and demand consideration of the history and the novel understanding that it does not have to be and was not always like this.

Robert Towne's *Personal Best* hovers between reinforcing and upending the male focus of female-centered sports films, to the extent that it might productively be read as the battle for women's sports in microcosm: the irreverent, queer, and comparatively unfeminine Tory Skinner cast as overstepping her bounds in attempting to defy the word of the patriarchal male coach as both wage war over an unmolded female athlete. *Best* provides a rare cinematic acknowledgment of lesbianism within sport; the eventual failure of that lesbianism—whose name is never uttered—in the narrative exposes its limitations and the film thus constitutes both a challenge and a concession to convention. The plot brings together the respective plights of the cinematic female athlete, tomboy, and lesbian: female strength and resistance are permissible at certain times, removed from political situations, personalized, and usually in the service of men. Likewise, deviant gender and sexuality, while accorded some degree of presence and visibility, must finally be reined in. The film, whose timeline fortuitously overlaps with *Goldengirl* but from which it could hardly differ more, features real-life Olympic hurdler Patrice Donnelly in tandem with Mariel Hemingway as romantically entangled pentathletes who are training for a spot on the United States squad for the 1980 Olympics. Tory (Donnelly) is the older, superior athlete; in the film's first scene, she recognizes potential in Chris Cahill (Hemingway) and recommends Chris to her own alternately curmudgeonly and lecherous coach, Terry Tingloff (Scott Glenn). Tory and Chris initiate a romantic relationship the night they meet—a relationship towards which Coach Tingloff regularly casts aspersions (he also makes a pass at Chris after she suffers a knee injury and while she lies immobilized, in recovery, on a bed).

Chris and Tory cohabitate for some weeks during their Olympic training before the romance abruptly fizzles out. Chris soon enters into a relationship with a male water polo player named Denny (Kenny Moore). At the final time trials, with Denny in the stands watching, both Chris and Tory qualify for the Moscow Olympics in spite of the United States' boycott of the games; the former lovers develop a tentative friendship on which the film comes to an end.

As one of the few mainstream films then in existence to deal openly (more or less) with lesbianism—and as one that does so in the already anxiety-producing context of women's sport, *Best* has generated heated debate among lesbian and feminist critics. Is the narrative ineluctably homophobic and heteronormative? Are such wishy-washy configurations of lesbianism better or worse than none at all? Does the film's cinematographic style—including lots of tightly-framed pelvic regions during races—celebrate female athleticism or merely fragment and objectify the female anatomy? Judith Butler writes pertinently, albeit obliquely, on this last matter, and in a manner that opens up productive ways to approach the first two. In an ambivalent consideration of a photographic exhibition of female athletes, she observes that women's sports and representations thereof “call into question what we take for granted as idealized feminine morphologies . . . women's sports have the power to rearticulate gender ideals such that those very athletic women's bodies . . . can come, over time, to constitute a new ideal of accomplishment and grace.” Butler is strikingly optimistic about the capacity of women's sport to alter ideals of femaleness, and it is an optimism that also differs markedly from the type Berlant locates within mass culture. Butler sees women's sports as a site in which gender ideals “are staged and contested in a public and dramatic form,” though she also expresses ambivalence about the spectatorial perspective that “works to defeat . . . the sense of kinesthetic continuity

that characterizes engaged bodily action” but which is also necessary to formulate a “bodily sense of self.”⁴⁹

Another feminist—albeit somewhat essentialist—analysis of female athletic motion, Iris Marion Young’s essay “Throwing Like a Girl,” published just two years before the release of *Personal Best*, elucidates a distinct manifestation of ambivalence rooted in the very mechanics of female athleticism: commenting on a series of studies documenting physiological differences in the ways boys and girls perform various athletic tasks, Young notes that “a woman typically refrains from throwing her whole body into a motion, and rather concentrates motion in one part of the body alone while the rest of the body remains relatively immobile . . . only a part of the body, that is, moves out toward a task while the rest remains rooted in immanence.”⁵⁰ She also describes the “inhibited intentionality” with which a female would-be athlete “simultaneously reaches toward a projected end with an ‘I can,’ and withholds [her] full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed ‘I cannot.’”⁵¹ This ambivalence reflects the wariness with which many do—and not wrongfully—regard female-centered sports films and the counterposed ambivalence their narratives express about female athleticism. “In performing a physical task,” Young observes, “the woman’s body does carry her toward the intended aim, but often not easily and directly, but rather circuitously, with the wasted motion resulting from the effort of testing and reorientation, which is a frequent consequence of feminine hesitancy.”⁵² Obviously many female athletes become proficient and graceful in these motions—but the very process of doing

⁴⁹ Judith Butler, “Athletic Genders: Hyperbolic Instance and/or the Overcoming of Sexual Binarism” (*Stanford Humanities Review*, 6.2: 1998).

⁵⁰ Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality” (*Human Studies*, 3.2: 1980) 139.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 146.

⁵² *ibid.*, 147.

so is transgressive and defies conventions about how women ought to move and act and to what ends they should or should not dedicate themselves.

The discontinuous unity that Young identifies in female athletic motion also manifests in the cinematic body of female-centered sports films, whose individual pieces and inconsistent attitudes towards their inhabitants do not make particular sense but, when viewed as a collective, perform an important function through their unified incoherence—that is, they refute a teleological, conventional wisdom about progress and instead orient the viewer backwards to seek more sustainable, less exploitative models of female athleticism. *Best*, for instance, in its conflictingly feminist and reactionary dispositions, the pull of the various homophobic comments the actors and director have made versus the power of the images the film presents and its “wasted motion”—the non-teleological elements of the narrative—creates a jumbled mass of contradictory attitudes which in their discontinuity reflect the unresolvable ambivalences structuring female sports and female-centered sports films. Like *League*, through its foundation of constant antagonism, *Best* illustrates contemporaneous (and contemporary) concerns about gender in sport, the conventional limitations of sports narrative, and the precarious position resistant females in both. Further, in its scenes of female athletic activity, *Best* takes up Young’s notion of discontinuous unity and thematizes the very feminine hesitancies and internalized inhibitions that she enumerates. It offers as a reparative what narrative and social conventions largely deny through cinematography, as the editing of its “Big Game” scenes assembles a discontinuous unity of female athleticism that finally displaces the dominant patriarchal structure and poses exclusive male leadership—and, by extension, narrative male-centrism as a defining problem for women’s sports and female-centered sports films.

In spite of a cast that features numerous real-life elite track and field athletes besides Donnelly (Jodi Anderson, Maren Seidler, Martha Watson, Pam Spencer, Emily Dole), *Personal Best*'s depiction of female teamdom seems largely a product of heterosexual white male fantasy; the women are repeatedly shown lounging together in the steam room, posing languidly while telling off-color and racist jokes and tittering about male anatomy. Along with these jokes come intermittent remarks by both Tory and Tingloff about—and a casually embedded political framework predicated on—Chris's Native American blood. Though the narrative motivation behind her oft-mentioned indigenous heritage remains perplexingly unclear, it positions her (not unproblematically) as a colonial subject—one across whose body Tory and Tingloff wage sexualized warfare.

As such and again problematically, Chris's youthfulness becomes even more pronounced and frames her tomboyish attributes as symptomatic of her broader immaturity. Surrounded by a child's drawings and lying on the lower half of a bunk bed set, she is cast as youthful, immature (when Tory pulls her impishly proffered finger, Chris rewards her with a loud fart), and in need of protection and tutelage—it is Tory, after all, who convinces Tingloff to grant her a spot on the team. Chris uses a cartoonish, pelican-shaped nightlight to illuminate a faint scar on Tory's bare leg, with all the earnest curiosity of a toddler asking her parent why their bodies are different. Chris and Tory's carefully calculated and insistently communicated childishness amounts to a telling instance of a women's sports film serving as an “adult” tomboy narrative (that is, marketing itself primarily to adult audiences) while still not permitting tomboyish behavior to continue beyond “childhood.” *Personal Best* performs a similar function to that of typical tomboy narratives—namely, confirming the passive heterosexuality of a previously rebellious female—while becoming marketable to a broader, older audience than teen-oriented fare such as

Little Darlings or *Some Kind of Wonderful* might be. Kit, the most tomboyish character in *League*, is, like Chris, consistently characterized as childish, impudent, and rebellious in stark contrast to her mature, level-headed do-gooding sister, Dottie, and the heroine's primary interlocutor in *Billie* (herself cherubically portrayed by Patty Duke) is a dog, who later gives over to her new boyfriend.

In disquieting concert with Chris's accentuated youthfulness, *Personal Best* also establishes a curious Oedipal dynamic that reveals and problematizes Chris's overriding attachment and deference to patriarchal figures. Chris's first words are, after a disappointing performance in the hurdles, "I'm sorry, Daddy." Her father leads her to a private spot under the bleachers, where he first consoles her before she admits to leg pain, whereupon he demands to know exactly what is wrong with her body. Shortly after, following her first love scene with Tory, Chris offhandedly reveals a rather incestuous veneer to her (evidently motherless) upbringing. She recounts how her brothers used to call her "a carpenter's dream . . . wide as a board and easy to nail," and that both they and her father would pay her to tickle them on their legs, arms, and back. Significantly, Hemingway herself was then most famous for her role in *Manhattan* (1979) as Woody Allen's seventeen-year-old girlfriend. Robert Towne—who wrote the screenplay for Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), which thematizes incest even more overtly than *Best*—himself asserts a diminishing view of Chris and Tory's romantic involvement: "To me the story is about innocence, purity, growing up . . . my idea is that they're children, like my daughter, discovering who they are with their bodies."⁵³

These extradiegetic elements of *Personal Best* render its narrative invocation of incest all the more potent, and together they lend its formulation of lesbianism a temporary, therapeutic

⁵³ Jack Kroll, "Chariots of Desire" (*Newsweek* 1982).

cast. In addition to the old-chestnut trope of molestation-spurred lesbianism that Towne's comment posits, his association of "innocence" with lesbian sex enacts a familiar rhetorical move that evacuates lesbian female agency, that renders female same-sex relations "meaningless"—a move that Karen Hollinger acknowledges even while describing *Personal Best* too generously, I think, as "openly lesbian."⁵⁴ Donnelly, who identifies as bisexual in real life, has publically equivocated over the question of sexuality in the film as well: "I had to believe that I could be attracted to Mariel's character in order to play those scenes, but that doesn't make either me or my character a lesbian. I think Tory may have affairs with men after she gets over Chris."⁵⁵ Donnelly's comments notwithstanding, the film leaves the ontology of Chris and Tory's relationship to inference and implication. For all its nudity, *Best* contains only one sex scene between the two women, and in it the actual sexual component is displaced onto the preceding sequence, a strenuous arm-wrestling match between Chris and Tory that features a number of extreme close-ups on lips, interlocked arms, intent eyes, and dripping sweat, all punctuated with moans of exertion; this scene constructs a damning synonymy between female athleticism and lesbianism even while rendering lesbian sex invisible. Further, the term "lesbian" is never used—yet the film has been admiringly dubbed "Hollywood's frankest treatment of lesbianism up to that time."⁵⁶ Not only is the treatment of sexual identity in *Personal Best* unfrank, I would argue, it also neglects to address even the most fundamental issues that a newly active lesbian (especially one as attached to her family as Chris initially

⁵⁴ Karen Hollinger, *In the Company of Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 139.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 141.

⁵⁶ Both befittingly and perversely, Donnelly—who reportedly had trouble "maintaining the intensity" needed for the week-long shoot of the arm-wrestling/sex scene—achieved her semblance of flushed invigoration by, at Towne's suggestion, singing the national anthem as loudly as she could. See Lucy Jane Bledsoe, "Still Sexy After All These Years, (*The Free Library*, 1998).

appears) might logically be expected to face. Chris's father vanishes after the opening scenes, never to be heard from again, and it remains unclear whether or not Chris and Tory's teammates know of their romantic involvement, nor how that knowledge might alter the apparently easy intimacy of the team's locker room dynamic. When Chris begins seeing Denny, she describes Tory to him as a former roommate apart from whom she has inexplicably drifted. In a review for *Newsweek*, Jack Kroll lauds the film for according "the love scenes between Hemingway and Donnelly . . . the dignity of true sensuality."⁵⁷ Considering that these love scenes consist primarily of arm-wrestling, tickling, and a single chaste kiss, this statement rings rather hollow, and its credibility is further diminished by surveys of lesbian viewers, many of whom complain that the scenes are "insultingly tame."⁵⁸

In its ambivalent depiction of lesbianism and the recuperative heterosexual "progression" of Chris's sexuality, *Personal Best* stages what mainstream narrative (and Hollywood narrative in particular) seems to see as the dilemma of the female athlete, dangling precariously between impertinent, independent-minded lesbianism—a lesbianism it is manifestly uncomfortable representing—and the safety of male-coached feminine heterosexuality. In a pivotal, if symbolically overwrought, scene after their breakup, Tory teaches Chris how to improve her high jump technique by starting her approach farther back, taking longer strides and exploding upward with more resolution than ever before—in other words, being more ambitious and more aggressive, overcoming the internalized inhibitions Chris's male-dominated history has instilled in her. Tingloff, needless to say, becomes irate when Chris dislocates her knee practicing this new form. But Tory's mentorship not only functions as a homophobic device to "cure" Chris's

⁵⁷ Kroll, "Chariots."

⁵⁸ Christine Holmlund, *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 41.

arrested sexual development and to restore her damaged psyche, it makes her newly resistant, independent, and able to hold her own in arguments with Coach Tingloff. In turn, too, Chris coaches Denny, who initially struggles to bench press as much weight as his new love interest can lift. Through these scenes, *Best* thematizes the threat (sexual undertones included) that patriarchy sees in female authority figures. While there is little love lost between Tory and Tingloff to begin with, her tutelage of Chris—and, by implication, her sexual “conquest” of Chris—cement this antagonism.

For all its dubious sexual (non)politics, the film’s anticlimactic finale proves ambiguous enough to sustain a more redemptive view, helped along by its fragmented structure and cinematography. Once viewers become resigned to the permanent dissolution of the same-sex relationship, they can better see how the film stages its conflicts through the various antagonisms it presents. Tory and Chris’s breakup and the latter’s pairing with Denny occur in the middle of the film, not at the end, thereby denying the privilege of narrative culmination to heteronormativity and according it instead to female solidarity. In the opening hurdles race, a series of jump cuts sees the athletes (or their legs and feet, rather) haltingly into their starting blocks, indistinguishable from one another. The camera often cuts mid-hurdle from one runner to another such that the second appears to be completing the first’s jump. This editing recurs in the shotput; as one athlete draws her arm back we cut seamlessly to another propelling her own forward. These graphic matches construct a discontinuous unity among the female athletes that emphasizes the action itself rather than the outcome, and the fragmented nature of the pentathlon itself, with its five events, forestalls the traditional “Big Game” climax of sports films and subverts its binary victory/defeat schema as well as interrupting the smug normativity that the film’s romantic storyline might otherwise produce.

The non-event of the Olympic Games towards which the women have been striving throughout foregrounds their personal emotional development (primarily Chris's) rather than their athletic achievement. Chris has "matured" into a heterosexual adult woman who conforms to her male coach's desires, as opposed to Tory's continued, antagonistic resistance. At the same time, and perhaps more compellingly, the general fizzle of the final scenes defuses the characters' Olympic hopes but in doing so also confounds narrative expectations in precluding either victory or loss. It prevents a lesbian narrative—albeit a qualified one—from falling into the tired monogamous and monotonous paradigm of true love and a conventional happy ending. Although Chris bests Tory in the final event, their efforts amount to the same result and thus transcend the dichotomous win/loss scenario the film ostensibly presents: they have both qualified—and nothing more—to compete in an event that will never take place. Tory has taught Chris how to overcome her internalized inhibitions, but Chris's abandonment of their relationship in favor of romance with a man draws an undeniable correspondence between "wholeness" and full athletic potential and heterosexuality, with lesbianism relegated to accessory status.

And still, in this closureless conclusion, Tory is rendered a more sympathetic and more interesting character than Chris due largely to the film's staging of her narrative in contrast to Chris's; Tory has stood up to their cretinous coach and maintained her dignity in the face of a potentially humiliating romantic development, comfortable enough to acknowledge with a smirk that Denny is "awful cute" while Tingloff sulks nearby. The women's athletic achievement endures in this anticlimax and refuses what would have necessarily become a hierarchical ending had the Olympic Games taken place. Further, the degree to which the constantly tetchy Tingloff finds the women's interactions—romantic and platonic alike—an affront attests again to the

transgressively allergenic nature of female athleticism and positions both Chris and Tory as feminist killjoys. In the sustained antagonism—the discontinuous unity—of its protagonists’ divergent trajectories, *Personal Best* subverts heteronormative convention through the narrative’s very concessions to it. This generously pessimistic outlook yields a dubious narrative “victory” to be sure, but one in which female solidarity remains on pace with heteronormative teleology rather than being outstripped by it.

Parting Shots

In this chapter, I have argued that female-centered sports films reflect and evoke the disharmonious history of women’s sport that their narratives tend to disavow, that female sport as we know it today has developed from and through a series of fundamentally ambivalent events, attitudes, and structures, and that cinematic representations of female sport, too, reflect this simultaneous embrace of and anxiety about female athletic participation and control. As a result of Title IX, female sport cannot exist without what its early leaders would have called commercial exploitation, yet it can still tender something positive from within that framework. So too do female-centered sports films—commercially exploitative and gender-normative as they are—provide something valuable to queer and feminist spectators.

These films, in whose narratives male concerns so often displace female agency and women surrender their athleticism for male benefit, illuminate a way of forming a pessimistic *detachment* from narrative and of thinking instead about how the films present these athletic bodies, the antagonisms they enact, and their capacity to let queerness peek through—even flourish—in incoherent and unconventional ways. The endings of female-centered sports films are by and large conventional, normative and easily dismissible as misogynist tripe, but something about the charm and vigor of the female characters that inhabit these films outlasts

their inglorious fates. Moreover, and beyond the question of depicting strong female characters, the chronically frustrating endings they offer invite exasperated viewers to ponder what else these films might be, and to turn to the past in doing so—if for nothing else than to demonstrate that the current state of female-centered sports films, female sports, and female gender conventions more generally are not inevitable, not age-old, and not unchangeable. The pernicious moves these films make, the gestures with which they subjugate their heroines, can also be a cause for spectatorial motion rather than paralysis; the films antagonize their audiences in a manner that stimulates action. One ought, perhaps, to love and to hate them, to be moved to inquire as to why they do the things they do, why they place women’s sport in the service of patriarchy even while keeping alive the seeds of female independence, and how the state of things is in many ways not better than it was prior to the passage of Title IX.

Certainly the NCAA, AIAW, and educational institutions subject to Title IX’s equal funding mandates are not and have not been the only arenas through which females may access sports, yet their antagonistic history exemplifies the structural ambivalences in female sport in the United States, and the NCAA’s format has become the de facto model upon which filmic representations of sport are based. Drew Barrymore’s 2009 roller derby film *Whip It!*, for example, drew praise from critics for its depictions of strong, athletic women in a sport that has yet to be incorporated into collegiate athletics; Xan Brooks remarks admiringly that the film is “brightly played” enough “that its manifest clichés come up smelling like fresh paint.”⁵⁹ For all this film’s putative novelty, however, one wonders whether the forced assimilation of a sport that shuns the mainstream into Hollywood convention is a good thing for female sports narrative or for the sport itself. Does it merely exploit a different, slightly less mainstream and more cynical

⁵⁹ Xan Brooks, Rev. of *Whip It!* (*The Guardian*, April 2010).

audience? Does its promotion of a female-dominated sport that not only encourages but demands female aggression outweigh that exploitation?

Further, in a body of films whose generally predictable conventions alternately reinforce and undermine its normative tendencies, how might various cinematic modes, styles, and forms subvert these conventions even more? Jesse Vaughan's farcical *Juwanna Mann* (2002), for example, blends cross-dressing comedy with sports film tropes to compose a matter-of-fact, despectacularized look at lesbianism and female homosociality. Peyton Reed's massively successful cheerleading film *Bring It On* (2001), eminently savvy to its own clichés, effectively deconstructs the incoherencies and contradictions of female-centered sports narratives and their gender-based anxieties while functioning just as effectively as such a narrative.

Defying convention in a different way than these sports camps, one of the few female-centered sports films that ends in uncompromised victory does so of historical necessity—and it is also a rare film that engages directly, if disingenuously, with the history of institutional women's sports; its success narrative and happy ending hinge on several conspicuous glosses and elisions. Tim Chambers's *The Mighty Macs* (2009), based on the improbable victory of tiny Immaculata College in the 1971-72 national women's collegiate basketball tournament—the first ever—makes no explicit mention of Title IX. Rather, it frames the story as an individualized victory driven by headstrong coach Cathy Rush (Carla Gugino), who simply refuses to be told “no.” Notably, the chief sources of her adversity in the film are the school's crotchety Mother Superior (Ellen Burstyn) who eventually comes around to a more progressive view, and Cathy's own husband, Ed (David Boreanaz), whose protests about Cathy's long hours and neglect of their domestic life quickly dissipate when she simply explains to him her profound passion for the game.

The Immaculata team that the film presents is a fictionalized version of its historical roster; its landmark success notwithstanding, the real story of the Immaculata College team includes an inauspicious tributary to which the film does not refer (and on which its silence speaks volumes), but with which a large portion of its audience may be familiar.⁶⁰ The closing credits include brief biographical blurbs about the lives and basketball-related accomplishments of the actual team members. They note that one Rene Portland “coached the Lady Lions of Penn State University for 27 years. Her team made it to the Final Four in 2000.” Unsurprisingly, they ignore the circumstances of her 2007 resignation from that program—which as Dee Mosbacher and Dawn Yacker’s documentary *Training Rules* (released the same year as *The Mighty Macs*) attests, resulted from the long-forestalled revelation of years of Portland’s systematic witch hunts for lesbians among her players and her persecution and purgation of any team members she suspected lesbianism.

However unintentionally—or even counter to the filmmakers’ intentions—*The Mighty Macs*’ post-diegetic sequence reminds its viewers of all that about which this film and others remain silent. It reveals once again the unspoken nature of politicality in female sports and female-centered sports films, where merely to be active as a lesbian or “mistakable” as one constitutes an affront to homophobic forces. This “happy” ending overwrites the suffering of the lesbians and suspected lesbians, but in doing so it opens the rest of the film to interrogation: what else does it cover up? How might this and other similar narratives obscure or bracket queer truths and possibilities? The most productive answer, I think, lies for ambivalent viewers in the generous pessimism that counters the ill-fated attachments cruel optimism—to maintain a

⁶⁰ An African-American player named Gayle (Bianca Brunson) has been added in the film’s version of the team, though she is given only a single line of dialogue.

healthy skepticism about these films, to detach from narratives that refute alterity, and to let one's suspicions pervade and perplex them.

The suspicious, pessimistic, and backwards-casting disposition this chapter outlines characterizes a queer, feminist mode of spectatorship that tomboy narratives engender; in the final chapter, I will explore the ways in which performers and performances in tomboy films—specifically, those of chronic tomboy actress Jodie Foster—also wield suspicion and pessimism in combination with the residual force of celebrity to queer and feminist ends.

CHAPTER THREE

Chronic Tomboys: Temporality, Survival, and Paranoia in Jodie Foster's Films

In David Slade's psychological thriller *Hard Candy* (2005), Ellen Page plays Hayley, a precocious and tomboyish fourteen-year-old who entraps and torments a sexual predator named Jeff (Patrick Wilson). With great relish, she outlines the bleak legal scenario he faces, concluding with a gleeful rumination on its suitability to cinematic adaptation: "Jodie Foster directs the movie version of the whole thing." This glib Hollywood reference, from the mouth of one notable tomboy actress about perhaps the most iconic tomboy actress of all, locates Jodie Foster, cinematic convention, and the film industry itself at the heart of issues of eroticized childhood, gender deviance, feminist transgression, and sexualized violence. This chapter will argue that queer feminist currents within and around Foster's films and star image subvert normative tropes of gender, reproduction, emotion, and duration through temporal play and a cumulatively unhappy outlook.

Foster has built a career largely around the type of psychological thrillers from which *Hard Candy* draws in form as well as dialogue; its chronologically closest precursor is David Fincher's *Panic Room* (2002), in which she plays mother to a tomboy not unlike Hayley. One of the most excruciating moments of narrative tension in *Panic Room*—a film that seldom relaxes—involves neither sex nor violence but produces its tension by intimating both. Young Sarah (Kristen Stewart), here pallid, supine, and incapacitated by illness, plugs her ears in the background of a shot while in the foreground a burglar's shrieking drill bites through the lock of a vault containing millions of dollars in bonds. The camera makes a series of cuts among Sarah, her mother, and the burglar in the act of penetration, a disturbingly suggestive sequence until it ends on the burglar's sociopathic accomplice, Raoul (Dwight Yoakam), who has just had his

fingers severed by the panic room's steel door—a jarring confirmation and obliteration of the eroticism it has conjured. If, as Tania Modleski has argued, eroticized violence and rape (or its specter, as in this case) are not only common to but in fact a constitutive standard of the Hollywood thriller, then a home invasion film that pits a single woman and her daughter against three ill-intentioned racialized men certainly capitalizes on that tried, true, and troubling pattern.¹ Yet ironically, even as this Hollywood thriller deploys such clichés as the helpless little girl and the fiercely protective mother, the unorthodox gender dynamics *Panic Room* enacts ultimately work to subvert these pernicious discourses and give birth to a mode of female subjectivity that endures, its two chronic tomboys surviving to prove that their mode of gender nonconformity can persist beyond childhood, contrary to the insinuations of mainstream narrative.

In the discussion that follows, I argue first of all that *Panic Room* refutes the conventional tomboy trope that sees female resistance expire in adolescence and capitulate to heteronormative strictures; instead, it reproduces that resistance in an adult through her interactions with her own tomboy daughter. Second, I put the film's narrative and formal aspects into conversation with Elizabeth Freeman's notion of temporal drag and with Jodie Foster's larger career to illustrate how *Panic Room* contravenes the definitionally limited existence of the tomboy via interplay with lived, extradiegetic histories. Third, I elaborate the dissident configuration of motherhood this reinvigorated tomboyism begets, which presents an alternative to oppressive maternal norms and to the politico-cultural phenomenon that Lee Edelman calls reproductive futurism.² In the last part of this section, I contend that a

¹ For a powerful study of film, feminism, and institutionalized violence, see Tania Modleski. *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1988).

² In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke UP, 2004), Edelman inveighs against the “for the child” sentiment that dominates late twentieth-century political rhetoric and upholds

consideration of not just the film and its pertinent pasts but also its related futures, so to speak, reveals that this resistant female subjectivity proceeds beyond narrative novelty into real life, giving rise to a nonbiological parenthood that continues to combat misogynist discourses offscreen in the sustained relationship between Foster and Stewart.

In the closing section, I extend this discussion to two of Foster's other domestic thrillers, Nicolas Gessner's *The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane* (1976) and Robert Schwentke's *Flightplan* (2005) and to Foster's *oeuvre* more broadly in relation to critical conceptions of paranoia, Gothic tropes, conspiracy thrillers, and questions of gender therein, arguing that her body of work asks to be understood cumulatively as overwhelming evidence of the violent power dynamic inherent in heterosexual and heterosocial relations within the United States. Female paranoia, according to Sigmund Freud's writings, is based in the pervasive fear of violent and violative sexualized masculine spectatorship. This fear—or more aptly, this understanding—has stood as the basis of feminist film theory for decades, and Jodie Foster's body of work, predominantly mainstream, narrative, and largely conventional as it is, works collectively and queerly to expose through the residual force of her roles the inimical patterns their accumulation makes manifest. Through and alongside *Panic Room*, the paranoia that Foster's films perform provides a counterpoint to patriarchal paranoia about tomboys, insisting repeatedly on the injurious effects of heteronormative society and its conscription of resistant femaleness in narrative into the service of heteronormative reproductivity. These lines of argumentation attempt to rework dominant critical discourses in both gender theory and feminist film scholarship that tend still to rely too heavily on dichotomous conceptions of gender and to reject

the “absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable . . . the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations.”

the possibility of subversive and/or feminist politics within mainstream, commercial film and the commodified figure of the celebrity.

Panic Womb?

Indeed, feminist film critics have long debated the merits and limitations of the kinds of gynocentric domestic thrillers in which Foster has so frequently appeared, perhaps most notably the cycle of 1940s psychodramas whose Gothic plots thematize knowledge, visual agency, and the simultaneous frailty and acuity of female intellect; while *Panic Room* is very much a product of its particular historical moment (a trend of wealthy families installing panic rooms in their homes inspired David Koepp to begin the script at the turn of the millennium), it also reflects long-standing cinematic conventions and cultural discourses around sex, gender, and sexuality. Dating back to what Mary Ann Doane has termed the paranoid woman's films that emerged in and around World War II (*Gaslight*, *Possessed*, *The Lady in the Dark*, *The Locket*, *Johnny Belinda*, etc.), Hollywood film posits a significant semantic difference between a male's home being broken into versus a female's.³ The relation of a man to his house, as tradition would have it, is primarily economic; it is the measure of his professional (and marital) success, it is property. According to traditions of womanhood, however, the domestic sphere encompassed by the house is her primary and proper domain. Such an experience for heteronormative males might register as emasculating in a pecuniary sense, a violation of their accrued material wealth and the symbol of their neoliberal personhood. For females, on the other hand, the threat is immediately sexual, as penetration of the home presages—at least implicitly—penetration of the body. From Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) to *Panic Room*, too, the invasion of a female's private space by males necessarily becomes a political allegory evoking reproductive

³ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

rights discourses and the repeated incursions of the American right-wing into the integrity of the female body and women's autonomy therein. Indeed, rape and contraception often arise together in political conversations, sometimes in rather alarming ways, as in the case of former Missouri Representative Todd Akin's inflammatory claim during the 2012 election season that access to emergency contraception is unnecessary and redundant because, in the event of rape, the female body has ways "to shut that whole thing down"—that "whole thing" being, evidently, the process of conception.⁴ If, therefore, discourses of reproduction are still a primary means by which a misogynistic society discredits and disenfranchises women, then motherhood itself remains an essential site for feminist interrogations, and filmic representations of motherhood an essential venue through which to pursue such interrogation.

An apt exemplar of the home invasion subgenre, *Panic Room* brings the threat of violence against women into the domestic sphere, evoking the foundational feminist axiom that the personal *is* political. At first glance an unexceptional thriller about a woman and daughter forced to retreat to their home's eponymous safety chamber when burglars break in, *Panic Room* works, in light of lead actress Jodie Foster's *oeuvre* and its feminist bent, on a level deeper than mere titillation at the women-in-danger plot. Critic John Kitterman claims that "it is clearly [the] contest between the sexes that attracts the American moviegoer" to *Panic Room*, but such moviegoers will be disappointed to find not just that the lone mutilated bodies the film offers belong to white men, but that the ostensible battle of the sexes is in fact more accurately a collision of gendered performances within a single individual.⁵ *Panic Room* is in many ways a feminist film, one that defies generic expectations, that sees its "final girl" figure become *less*

⁴ Charles Jaco, "The Jaco Report: August 19, 2012," *Fox News*.

⁵ John Kitterman, "Home(land) Invasion: Poe, Panic Rooms, and 9/11" (*The Journal of American Culture*. 26. 2003), 239.

naked, less vulnerable, and less sexualized as the film progresses.⁶ By accessing a past less constrained by gender-based limitations, she cultivates emancipatory faculties for self-awareness and agency, and finally reveals herself to be capable of deploying gendered performances—masculine, feminine, and otherwise—to her advantage.

Whereas the Gothic plots Doane investigates are conventionally “marked by the existence of a room to which the woman is barred access,” in *Panic Room* the female characters inhabit the barred space to which the burglars seek to gain access;⁷ questions of gendered mobility and visibility constitute the crux of such films for their heroines, and the home invasion subgenre of film demands particular attention for its treatment of females, violence, and domestic space. In the United States, home invasion is a legally defined offense: “an act of entering a private dwelling without the permission of the occupier,” typically “with the intention of committing a crime (usually burglary, often with threats to the resident).”⁸ Having gained tremendous popularity during the Cold War, home invasion films are typically characterized by groups of intruders who enter a particular, currently inhabited home for a specific purpose; over the course of the invasion, they must maintain an illusion of normalcy, often contriving to send a member of the encroached-upon family out into public to allay any external suspicions. The subgenre’s other primary convention is the “breakdown of alliances,” a consequence of which is the dissolution of intrafamilial trust and the further isolation of each faction within the home. *Panic Room*, on the contrary, reverses this tendency, developing increasingly intimate

⁶ Carol Clover’s term for the typically female character—often marked by masculine traits—in horror films who survives to confront the killer, outlined in *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1997).

⁷ Doane, “The Woman’s Film: Possession and Address,” in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*. (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 287.

⁸ “Home invasion,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

relationships between mother and daughter, daughter and intruder, and even ex-wife and ex-husband, within a reworked set of power dynamics. In the meantime, the intruders' tenuous alliance quickly dissolves in the face of the mother's and daughter's resistance, highlighting the potency of this seldom-depicted intersectional cooperation.

Panic Room is largely about the complication of many of the very tropes it employs to draw the interest of mass audiences: criminal Others, "helpless" women in danger, a vulnerable child isolated with racialized villains. Most saliently, the film challenges viewers' notions of gender and genre in order to propose a refigured version of motherhood and, through a mother's interactions with her tomboy daughter (this aspect of *Panic Room* is in itself exceptional; other ambiguities aside, tomboy characters in film and literature are nearly always motherless), a novel possibility for tomboyism beyond childhood. Predicated on Foster's star image to the extent that a viewer unfamiliar with her work might find her character implausible if not entirely incoherent, it demands to be understood in both diachronic and synchronic terms—though not always chronologically—as the categories it questions and the possibilities it posits must also be. The mode of gendered reproductivity that emerges through the reception of the film's narrative alongside its relation to national discourses and the ongoing histories of its stars comprises a starting point from which to think about female agency not as a matter of masculinization, but of reclaiming autonomies of youth and wielding them in resistant relation to patriarchal constraints.

Failed Femininity and Mediocre Motherhood

While on one level *Panic Room* critiques a society that prioritizes and commodifies the safety of the white upper class, it also thematizes a topic largely unheard of within the genre:

mother-daughter relationships.⁹ In brief, the film is a psychological thriller about Meg and Sarah Altman, whose new home is broken into by three working-class men who know that the previous owner has stashed bank bonds worth several million dollars in the floor of the titular space, and who were not expecting anyone to move in for several weeks. Jodie Foster plays the perpetually tense Meg, and Kristen Stewart is her snarky, tomboyish daughter. Meg must protect Sarah—who is sickly and prone to diabetic shock—and find a way to expel the burglars from her house. When she leaves the panic room to find Sarah’s medicine, the intruders enter it and lock themselves in with the girl. In the climactic showdown, Burnham (Forest Whitaker), the most reluctant of the three, saves Meg by killing the most vicious, Raoul, who has earlier murdered Junior (Jared Leto), the original mastermind of the heist. Burnham is tracked down by police immediately afterwards, but his fate thereafter remains uncertain. Foster’s character, recently divorced from pharmaceuticals tycoon Stephen Altman (Patrick Bauchau), possesses a contradictory assortment of attributes—one moment struggling with technology, the next hotwiring telephone lines inside the panic room, Meg is equal parts ungainly parent and la femme Nikita. Far from poor acting or inconsistent direction, however, this complex character proves to be a calculated agglomeration of Foster’s roles over the years.

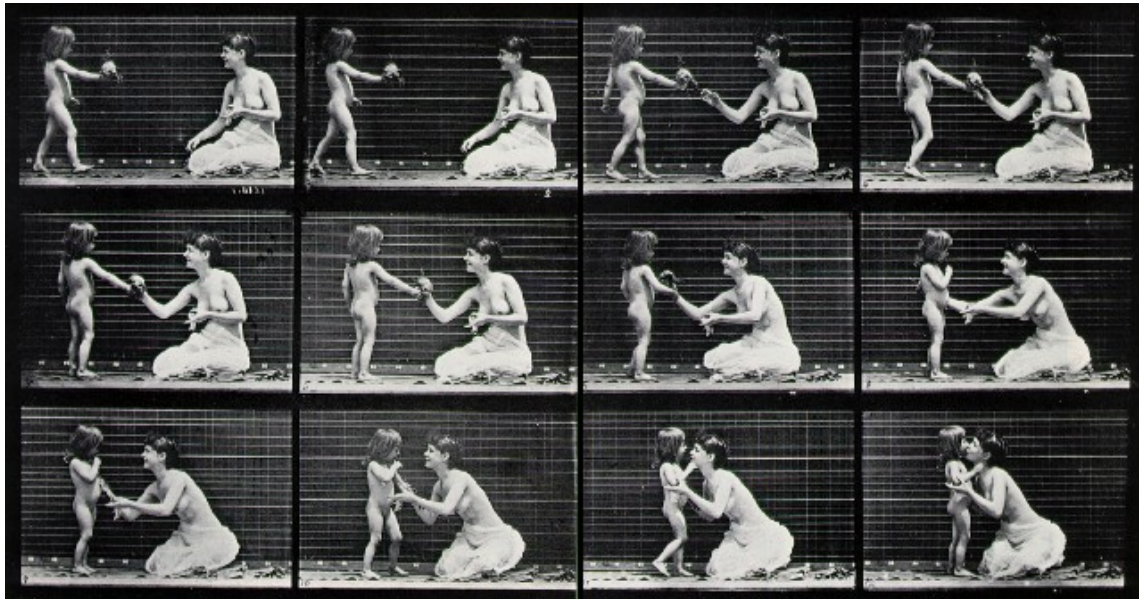
From the beginning, the film casts Meg as an incompetent mother. She bickers ineffectually with her daughter, orders pizza instead of providing a home-cooked meal, and is repeatedly preempted in discipline by her ultra-feminine realtor, who does not hesitate to yell at Sarah for riding her scooter inside the extravagant brownstone. As a mother, Meg is meek, unauthoritative, and flustered, scolding her daughter at the wrong times and later lapsing into oversentimentality. “I love you so much it’s disgusting,” she tells Sarah as she tucks her into

⁹ James Swallow, *Dark Eye: The Films of David Fincher*. (London: Reynolds & Hearn, 2003), 150.

bed, and she is right: viewers are accustomed to Foster's tough, streetwise, consummately self-possessed characters, children and adult alike, from spunky Audrey in Martin Scorsese's *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) to her iconic Clarice Starling in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) to the repressive and repressed Sister Assumpta in Peter Care's *The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys* (2002). The film sets up Jodie Foster-as-Meg as someone alien to audiences, an intelligent but wholly irreconcilable mishmash of incompetence, passivity, and ex-trophy wife status; Fincher plays on this disruption of expectation to heighten the already considerable sense of unease.

Although Foster's personality as Meg may seem like foreign territory to viewers, mothers and the quality of their motherhood have been under cinematic scrutiny ever since the medium came into existence. Eadweard Muybridge, famous for the some of the first motion picture projections of running animals, also exhibited a pair of projections in 1887 titled, respectively, "The Good Mother" and "The Bad Mother" (see Figs. 3.1-3.2). In the former, a young girl presents her mother with a bouquet of flowers and is rewarded with a kiss on the cheek. The mother here is topless, wearing only a skirtlike drape over her lower half; she remains on her knees throughout the sequence.

Figure 3.1: “The Good Mother.”



The “Bad Mother,” by contrast, is entirely nude, spanking a small boy over her knee. Without providing any context for the circumstances occasioning the boy’s punishment, the sequence condemns female authority (the outcome of which is here unfavorable to the male subject), and through nudity associates it with sexual shame. A good mother evidently should, post-partum, be reduced as in the first plate to a pair of breasts and nurturing arms—the “naturalness” and femininity of which state the flowers strewn across the ground underscore. “Good” seems to mean “in fulfillment of conventions of femininity” whereas “bad” motherhood entails sexuality beyond the scope of reproduction, a lack of bodily shame, physical strength, assertiveness, and authority—the sum of which adds up, roughly, to masculinity.



Figure 3.2. "The Bad Mother."

These images are over one hundred years old, but the trajectory of film criticism over the intervening century indicates that the dichotomy Muybridge depicts still persists in cinema and its attendant scholarship. Motherhood, of course, has long been a subject of feminist scrutiny as well, particularly during and after the Second Wave. In *Panic Room*, we watch as a mother recently divorced from (but still fiscally bound to) a prototypical American patriarch becomes a loud, present, and centralized node of agency only after attempting and failing to achieve maternity's ideals. In the history of film criticism from the 1970s and beyond, eminent feminist scholars such as Doane, Ann Kaplan, Laura Mulvey, Lucy Fischer, and Barbara Creed have devoted substantial attention to the figure of the mother in popular film, but their work largely focuses on either the femme fatale, the sacrificial mother of maternal melodrama, or the sinister phallic mother of Hitchcockian thrillers. Linda Ruth Williams writes that *Panic Room* "unpacks a number of genre staples," perhaps most notably the "woman-in-peril"-cum-Final Girl trope that

critics such as Carol Clover and Tania Modleski have so articulately analyzed.¹⁰ As such, its maternal protagonist fits into neither the sacrificial nor phallic category. Rather, Meg becomes a hybrid entity, perhaps still prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for her child but newly equipped with sufficient wherewithal to foreclose the need for that sacrifice.

For every genre staple it unpacks, however, *Panic Room* deploys another to anchor it well within the territory of mainstream palatability—narrative transmutations and displacements crucial to note lest the queer feminist readings it offers arrive at the expense of acceptable racial politics. It evokes but stops short of enacting the trope of the black rapist that has haunted Hollywood cinema since D.W. Griffiths' *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and it foists the dirty work of killing Raoul upon the film's lone minority; the sacrifice this genre demands is displaced from Meg onto Burnham, a working-class, black individual (and security company employee who helped to install the house's security features)—a shift that bears no small resemblance to the commonplace commercial practice of outsourcing undesirable labor to demographically disadvantaged groups. Indeed, multiple myths of racist ideology converge in Burnham, who is alternately streetwise thug and gentle giant; viewers are prompted to feel conflicted about his character's morality, a narrative tack that occludes the phobic constructs on which that character is predicated. He saves Sarah's life and later Meg's, reentering the house after an initial getaway in order to prevent Raoul from killing the Altmans, and is apprehended by the police as a result in the film's closing moments. But by immediately cutting to an epilogic scene some undetermined amount of time later and neglecting to address his fate, the film evades the ethical quandary with which Burnham's trial would confront Meg, as well as the efforts she might or

¹⁰ Linda Ruth Williams, "Mother Courage." *Sight and Sound*. 12 (2002). For an illuminating analysis of how gender identification functions in horror films, see Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*.

might not make towards sympathetic testimony. The script exonerates Meg from having to articulate an opinion of Burnham, but it also deprives Sarah—who vouches for him later in the film in front of her father—of the chance to speak on his behalf, refusing to put into her mouth Burnham’s critiques, explicit and implicit, of the ways in which the American ethos of hard work rewarded has proven specious and the irony of his failure to earn a decent living from building security systems so that wealthy citizens might better hoard the money he so desperately needs to feed his family. Rather than delving too deeply into speculation over a conclusion the film neglects to portray, perhaps it is more productive to allow this troubling lack of resolution to remain troubling, to let it stand as a caution that the gendered emancipation of wealthy white females must not come at the expense of the racially and economically marginalized, and to recognize in the film’s unhappy treatment of race the profound co-imbrication of heteronormative and Anglonormative structures.

Meg’s position of financial privilege means she need not resort to crime to survive, despite her unemployment; the film’s expression and resolution of her hardship is achieved through temporal rather than fiscal means. Breaking with the linear chronology of traditional character development, she must reach both backwards and sideways towards her past—and Foster’s—as well as the model her daughter embodies. In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman advances the concept of erotohistoriography as a recuperative method of encountering the past, specifically through bodily performances and non-normative behaviors. Erotohistoriography

does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter. Erotohistoriography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions and...responses...that are themselves a form of understanding.¹¹

¹¹ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 95-6.

Although Freeman conceives it as a reparative mode of critical praxis, erotohistoriography functions here at once as a performance on the actor's part and as a spectatorial act by the viewer who inevitably sees a performance in relation to past performances. Tomboyism and its attendant autonomy are the lost objects for Meg/Jodie Foster, and she encounters them both in the person of her daughter and in the repetition—with a difference—of a cumulative assemblage of her previous roles, her body of work through a period of history. And the moment that marks Meg's encounter with her abandoned/forsaken tomboyish youth is a moment of eros indeed, one that ends in a self-shattering scream as she cradles her own tomboyish child while watching her ex-husband being savagely beaten—on which more later.

Time in *Panic Room* is both condensed and prolonged: the circumstances change completely in mere instants, yet the night drags on for what seems like hours. The camera creeps slowly through the house, and the film's bispatial structure occasions a perpetual alternation between Meg and Sarah (later just Meg) and the burglars that lends a layer of thickened duration to every scene. In terms of temporality, Meg's character is marked by behindness, slowness, and delay. She has picked up too late on her husband's infidelity, she is going back to school after years away, she struggles with technology; she is by no means "with it" enough to satisfy her sarcastic daughter. This belatedness eventuates from a sense of rush congruent with Gothic convention, wherein women's hasty marriages leave their barely-acquainted husbands mysterious and threatening figures.¹² Meg has left school early, bought the brownstone too quickly, and moved into it too soon, so in order to survive—to move forward—she must move back to a time before all this, paradoxically, to previous roles and attitudes, and most importantly to the tomboyism that her daughter still possesses.

¹² Diane Waldman, "'At Last I Can Tell It to Someone!': Feminine Point of View and Subjectivity in the Gothic Romance Film of the 1940s" (*Cinema Journal*, 23.2, 1984), 29.

Meg's success in adopting the necessary transgressive behavior to survive depends on her ability to encounter and recover various pasts. Freeman's notion of temporal drag, the "retrogression, delay, and . . . pull of the past on the present" manifests itself on two levels in *Panic Room*: first, in Sarah's youthful autonomy pulling Meg back toward her own pre-domestic(ated) days, and second, in Foster's acted and lived pasts, which emerge here as a cumulative persona.¹³ In reading *Panic Room* via Freeman's framework, I seek to articulate the possibilities that both of these texts posit for a future offering queer, feminist modes of motherhood—and possibilities of queer and feminist futurity more broadly—by reaching backwards to past failures and dragging them forward through history, a recuperative countermand to the rush that has precipitated her adverse situation.

The beginning of the film advertises Meg's utterly failed attempts at archetypal femininity as the root of that situation: she has lost her adulterous husband to a younger woman (who never appears onscreen but is voiced by the consummately feminine Nicole Kidman), and she has quit school long ago to be a mother, which in turn has left her jobless, out of touch, and dependent on her ex-husband's money—she uses these funds to purchase her needlessly large and luxurious New York City brownstone. When the realtor inquires as to her profession, Meg replies that she is "going back to school. Columbia," leaving the viewer to infer not only that she is reliant upon the money from her recent divorce settlement, but that it is abundant enough to buy her this massive residence as well as pay her Ivy League tuition

Ample alimony notwithstanding, Meg has lost her spouse to another—for a man the quintessential marker of emasculation, and for women an indication of perceived inadequacy as a wife, a failure to please one's husband, deficient femininity. In its exposition, the film once

¹³ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 62.

again exaggerates its own Gothic elements, as the wife's suspicion of her husband is already validated, and her husband's conventional treachery is established a priori. This uncomfortable position itself elucidates the insufficiency of dichotomous conceptions of gender; an unfeminine woman, of course, is not equal to a masculine woman, and to designate the changes Meg undergoes throughout the film as masculinization flattens the very distinction Foster's roles so often make in resistance to the over-valorization of masculinity. But beyond the fact that "unfeminine" and "masculine" are not coterminous, Meg's dislocation sets the stage for her slowly to regain through the film what has been a gradual loss of agency embodied in the transfiguration of her gender. The film conveys her sexual abjection visually through camerawork and costuming, and particularly by contrast to Sarah's demeanor and dress. After taking a bath—an unmotivated scene rife with lingering, melancholy-fraught close-ups—Meg spends much of the film in a low-cut pajama top, which not only emphasizes her vulnerability through exposed flesh but also attaches to her a perpetual connection to bed, with all the connotations that carries. One anecdotal testament to the film's success in sexualizing Meg early on is the fact that the first term that Google's Autocomplete function suggests in a search for "Jodie Foster Panic Room" is "cleavage" and the second "breasts"—certainly not a feature often associated with the petite and typically well-covered actress.¹⁴

In light of her ostentatiously ill-suited femininity, where does Meg fall on the gender spectrum? Indeed, is "spectrum" after all a useful figure through which to think about gender? As Jack Halberstam has convincingly demonstrated, American society finds masculinity generally easy to recognize, difficult to define, and nearly impossible to conceive of in relation to

¹⁴ Given Foster's sizable contingent of lesbian fans, ascribing this phenomenon solely to libidinous men and boys would be unfair; regardless of the gender and sexuality of Foster's Google-searchers, the point stands that the film successfully cues the audience to view the actress in a sexual manner.

females. Eve Sedgwick advocates conceptualizing masculinity and femininity as orthogonally related rather than diametrically opposed—a useful schematic, although it does little to flesh out the term itself.¹⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* proves excruciatingly unhelpful, defining “masculinity” as “the state or fact of being masculine,” and “masculine” simply as “belonging to the male sex.” Denotative ambiguities aside, depictions of masculinity tend to entail physical and emotional strength, autonomy, agential visibility, and as Halberstam notes, the “greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys,” all of which figure prominently in Meg’s transformation; the latter half of the film also puts the gaze—a cornerstone of male cinematic subjectivity, in contrast to what Laura Mulvey terms the female object’s “to-be-looked-at-ness”—under Meg’s control.¹⁶ However, in the spirit of advancing a more Butlerian model in which neither males nor females are intrinsically masculine or feminine, I wish to propose, contra Halberstam’s incorporation of tomboys into her schema of masculinity, that appropriating those freedoms and mobilities granted to males does not in fact amount to masculinity. Instead, and beyond the hegemonically-endorsed masculinization of the fierce mother figure in service of the nuclear family, the gender trouble that emerges through the retroactive nurturance of tomboyism that *Panic Room* performs disrupts the categories of masculinity and femininity, proffering as an alternative a resistant combination of the two made greater than the sum of its parts by the temporal play that accompanies it.¹⁷

¹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Gosh, Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure in Your Masculinity!” In *Constructing Masculinity*. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 15-6.

¹⁶ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*. (Durham [N.C.]: Duke Univ. Press, 2006), 6; Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (*Screen* 16:3, 1975).

¹⁷ The fiercely protective mother is herself what Williams refers to as a “genre staple,” one that embodies a conditional autonomy contingent upon the orientation of her provisionally enabled movements and actions towards the nuclear family/patriarchal imperatives, from Barbara Stanwyck’s character in King Vidor’s *Stella Dallas* (1937) to Foster’s own Erica Bain in Neil

Like Daughter, Like Mother

Sarah embodies a freedom and mobility that defy traditional feminine constrictions from the start, skimming the streets confidently on her scooter and eagerly exploring her new home; the camera accords her an off-screen autonomy in the first half of the film even as it pins Meg down in dark corners and with tight close-ups. She ranges freely within the house and speaks her mind openly, a vivacious foil to her mother's rigidity, quiescence, and passive demeanor. Although her illness effectively immobilizes her within the panic room, Sarah's earlier behaviors constitute a model for what Meg must do to save them both—that is, move with autonomy through the house, claim her physical agency, become loud and assertive, and stop swallowing the “Fuck her” attitude that Sarah voices towards Stephen's mistress, the previous violator of their household—an attitude for which Meg reproaches her in their dinner scene. Through the unconventionally pedagogical daughter-mother dynamic that develops over the course of the film, *Panic Room* enacts an erotohistoriographic reversal of the tomboy narrative, bringing Meg's lost autonomy of gender into the present and staking a broad claim for a mode of resistant womanhood not reducible to the category of butchness.

Meg is not alerted to the presence of intruders by any female intuition or motherly clairvoyance about the danger she and her child are in. On the contrary, two elements with distinctively masculine connotations tip her off: first, Meg's perceptive glance towards the panic room that becomes a gaze into the security monitors, and second, the loudly bouncing basketball that Junior accidentally kicks down the stairs—another marker of Sarah's tomboyism. As if to emphasize the significance of her gaze, Meg stares directly into the camera before it cuts to one

Jordan's *The Brave One* (2007), who embarks on a vigilante killing spree to avenge her fiancé, brutally murdered at the hands of three anonymous thugs.

of the rare point-of-view shots in the film: a security monitor captures the three burglars as they ascend the stairs and forces the viewer into an uncomfortable identification with the criminals. In the masculine-coded basketball and the moment of surveillance, this scene incorporates both of the elements that Meg must wield to her advantage in order to survive the night and save her child. Further, the staging of the film's gendered inversion of vision on a symbolically resonant staircase—as Doane observes, “it is *on the stairway* that [the Gothic female protagonist] is displayed as spectacle for the male gaze . . . the staircase in the paranoid woman's films also becomes the passageway to the ‘image’ of the worst places the film”—positions *Panic Room* conspicuously and self-consciously out of step with its generic predecessors.¹⁸

Once safely ensconced within the chamber's reinforced concrete walls, Meg remains in damsel-in-distress mode, though not for long. She sits, cowering and cradling Sarah, and in the meantime Burnham disables the alarm and phone systems; her approach is thoroughly passive, and when Sarah asks what they should do next, Meg responds, simply, “We wait.” She slumps despairingly while Sarah rifles through the panic room's supplies, finding a flashlight with which she almost manages to alert their neighbor before dropping it down the drainpipe. Eventually, and only with Sarah's encouragement, Meg begins to take advantage of her home's technology, using the PA system to threaten the burglars—but when they call her bluff she surrenders, instructing them to “take what [they] want and get out!” They inform her that what they want is in the panic room—which must register with the Altmans as a threat of bodily harm, since they are to this point unaware of the hidden bank bonds. Yet oddly at this moment of extreme narrative tension—as if to affirm that the film is more concerned with reconceiving

¹⁸ Doane, “The Woman's Film,” 288.

mother/daughter relations than provoking grisly sensation—Fincher inserts one of the sole comical scenes in the entire movie, as Sarah teaches her mother how to curse effectively:

MEG. Get out of my house!

SARAH. Say “fuck.”

MEG. ...fuck!

SARAH. [exasperated] Mom. “Get the *fuck* out of my house.”

MEG. Oh. *Get the fuck out of my house!*

By creating a rupture in the relentlessly grim tone of the narrative, this humorous exchange announces its own importance, that is, its designation of the sole beacon of hope and resistance in Meg’s youthful, tomboyish reflection of herself. Additionally, the use of this particular expletive communicates her abandonment of any lingering preoccupations with ladylikeness; it is a word that a proper wife and mother should outgrow—if indeed she ever stoops to it in the first place. Although in locating the film’s “solution” in the child and to an extent childish behavior, *Panic Room* may project on one level the kind of reproductive futurism to which Edelman and others have so persuasively objected, it does so without forsaking the post-reproductive adult—indeed, it foregoes the generic call for maternal sacrifice and reinvigorates Meg as an unfeminine mother and an agential single woman.

Where such women are typically pathologized in film and culture as neurotic, frigid, queer, or in some other way lacking, both Freeman and *Panic Room* refute the negative connotations of resistant womanhood and feminism, its corollary. Freeman conceptualizes temporal drag as part of a reparative project on lesbian feminism and its advocates, whom, she notes, “in many classroom, popular, and activist discussions . . . and sometimes in academic scholarship too are cast as the big drag,” complainers, resisters, disrupters and delayers of the naturalized course of things.¹⁹ In *Panic Room*, of course, Foster—an avowed feminist and semi-

¹⁹ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 62.

avowed lesbian—plays one other figure consistently cast in popular film as well as art, literature, and academic theory as the “big drag,” that is, a mother: the nag, the harpy, the termagant, the spoiler of fun and enforcer of duty. Feminized fathers are relatively common comedic fare, featuring prominently and always endearingly in films such as *Mr. Mom* (Stan Dragoti, 1983), *Three Men and a Baby* (Leonard Nimoy, 1987), *Sleepless in Seattle* (Nora Ephron, 1993), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus, 1993), and *Big Momma’s House* (Raja Gosnell, 2000), but masculine mothers are conventionally the province of thrillers and horror films (and sometimes, as Ann Kaplan suggests, matriphobic mother-daughter melodramas such as Irving Rapper’s 1942 *Now Voyager*); the very thought of such a woman seems to threaten the patriarchal structures that the Second-Wave feminists to whom Freeman refers railed against and from which Meg must escape—and it is only by destabilizing them through her own specifically gendered performance that she can.²⁰

Moreover, the presence of not one but two markedly unfeminine females in a Hollywood thriller is all but unheard of. Scholars from Leslie Fiedler to Halberstam have observed not just a tremendous cultural unwillingness to discuss other non-normative female modes of gender expression, but also a tendency to write them out of existence altogether except in the limited phase of childhood. Indeed, many of Foster’s childhood roles follow this model of tomboyism, including *Napoleon and Samantha* (Bernard McEveety, 1972), the television adaptation of *Paper Moon* (1974-75), *Freaky Friday* (Gary Nelson, 1976), and *Candlehoe* (Norman Tokar, 1977). In *Friday*, Foster’s Annabel and her mother magically inhabit each other’s bodies, and the recalcitrant daughter’s encounter with adult femininity renders her meeker, milder, and wiser

²⁰ E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 111.

enough to win over the boy who earlier found her repulsive; in the final scene, she primps and preens in front of a mirror before heading out with him on a date.

Although literary and cultural texts almost invariably demarcate the temporality of tomboyism as finite, a phase fated to expire with puberty and the heteronormative trajectory towards motherhood, *Panic Room* affirms the possibility of tomboyism's persistence and survival beyond adolescence in a form too often discounted by critical work in the field of gender studies (i.e. neither butchness nor spinsterhood nor phallic motherhood) and, simultaneously, the existence of a defeminized motherhood that occurs on both narrative and metanarrative levels, outlasting the film to enact a non-biological kinship between actors whose affinities exceed their onscreen roles. Given, too, that tomboy characters are almost invariably motherless, the pairing of Meg/Foster and Sarah/Stewart here affords a rare and revelatory glimpse at this type of parent-child dynamic—and the gender destabilization it occasions may explain, at least partially, why tomboys in popular narrative are so obstinately kept away from other women.

While Freeman's exploration of queerly maternal ancestry and lesbian inheritance is useful in its own right, the context she provides to flesh out her notion of temporal drag perhaps speaks more cogently to the vicissitudes of gender that inflect Meg and Sarah's relationship. Freeman frames this discussion with a reading of the 1997 experimental film *Shulie*, a shot-by-shot remake of a 1967 documentary made by and about radical feminist Shulamith Firestone. Appropriately to the task of this essay, Firestone's 1970 opus, *The Dialectic of Sex*, constitutes one of the most trenchant critiques of motherhood that emerged during the Second Wave, though many of her feminist contemporaries shared her opinions on the matter. Firestone claims that an effective feminist revolution depends up on "the freeing of women from the tyranny of

reproduction” and ending their abjection “at the continual mercy of their biology,” two major steps towards her paramount goal of “not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself.”²¹ As many other feminist thinkers such as Jessie Bernard²² and Adrienne Rich²³ rightly pointed out not long after the publication of *Dialectic*, motherhood is not so inherently oppressive as Firestone paints it; desentimentalized, it can be a source of empowerment, learning, and kinship. *Panic Room* presents a revision of motherhood which, though failing to deliver women from the biological impediments Firestone cites, does disrupt the gendered distinctions between mother and father by enabling its parental figure to perform motherhood free of the constraints of conventional femininity—and, beyond the narrative in Foster and Stewart’s continued relationship, a nonbiological parenthood in an era when patriarchal concerns about securing control over the female body have reemerged as one of the dominant threads of contemporary political campaigns.

Star Travels: From *Silence* to “Fuck you!”

The younger party in that relationship plays a key role amid the chronological contortions that (re)birth her mother’s tomboyism. Freeman writes that the “material by-products of past failures write the poetry of a different future.”²⁴ As the film clearly indicates, Meg’s defunct marriage and maladroitness motherhood constitute her failures, and her daughter’s queer embodiment (though of course “material by-product” is hardly an adequate term for Sarah) contains the promise of a less stiflingly gendered life. It is Sarah’s wristwatch, fittingly, that provides the cue

²¹ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 8-9.

²² Jessie Bernard, *Women, Wives, Mothers: Values and Options* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1975).

²³ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976).

²⁴ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 68.

for that new life to commence. Another technology of surveillance, the device is used to track not time but her insulin levels. It contributes an additional layer of suspense to the film by constantly signaling Sarah's vulnerability, and it also occasions the beginning of Meg's deliverance from feminine norms, its shrill alert advising her that she must eventually leave the panic room to retrieve her daughter's medication. Finally, and only after watching her ex-husband's vicious beating at Raoul's hands—the film's most harrowing scene, not least because of its suggestion of perverse wish-fulfillment—Meg emerges from the womblike safety of the chamber. She lets loose an earsplitting, primal scream that marks a moment not so much of throwing off the strictures of “civilized” society as of a shattering recognition of their effects.

In this peripeteic instant, Meg's initially dilute character commences the process of being dragged, thickened, and made tangible by the substance and citation of Foster's prior roles as well as Sarah's tomboyish influence. This invocation of her past and its perdurance, in addition to endless public speculation about her (homo)sexuality, provokes in viewers what Karen Hollinger describes as “a tendency . . . to see Foster's performances as lacking ‘romantic chemistry’ with her male love interests”; Foster's perceived failure to create a convincing erotic connection with male leads lays the groundwork for the pronounced gracelessness of Meg's attempts at heterofemininity.²⁵ Unfair though this position of speculative, often dubiously informed viewership may be to an actor, its inevitability is well documented by scholars of star production. In his foundational study of stardom, for instance, Richard Dyer demonstrates that “a star's image is made out of media texts” that far exceed any single performance, incorporating such peripheral factors as marketing tactics for a given film, prior roles, and “audience foreknowledge” about the actor—which has proliferated through paparazzi culture and

²⁵ Karen Hollinger, “Jodie Foster: Feminist Hero?” in Anna Everett, ed. *Pretty People: Movie Stars of the 1990s*. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 54.

social/mass media much more than Dyer could have anticipated in 1979.²⁶ Barry King, too, observes that stars establish over time a “wardrobe of identities” that viewers will consider credible, rather than any one unified persona, and Leo Braudy argues that “film acting deposits a residual self that snowballs from film to film,” over which directors and scriptwriters have limited control.²⁷ For better or for worse, moreover, a star’s image is often deployed for marketing purposes regardless of its relevance (or lack thereof) to the film in question. To this point, Columbia Pictures initially insisted, despite Fincher’s objections, on marketing *Panic Room* as “the new movie from the director of *Fight Club* and *Seven*, starring the star of *The Silence of the Lambs*,” which resulted in a “cross-section of audience that this movie was *not* made for”—an audience that, whatever its undesirability to Fincher, would carry a cognitive association with *Silence* and related expectations into theaters.²⁸

Critics as well as audiences frequently make direct reference to Foster’s previous roles in their assessments of *Panic Room*. Williams notes several moments that recall Foster’s *The Silence of the Lambs* role as FBI agent Clarice Starling, describing the sequence in which Meg “nips around the darkened house . . . [as] reminiscent of the [*Silence*] final chase,” and asserting that Meg “reprises something of the ‘Final Girl’ aspect of Clarice Starling.”²⁹ Williams also comments on Foster’s numerous single-mother roles, from Foster’s own *Little Man Tate* (1991) to Andrew Tennant’s *Anna and the King* (1999), but the roles that perhaps bear equal attention for their underlying relation to this film are older—films like *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*, *The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane* (1976), Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), Alan Parker’s

²⁶ Richard Dyer, *Stars*. (London: BFI Pub., 1998), 10.

²⁷ Barry King, “Articulating Stardom,” in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 168, and Leo Braudy. *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films*. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1976), 419.

²⁸ Swallow, *Dark Eye*, 171.

²⁹ Williams, “Mother Courage.”

Bugsy Malone (1976), *Candleshoe* (1977) and Adrian Lyne's *Foxes* (1980), in each of which she plays a child characterized by precocity, self-sufficiency, and preternatural competence. In all of these films, too, mother-daughter relations are at best nonexistent and at worst homicidal; such singular continuities among Foster's roles generate feminist currents far stronger than the individual films do on their own.

The inevitable influence of Foster's *oeuvre* on audience reception brings us to the second productive intersection with Freeman's temporal drag, as Foster's past pulls on Stewart's present: for all intents and purposes in *Panic Room*, Kristen Stewart is in drag as a young Jodie Foster. As different as Meg and Sarah are in temperament, the film constructs a strong physical resemblance between them. The camera consistently frames the two together, mirroring each other's movements and exhibiting similar postures and facial expressions. Meg's hairstyle, too, closely resembles Sarah's, but it is longer, as if grown out slightly to achieve a more feminine look. Swallow notes that "even before Foster had been cast, the girl who would fill the part had been chosen on the basis

of her similarity to the actress. 'We saw Kristen Stewart,' said Fincher. 'We thought she was amazing, like a young Jodie Foster.'"³⁰



Figure 3.3: Meg and Sarah I

³⁰ Swallow, *Dark Eye*, 161.

Indeed, Stewart's performance as Sarah recalls any number of Foster's younger roles, from Rynn in *Little Girl* to *Freaky Friday's* Annabel: self-assured, sarcastic, and endearingly precocious. With her baggy clothing, androgynous haircut, athletic accoutrements, and energetic



Figure 3.5: Meg and Sarah III



Figure 3.4: Meg and Sarah II

independence, Sarah is a filmic tomboy *par excellence*. It is rare in Hollywood cinema for a girl—or anyone, for that matter—to exhibit deviant gender characteristics unless that deviance (and, typically, its eradication) constitutes a significant part of the plotline; a director as notoriously meticulous as Fincher would certainly not make such an unusual decision lightly. Whatever his reasoning, the effect is to evoke Foster's own past tomboy roles, to illuminate the mother-daughter dynamic as it evolves, and, more broadly, to highlight the play of gender throughout the film (one suspects that a *Panic Room* as originally cast with Nicole Kidman and Hayden Panettiere as the Altman women would have an entirely different tone). Koepp's script describes Sarah as "athletic, much tougher than Meg, who [*sic*] she resembles."³¹ Tomboyism aside, Sarah is a child befitting of the thriller genre—unaccountably savvy, possessed of an ethereal frailty, gently contemptuous of her mother's technological ineptitude and displays of affection. Like so many of the infinitely

³¹ David Koepp, *Panic Room*. www.dailyscript.com. 2000.

resourceful self-parenting children that populate American film and literature, she somehow knows the tricks to manipulating elevator control panels and where to find a vent to funnel in fresh air when the burglars fumigate the panic room, but her illness keeps her believably human and within the realm of affective relatability. Sarah suffers from Type 1 diabetes, a rare, chronic disease in which an autoimmune reaction destroys insulin-producing beta cells that integrate glucose into one's system. Instead, the glucose remains in the blood, causing fatigue, nausea, and if untreated, diabetic shock followed by death. Although it may be a stretch to say that Sarah's condition entails a psychosomatic rejection of sugar and spice and all things nice of which girls are proverbially made, this particular choice of ailment by Koepp and Fincher nonetheless serves an important and specifically gendered function beyond merely injecting an additional element of suspense into the plot; it provides the occasion for the tentative bond she forms with Burnham, his moral redemption, and the sacrifice he eventually makes to save her and Meg both.³²

While Burnham exposes the sympathetic side of his character by administering a crucial shot of insulin to Sarah, the police make their initial arrival. Meg must dissuade them from entering in order to protect her daughter, who is currently trapped in the panic room with bloodthirsty Raoul as well as Burnham, and all three watch her intently on the monitors. Meg pulls on a bulky sweater over her scanty tank top, obscuring her vulnerable form and effectively defeminizing her—no more cleavage. This wardrobe change was prompted pragmatically to

³² While the affinity that develops between Burnham and Sarah evokes on one level the horror movie trope of a villain being redeemed through friendship with an innocent child, it also fulfills one of the commonest traits of tomboy figures in literature: friendship with a marginalized other. Like Louisa May Alcott's Jo and Laurie, Carson McCullers's Frankie Addams and Berenice, and Harper Lee's Scout and Calpurnia Fincher's tomboy forms an instructive relationship with the would-be robber, and he eventually saves her life with a crucial insulin injection after Meg has left the panic room.

conceal Jodie Foster's visible pregnancy; however, its diegetic effects are to devictimize Meg further and to desexualize her in the eyes of the audience. That this shift occurs immediately before she puts on a self-referential, ostentatiously feminine performance—drag minus the makeup—accentuates the process of her gender transformation and her quickly increasing, Clarice Starling-worthy competence, and she proves significantly better at feigning femininity than at earnestly attempting to attain its ideals in parenting. Starling strategically affects a feminine manner to distract various interfering male authority figures at key moments in *The Silence of the Lambs*, most notably in an autopsy scene featuring one of serial killer Buffalo Bill's female murder victims. She exudes an uncharacteristically nurturing, matronly air in her exchange with the local sheriff and his men, framing her request to be left alone with the body as "women's business" so that she might perform her examination uninhibited by their intrusive stares, which are directed at her as often as at the corpse in question. Here, Meg heads off the police by professing that her telephone call to Stephen was a desperate, innuendo-ridden entreaty to entice him over. This scene feels remarkably embarrassing to the viewer, as it self-consciously sexualizes Meg in a manner anathematic to Foster and her broader *oeuvre*, recalling by antithesis the typical independence, self-possession, and obscured (or violated) sexuality of many of her roles.

Capitalizing on this vampish display of feminine wiles to stage a dramatic contrast in the scenes that follow, the film highlights Meg's nascent tomboyism through her subsequent interactions with and around her ex-husband and the burglars. When the latter address her from the panic room, she looks directly into the camera (a point-of-view shot from the security monitor, Meg's and the intruders' earlier positions now reversed) and delivers a muted but emphatically visible "fuck you!," not merely returning but forcefully repulsing the male gaze. In

recuperating her tomboyism and living up to her surname—which itself belongs to and marks her as belonging to her ex-husband—Meg ascends to a physical potency that extends her prior rejection of that gaze. She has earlier managed a brief, hotwired phone call to Stephen in a frantic plea for help; he arrives at the house and is promptly beaten bloody by Raoul, as noted above, in an attempt to lure Meg out of the panic room. After leaving it, she smashes the home’s video cameras one by one with a sledgehammer, cutting off the burglars’ view of her and affording her the cover she needs to execute her plan to ensnare them. Newly authoritative, she issues stern, repeated directives to the battered Stephen: “Raise your arm. Come on, raise your arm . . . Try again. Try again!” Gone are her hesitations, her questions, and her deference to everyone around her. She rigs up her ex-husband with a chair and a lamp, bracing his broken arm so that he can use it to fire the gun she wedges into his grasp; she enacts her newfound agency upon him such that he—formerly an obstacle to her autonomy and an origin of her morosity—becomes an accessory to her survival.

Reputation with a Difference

The climactic scene centralizes the film’s masculine entities only to destabilize their authority in a manner that has become a hallmark of Foster’s work. Burnham shoots Raoul just before the latter can swing a sledgehammer down on Meg’s head and attempts unsuccessfully to flee as police burst into the room with shouts of “Freeze!,” “Nobody move!” and “Get down!” Ignoring them, Sarah rushes across the room to tend to her injured father, and Meg crawls out from under Raoul to stand up, moving independently of—indeed in direct disobedience of—male authority. The police arrival is almost a joke; they are far too late to do anything but apprehend Burnham, who has already redeemed himself. As Meg watches his capture, the camera zooms slowly in on her face, splattered with Raoul’s blood. She is remarkably wide-

eyed and young-looking, recalling the similarly gory publicity image used for *The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane*, in which Foster's character, Rynn, also repeatedly refuses a police officer's help, her distrust of the system leading her to fend for herself. In *Little Girl*, Rynn wishes to live alone after her father's death rather than be

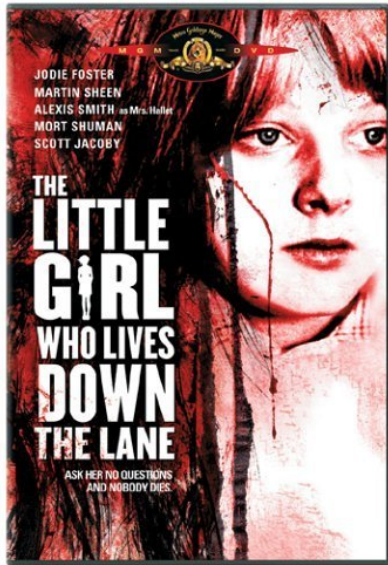


Figure 3.7: Foster as Rynn Jacobs

made a ward of the state, but her privacy is



Figure 3.6: Meg at the end of *Panic Room*

encroached upon by a pedophile, his prototypically phallic mother, and a well-meaning police officer, all of whom attempt through various means of coercion to reintegrate Rynn into the heteronormative, nuclear social order.

Indeed, suspicious glances at authorities abound over the course of Foster's career, from *Little Girl* and *Tom Sawyer* to *The Accused* and *Silence*, and into the post-*Panic Room* era with *Flightplan* and *The Brave One*. If, as Freeman asserts, "identity is always in temporal drag, constituted and haunted by the failed love project that precedes it," what is the project that constitutes and haunts Foster's identity—her star identity, at least—and what is its relation to the patriarchal entities it so insistently questions?³³ In Meg's case, the love project in question is her defunct marriage—and, in a sense, the loss of the trajectory she was on prior to matrimonial interruption. For Foster, however, the failed love project seems to be no less than her involvement from childhood with the Hollywood industry

³³ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 93.

itself, marred by omnipresent intrusive, policing gazes. Over the span of her career, Foster's personal life and politics have attracted an unusual class of attention, far beyond the scope of typical public celebrity fascination. From the producers of *Little Girl*³⁴ to John Hinckley Jr. to gay activists³⁵ to Foster's own brother Buddy—who published an unauthorized biography of her in 1997—to any number of mass and individual social media commentators, Foster has combated invasions of privacy for decades, particularly with regard to her sexuality and romantic life. Until 2007, she remained steadfastly closemouthed about her much-scrutinized sexual orientation and in 2013 renewed her public silence on the topic—speaking out against the imperative to speak out.³⁶ Yet she has never been reticent about her stances as far as gender politics go, saying in an interview with Douglas Eby, "I pride myself on knowing as much about feminism as the next person, and not being scared to say I'm a feminist, but at the same time, its role in our society has changed dramatically, because our traditions are changing."³⁷ Hollinger describes Foster in an otherwise ambivalent article as "the only major Hollywood actress who consistently plays strong female characters and refuses to run away from the feminist label," and

³⁴ According to interviews, Foster—fourteen at the time of filming—was traumatized by both the film's nude scenes and the scene in which the villain stubs his cigarette out on her pet hamster's eyes.

³⁵ Many who believed *The Silence of the Lambs* to be homophobic attacked Foster—whose sexuality was more or less an open secret at the time—for starring in it; for more on this instance of contention among popular and scholarly audiences, see Michelangelo Signorile, *Queer in America: Sex, the Media, and the Closets of Power* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

³⁶ Jodie Foster, "Jodie Foster's Golden Globes Speech: Full Transcript." ABCNews.com. 2013. ABC provides a full transcript of this controversial speech.

³⁷ Douglas Eby. "Jodie Foster on Making her Film *Contact*- and on Filmmaking, and Gifted women." Talent Development Resources.

Richard Corliss observes that she is “maybe the only actress in Hollywood history who has built a two-decade star career without ever playing a traditional romantic lead.”³⁸

Panic Room’s final scene actualizes this resolute commitment to feminism—and chronic resistance of heteronormative gender standards—across time. Rather than the touching reconciliation with Stephen that would satisfy genre expectations, it gives us Meg and Sarah outside on a park bench, perusing a leaflet of apartment listings. They are on their own this time, with no need of the hyperfeminine agent whom Meg let pressure her into buying the ill-fated brownstone. In a last biographical gesture, the film affords Foster—who graduated from the *Lycée français* in Los Angeles and typically does her own dubbing for French language tracks on her films—a chance to display her Gallic knowledge. Browsing the real estate listings, Sarah asks what a concierge is, and Meg promptly supplies the answer: “It’s French for superintendent.” This ostensibly small detail serves in the denouement to remind viewers one more time of the relationship between the film and its actors—not merely their characters—and between the film’s actors, for *Panic Room* functions not only as a psychological thriller underpinned by class and gender critiques, but as a transtemporal vehicle for a pedagogical and emotional relationship both lived and diegetic, a nonbiological and gender-flexible motherhood facilitated by an encounter with tomboyism.

Close to Home: Domesticity, Paranoia, and Feminism

Indeed, although Foster plays mothers infrequently, maternity itself figures centrally in two other thrillers that fall on either side of *Panic Room* chronologically and that draw just as heavily on Gothic tropes and the paranoid framework of female-centered thrillers. *Panic Room*’s

³⁸ Hollinger, *Pretty People*, 43, and Richard Corliss, “Jodie Foster, Feminist Avenger.” (*Time Magazine*, 2007).

Hitchcockian aspects have been noted by many critics;³⁹ its Gothic and noirish elements link it to the domestically-centered paranoid woman's films of the 1940s, which present iterations of what Andrea Walsh describes as "scenario[s] in which the wife invariably fears that her husband is planning to kill her."⁴⁰ In *Panic Room*, however, the wife's doubts about her husband's trustworthiness have already been validated, and it is the institution of Hollywood rather than marriage whose haunting by gynocide and sexual violence the film exposes. Nearly all of Foster's films treat these themes; in their citations and refutations of such misogynistic convention, Nicolas Gessner's *The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane* and Robert Schwentke's *Flightplan* speak most directly to scholarly debates about domesticity and female paranoia, cinematic or otherwise.

Critical ambivalence about the mid-century cycle of paranoid domestic thrillers reflects what Diane Waldman describes as these films' "affirmation of feminine perception, interpretation, and lived experience"⁴¹ and, in their validation of that perception, as Walsh notes, their suggestion to "increasingly independent women that they are weaker and more vulnerable in nature than they think."⁴² Further, in necessitating a male figure to solve the mystery and save the woman, the female protagonist is "revealed as impotent in terms of the actual ability to uncover the secret or attain the knowledge which she desires."⁴³ In other words, these heroines

³⁹ Among these are Swallow and Williams as well as Mark Browning, *David Fincher: Films That Scar* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010).

⁴⁰ Andrea Walsh, *Women's Film and Female Experience, 1940-1950* (New York: Praeger, 1984), 285.

⁴¹ Waldman, "'At Last,'" 28.

⁴² Walsh, *Women's Film*, 193.

⁴³ Doane, *Desire*, 135. Qtd. in Mark Jancovich, "Crack-Up: Psychological Realism, Generic Transformation and the Demise of the Paranoid Woman's Film" (*The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 3: 2007).

can tell when something is wrong, but filmic convention precludes them from doing anything about it, and they must rely on men to save them. Yet in a host of Foster's films—her most Gothic ones, at that: *Little Girl*, *Silence*, *Panic Room*, *Flightplan*—men fail to come to the heroine's rescue. Indeed, the traditional bearers of male authority in these narratives demonstrate their ineffectuality in pronounced ways: the gregarious police officer proves unable to prevent a lecherous neighbor from isolating Rynn in *Little Girl*; the supposed air marshal in *Flightplan* is revealed as the villain and manages to deceive the plane's captain into collusion; FBI bigwig Jack Crawford (Scott Glenn) sends his agents to the wrong place in *Silence* while Foster's Clarice Starling successfully hunts down the killer, and the police in *Panic Room* arrive too late to do anything but apprehend Burnham, whose actions have already redeemed him. In tandem with the male antagonists, these staged failures emphasize the all-encompassing nature of patriarchal oppression. Where Meg survives by repulsing the male gaze, Foster's *oeuvre* controls the gaze of the chronic viewer over time on a metanarrative level, refusing to separate female characters—strong or weak—from the malignant ideological systems that produce them as subjects and precipitate their adverse situations. Through a combination of tomboyish resistance, transgressive motion, and repeatedly validated anxieties about female vulnerability, Foster's films collectively repurpose cinematic violence against women across time to expose the deep-seated iniquities imbricated not only in Hollywood film but also and more fundamentally within heterosexual and heterosocial relations.

The survival that *Panic Room* emphasizes stands in stark contrast to the paralysis with which Foster's other notable home invasion film terminates. *Little Girl* features another tomboy, this one self-parenting, who finds herself confronted with male intruders and the threat—here much more explicit than in *Panic Room*—of sexual violence. The film opens with Foster's

thirteen-year old character, Rynn Jacobs, wishing herself a happy birthday and blowing out the candles on a cake she has made for her lonesome celebration. Her father has died a number of years previously, and Rynn desires to remain independent rather than be absorbed into the state's custodial system. While the self-parenting child is paradigmatic in American literature, from Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn to Oskar Schell of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, tomboy characters tend to be isolated to a greater degree, removed from parental figures and ostracized by their own peer groups as well. Although she is still a child in the juridical sense, the film constructs the orphaned Rynn as unequivocally adult: she lives alone, cooks for herself, smokes cigarettes proficiently and nonchalantly, listens to Chopin, and engages in sexual intercourse.

Despite—or because of—Rynn's precocity, hebephilic neighbor Frank Hallet (Martin Sheen) takes a keen, prurient interest in the girl, ignorant of the fact that she has killed her own abusive mother out of self-preservation but increasingly (and rightfully) suspicious that she has had something to do with *his* mother's death; in fact, the overbearing Mrs. Hallet (Alexis Smith)—the legal proprietor of Rynn's house, as it happens—has fallen fatally after spying Mrs. Jacobs's corpse in the cellar.⁴⁴ *Little Girl* features a curious home invasion plot in which not only a villainous criminal but also a phallic mother and an ostensibly well-meaning

⁴⁴ Hallet's attraction to adolescent Rynn is less pedophilic than hebephilic—a term that designates adult sexual attraction to pubescent individuals and around which much controversy has recently arisen in the psychological community. Hebephilia was rejected as an addition to the *DSM-5* on the basis that the sexualization of adolescents is to some degree normative and, consequently, attraction to individuals in that age range is normative as well. We might consider Hallet, therefore, not so much an exceptional, mentally disturbed sexual predator as a normative adult man (albeit one with particularly low moral standards, given his married status and disregard for anything Rynn says). For further discussion of the normative sexualization of children and adolescents in the United States and the cultural fascination with accounts of sexual abuse, see James Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (Duke University Press, 1998).

policeman repeatedly penetrate the protagonist's home unbidden, while she desperately attempts to maintain the appearance of normality. As a representative of the law, Officer Miglioriti (Mort Shuman) symbolizes the "legitimate" aspect of hebephilic fascination—he can profess a vested interest in Rynn's well-being and does so on his frequent surveillance visits to her house, thereby appearing to oppose his motivations to Hallet's manifestly evil interests in the girl; the film thus presents the invasion of female-coded space on a ubiquitous, systemic level rather than localizing it within a few deviant individuals.

Like its descendant *Panic Room*, *Little Girl* sees Gothic convention inverted as the male intruders seek unfettered access to the female protagonists' metaphorically laden hidden chamber. *Little Girl*'s climactic scenes are occasioned by the revelation of the contents of this taboo space: not millions of dollars in savings bonds but dead female bodies, the reviled corpses of overly assertive women. Attempting to dominate this assertive female in a way that he could not his own mother, Hallet finally corners Rynn—though only after repeated endeavors to seduce and blackmail her—when he breaks in and discovers his mother's hairpin and broken fingernail in the cellar. Outlining the surreptitious conjugal visits he anticipates making to her (his wife, he assures Rynn, never needs to know), he expounds upon Rynn's appeal from the living room as she prepares tea in the kitchen: "You are brilliant. Very inventive and resourceful, very cool under fire. You know how to survive, don't you?" Resigned, Rynn meekly replies, "I thought I did," in the meantime pouring a vial of potassium cyanide into the empty teacup nearest her.

The film brings home—literally—the intransigency of the tomboy's dilemma. Although Hallet ultimately makes Rynn exchange cups with him, unwittingly condemning himself to death, her apparent victory scene is hardly triumphal. Indeed, the striking tableau of Rynn preparing tea for her would-be rapist/forcible-husband in the kitchen—combined with a

prolonged close-up of her still unreadable face watching Hallet die as the credits roll—throws doubt on the notion that there is any kind of victory to be achieved here at all. Perhaps, faced with imminent molestation and rape, Rynn intended to commit suicide. Perhaps, realizing the vulnerability of her situation and the need finally to integrate herself into society for protection, she rues the exhaustion of her cyanide supply. The ambiguity with which the film surrounds this tomboy's intentions points to their very irrelevance: intent is immaterial when one's choices are domestic servitude, death, or murder. Either way means death for her—if not literal death, then the death of her resistant subjectivity and, instead, subjugation to the social order that she has gone to such lengths to resist.

In *Little Girl*, the tomboy's dilemma arises from the unpropitious circumstances in which her dead father has left his daughter, and her survival depends on the methodical destruction of the nuclear family: Rynn's refusal to allow the state to interpellate her artificially into one, the (wo)manslaughter of her mother and Hallet's mother, and eventually of Hallet himself. Yet the film ends in Rynn's paralysis, not her liberation. She refuses to surrender to her individual oppressors and remains unwilling to partake in the system that produces them—but her detachment from that social order and the bloodshed it has engendered render her now completely isolated; moreover, *Little Girl* codes female resistance to the heteronormative order as not only pathological but in fact homicidal at its core.

Female resistance has long been rhetorically linked to lethality and to pathology as well. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed nominates feminist “killjoys” along with queer and racially-other individuals as figures whose expressions of dissatisfaction with the status quo trouble normative visions of and trajectories to happiness. Such disgruntled female agitators frequently find themselves designated as paranoid: “Not only is [legal/social] recognition not

given [to members of marginalized groups], but it is often not given in places that are not noticeable to those who do not need to be recognized, which helps sustain the illusion that it is given (which means that if you say that it has not been given, you are read as paranoid).”⁴⁵ Kith and kin of Freeman’s “big drags,” the feminist killjoys that Ahmed discusses are, merely by announcing their feminism—their assertion of nonrecognition—“already read as destroying something that is thought of by others not only as being good but as the cause of happiness.”⁴⁶ Paranoia, then, or at least the affect and outlook pejoratively described as paranoia in females, is in no small part the result of unhappiness, discontent, and frustration with the normative systems structuring everyday life.

Jodie Foster’s *oeuvre*, it may safely be said, is largely an unhappy one. Corollary, perhaps, to her aforementioned “inability” (better termed “refusal,” as I will suggest) to create romantic chemistry with male co-stars is a proliferation of roles involving her characters being raped, assaulted, commodified, or otherwise subject to specifically gendered violence.⁴⁷ Hollinger’s point bears further attention: Foster’s “inability” to play a heterosexual romantic role convincingly may be partly her own failing and partly a result of spectatorial perception and projection, but what happens if we assume a greater degree of intentionality on Foster’s part—or

⁴⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*. (Duke University Press, 2010), 106.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁷ Foster has played prostitutes in *Taxi Driver* and Woody Allen’s *Shadows and Fog* (1991), a gangster moll in *Bugsy Malone* (1976), an exotic dancer in Robert Kaylor’s *Carny* (1980), a victim of sexual abuse and/or rape in *Little Girl*, Tony Richardson’s *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1984), Michael Laughlin’s *My Letter to George* (1985), Tony Bill’s *Five Corners* (1987), and Jonathan Kaplan’s *The Accused* (1988); in Michael Apted’s *Nell* (1994), her character’s birth is the result of rape. The French production *Moi, fleur bleue* (1977, Eric Le Hung, English title *Stop Calling Me Baby*), features Foster as an underage schoolgirl who initiates a relationship with a much older man. In Dennis Hopper’s *Catchfire* (1990), Foster plays an artist who witnesses (and is seen witnessing) a mafia hit and is subsequently stalked by two vengeful mobsters, one of whom proceeds to fall in love with her and blackmail her into a sexual relationship which she soon embraces. The other mobster is played by John Turturro, whose character stalks and rapes Foster’s Linda in *Five Corners*.

better yet, what happens if we dispense with the presumption that she and her characters are trying to or ought to try to create such chemistry? As the living embodiment of what Ahmed would call a feminist killjoy, Foster disrupts heteronormative trajectories and expectations; her films repeatedly deromanticize and dismantle corresponding ideals, offering instead a bare look at the ramifications of being a non-normative female in the United States' sex/gender system.

Insistent as it is upon exposing imbalances, violences, and omnipresent problematics inherent in heterosexual and heterosocial relationships, Foster's *oeuvre*, too, might most productively be viewed as a manifestation of feminist paranoia, with all that term's connotations of pathology and hyperactive intellect and gender difference. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic conception of female paranoia, detailed in "A Case of Paranoia Running Counter to the Theory of the Disease," (1915) develops around a young woman who suspects that the man with whom she is conducting an affair has arranged for their trysts to be photographed surreptitiously by a third party (presumed also to be male in the scenario). Upon learning that the woman has also come to believe that a respected elderly female co-worker knows and disapproves of the affair, Freud concludes that the woman has a pathological mother-complex connected to the patient's relationship with this co-worker, who stands as the supposed agent of her persecution in her delusion and her repressed love-object: the cause of pathology lies in an unhealthy bond with the mother, and its effect is the transformation of homosexual impulses into paranoia. At bottom, then, female paranoia hinges on the female bonds and desires of which hegemonic discourses disapprove.⁴⁸

Paranoia—or at least Freud's psychoanalytic account of it—is a concept whose workings various academics have lately analyzed and sought to recuperate; for example, Sianne Ngai

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, "A Case of Paranoia Running Counter to the Theory of the Disease," *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), 87-96.

suggests in *Ugly Feelings* that paranoia *qua* “conspiracy theory” may have been “quietly claimed as a masculine prerogative” towards the end of the twentieth century.⁴⁹ After Frederic Jameson, she characterizes (implicitly male-centered) conspiracy films as “allegories for the attempt—and, more significantly, failure—on the part of subjects to grasp global capitalism’s social totality in formal or representational terms,” and in which the protagonists “belatedly find that they are small subjects caught up in larger systems extending beyond their comprehension and control.”⁵⁰ Ngai and Jameson view conspiracy theory as synecdochal to intellectual theory more broadly, and Ngai identifies both as primarily “male form[s] of knowledge production,” at least insofar as universal abstractions tend to be coded as masculine. Excluded by custom from political thrillers and the domain of unmarked theory, female—more specifically, *feminist*—forms of abstraction, most prominently the designation of “patriarchy” as a (or the) definitive, totalizing system, are regarded as a “source of embarrassment” among academics, an attitude that, when juxtaposed to the glorification of male abstraction/conspiracy theory highlights a fundamental imbalance: namely, that “paranoia can be denied the *status* of epistemology when claimed by some subjects, while valorized for precisely that status when claimed by others.”⁵¹ The ability to voice and validate paranoia, therefore, to identify and articulate the systemic structures that undergird gender and genre, is integral to female resistance and the possibility of change: a paranoid reading of heterosexist paranoia.

Many feminist critics before and alongside Ngai have addressed Freud’s conceptualization of paranoia in relation to film, often with respect to its characteristic symptoms of delusion, hallucination, and projection as well as the cinematic evocations of the scenario

⁴⁹ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 298.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 299.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 302.

around which Freud here theorizes female paranoia (Doane, Halberstam, Jacqueline Rose, Patricia White, et al), and in the context of films considerably older than Foster's but on which the latter set draws heavily. Rose, for example, describes the phenomenon of cinema via paranoia, as "the outward projection of a rejected idea—the content of a desire—which reappears as perceived reality, against which repression manifests itself anew as opposition."⁵² In parallel albeit less strictly psychoanalytic terms, one might read the consistent persecution of female characters by men in Foster's *oeuvre* as a projection of the not-delusive-but-frequently-treated-as-such notion of an oppressive patriarchy. Halberstam observes, too, that female anxiety over becoming the object of an unknown gaze marks intelligence in female horror film characters; those who dismiss such fears conventionally become victims of the killer who really was there after all.⁵³ Halberstam goes on to advocate for "reading with the female paranoiac to show that horror narratives are not always . . . complicit with misogyny."⁵⁴ Further than this, however, and more properly in the domain of domestic thrillers than horror, I argue that the paranoia Foster's *oeuvre* performs does not merely show that such films are "not always" misogynist, but actively calls attention to and deconstructs the systemic misogyny of cinematic narrative.

Key to this performance is a relentless iterativity equal to Hollywood's pertinaciously problematic discourses. Less optimistic than Halberstam, Jyotsna Kapur draws from both Jameson and Ngai to outline a growing trend in the early twenty-first century of conspiracy thrillers that thematize the loss of children—and, more specifically, a parent's inability to care sufficiently for his or her child—as the "subject of horror and alarm" in such films; she contrasts

⁵² Jacqueline Rose, "Paranoia and the Film System" in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988), 143.

⁵³ Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 126.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 136.

this trend to the lighthearted cinematic celebration of the “growing up of children and the growing down of adults” predominant in the 1970s and ‘80s.⁵⁵ Expanding on Jameson’s account of the male paranoiac as a figure for the (also male) intellectual theorist who strives to apprehend the totalities of global capital, Kapur parses the gendered discrepancies between male and female paranoiac characters in film: a male paranoiac is not only “intellectually driven,” as per Jameson, but indeed an “idealized subject who thinks fast on his feet and cuts through [his] fear to find the conspirators,” typically “foreign” villains, aliens, or technology—but seldom ideological social structures, of course. The female of the species, on the other hand, “turns delusional and vulnerable to suggestions . . . both the character and the audience doubt her ability to think rationally.” As Kapur acknowledges, the “excessive affect” that characterizes paranoia is marked as feminine, harking back to the Gothic thrillers Walsh and Waldman explore, as are the domestic sphere and the threat of child-loss that premise female-centered conspiracy thrillers, insofar as they exist; for her, female paranoia is intrinsically bound up with domestic concerns and with women’s threatened ability to “stand as a buffer between [her] children and the market.”⁵⁶ These films, she asserts, submit disingenuous conceptions of political progress, merely replaying a tired “trope of diminutive white women in need of protection from outsider threats” that perpetuates sexist and racist ideologies. Yet to dismiss such films on the basis of their putative localization and individualization of misogyny forecloses the possibility of allegorical and cumulative readings that would provide precisely the “more systemic understanding” for which she calls.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Jyotsna Kapur, “Fear on the Footsteps of Comedy: Childhood and Paranoia in Contemporary American Cinema.” (*Visual Anthropology*, 2009), 44.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 47-8.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 50.

Pursuant to such an understanding, Ngai identifies a component of “suspicious timing” in conspiracy theory, which emerges in the speculative formulation, “why is it that at the same time . . . ?”.⁵⁸ This temporal framework suggests a condensation of circumstances and a recurrence of noteworthy events within a relatively short span of time. In Foster’s case, this timing entails not so much a series of suspicious instances as an unremittingly misogynistic climate in which inurement breeds disavowal. Dispersed as they are over the course of her career, her thrillers drag along key elements of their generic predecessors and the anxieties over increasing female independence that they reflect according to their respective historical contexts: *Little Girl* Cold War concerns about the dissolution of the nuclear family and the 1970s-era sexualization of adolescents in film and culture, for example; *Silence* panic over the inability to contain the AIDS crisis and the increasing political volume of queer groups and individuals; and *Flightplan* the (often manufactured) threat of international terrorism and its obfuscation of closer-to-home, less sensational threats. Paranoia *qua* theory accordions outward across history in Foster’s *oeuvre*, locating elements of conspiracy not simply in discrete diegeses but in overarching, transhistorical narratives. By insistently posing problematized depictions of the heteronormative nuclear family and heterosexuality more broadly, Foster has literally acted out a mode of feminist paranoia over the past forty-odd years, theorizing the holistic and all-encompassing structure to which the abstractions of both patriarchy and the less “embarrassing” heteronormativity apply. If heteronormative ideology is paranoid about tomboys and their relation to female insubordination, then Foster’s body of work, with all its resistant figures incarnated as tomboys and otherwise, evinces a metaparanoia about that ideology’s phobic position—which she counters by repeatedly and differently presenting dissident bodies within that corpus.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 304.

If not a conspiracy thriller *per se*, nor quite a traditionally Gothic mystery, *Panic Room* draws on a type of paranoia specific to the female body, a type of paranoia that sees home invasion as allegorical of rape, and rape as symptomatic of the systemic structure that feminists have called—and that they have been derisively termed “paranoid” for calling—patriarchy. As my discussion of *Panic Room* seeks to suggest, films that center on a female character and her (violated) rights as a mother as well as threats to her bodily integrity, implied or otherwise, are necessarily political and do offer systemic understandings of patriarchy and white supremacist ideology. When Hollywood thrillers feature female protagonists, they are almost invariably staged as “domestic” rather than “political”—a distinction that Second Wave feminists effectively deconstructed decades ago, yet one that lives on in this genre. Just as the personal is political, the domestic thriller is a political thriller, albeit a kind in which the female subject’s knowledge-production is circumscribed and individualized to the domain of the home and family—but still potentially allegorical of a “holistic and all-encompassing system.”⁵⁹

Befittingly, Foster’s résumé includes another film, forty years newer, that explores precisely these relationships among domesticity, paranoia, conspiracy, and gender, as it confronts its female lead with a political conspiracy to which—due to her perceived state of hysteria ostensibly brought on by her husband’s death—no one onboard gives credence. *Flightplan* loosely adapts Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), a mystery film set on a train, in which the protagonist’s sanity is called into question when a fellow passenger whom no one else remembers having seen disappears. A more traditional conspiracy thriller than *Panic Room*, *Flightplan* stars Foster as Kyle Pratt in a role originally written for Sean Penn and later modified to suit Foster. The film might be termed “political” insofar as it involves terrorist plots,

⁵⁹ Ngai, *Feelings*, 299.

international collusion, and federal agents in a post-9/11 milieu saturated with and structured by fear, yet for Kyle, the issue at hand is still domestic: her daughter, Julia (Marlene Lawston), disappears onboard an airborne plane, and no one else admits to having seen the little girl at all. Isolated and finally written off by the crew and passengers as hysterical and delusional (her husband has died recently, and the purpose of their trip is to return his body from Germany to the United States for burial), Kyle insists precisely that something is wrong with the system. She is right, of course; the passenger list has been doctored and her daughter's boarding pass stolen. The federal Air Marshal Carson (Peter Sarsgaard) and a female flight attendant (whose stereotypically feminine occupation contrasts Kyle's career as a propulsion engineer; she is played by Katie Beahan) are part of a terrorist plot to hijack the plane and frame her. After the repeated disturbances she causes force the crew to make an emergency landing, Kyle manages to escape from the villainous co-conspirators, find Julia, and detonate the planted explosives.

Flightplan opens on Kyle, seated alone in a silent and deserted Berlin airport. The camera switches between softly-lit fantasy and the cold, sharp focus of reality, cutting from the image of her husband greeting her in the airport to a morgue: Kyle's last, private moment with his body before closing the coffin. The narrative repeatedly gestures towards the possibility of Kyle's unreliability, but the film maintains clear formal distinctions between truth and fancy, as the dreamlike, colorful, isolating mise-en-scène contrast starkly with the shadowy, crowded environments that it presents in virtually every scene after the opening intervals of unreality. Indeed, the camera seems to be Kyle's lone ally when Julia disappears, supplementing her frantic search with lingering glances down darkened aisles, spiraling up the airplane's staircase, probing its infinitude of nooks and crannies. While it—like the female protagonist—is limited by conventional narrative constraints and cannot directly reveal Julia's whereabouts, every genteel

viewer knows (to recall Leslie Fiedler's turn of phrase) that the instincts of the hero—even when a heroine—of a conspiracy thriller will ultimately be validated, and there is never any real doubt that Kyle's daughter is onboard somewhere. The film's real interest, then, lies in the particular ways that this heroine is discredited, that is, how misogynistic gender norms are deployed to silence and discredit her.

The system the villains have installed is comprehensive, transnational, and predicated on cultural assumptions about gender. They have tampered with the flight information, prevented anyone from noticing Julia before her abduction, and conspired with the Berlin hospital to convince everyone, including the ostentatiously fair-minded captain, that Kyle's daughter died along with her husband, resulting in her psychological instability. Kyle finds herself beset by traditionally authoritative masculinity but also by its feminine accessory in Stephanie, the catty flight attendant. Together, by constantly invoking the feminizing rhetoric of mental illness—delusion, hysteria, hallucination—the villains persuade the captain first that Kyle's excessive emotionality is a danger to everyone onboard, and later, that she is in fact the one working to execute a terrorist plot and has rigged the plane with explosives. Predictably, the captain finds Carson's conspiracy theory much easier to swallow than Kyle's, never questioning his governmentally-endorsed authority. Disenfranchised by dominant tropes of female irrationality, Kyle has no way to make herself heard within the bounds of socially and legally acceptable discourse. She escapes her physical constraints and Carson's surveillance by climbing through the ceiling of the latrine and into the plane's infrastructure, an acrobatic feat of defiance that Charlotte Mary Yonge would surely have called a tomboyade, were the circumstances less dire. When the plane lands, she finally locates a drugged and unconscious Julia and shields herself and her daughter inside a protected compartment as she detonates the explosives in the main cabin.

The girl and the film's answer, fittingly, are hidden in avionics—the section of an airplane that enables navigation, communication, displays, and the hundreds of other electrical systems necessary to proper function: the infrastructure, where, as Ahmed suggests, only someone asking, knowing how to ask, and willing to cause immense trouble might find them.

In *Flightplan*, Julia is a figure rather than a character, one valuable not because of her “innocence” or the culturally unquestioned goodness of (white) children, but because of her potential for resistance—a resistance common in but not limited to childhood. Likewise, Kyle's maternal protectiveness is not circumscribed to tropes of fierce motherhood and heterosexual reproduction, but is closely linked to female resistance and questions of feminist epistemology. Julia must be saved, per this view, so that she might learn from Kyle to ask the right questions, to analyze systems, and to interrogate infrastructures: something is indeed wrong, and its redress necessitates female transgression on multiple levels.

Killjoy to the World

As *Panic Room* demonstrates, this mode of feminist reproduction does not necessarily correspond to the hierarchal descendance of the biological nuclear family. Indeed, in the years following the completion of both *Panic Room* and *Flightplan*, Foster herself has enacted one such mode of feminist homosociality and inheritance that exceeds biological ties. Alongside the problematics of past and present that her *oeuvre* exposes, the future of sustained female cooperation against heteronormative forces that *Panic Room* creates has proven beneficial to both the characters and actresses alike. Through her relationship with Foster, Kristen Stewart the former child actress has gained a parental surrogate to help her endure real-life invasions, the perils of stardom, and an ever-surveillant public—and Foster has been active in that role. Now taking cues, perhaps, from her own experience with motherhood as well as Meg Altman's

metamorphosed maternity, Foster continues to enact an oblique, mimetically reproductive parental connection with Stewart, breaching the heteronormative, misogynistic, slut-shaming public sphere with staged, aggressive defenses. In doing so, she is also, to borrow Freeman's phrase once again, being a drag—that is, issuing an ethical injunction to the public's collective conscience: in 2012, when Stewart herself came to be perceived as failing at femininity and was dragged in a different sense—through the mud—for her highly publicized affair with *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) director Rupert Sanders, Foster authored an impassioned defense of her former co-star and of child actors in general in *The Daily Beast*, contending that “we seldom consider the childhoods we destroy. . . the online harassment . . . humiliations . . . when the public throws stones.” Further, she writes, “If I were a young actor today I would quit before I started. If I had to grow up in this mediated culture, I don't think I could survive it emotionally.”⁶⁰ The emotional hardships to which Foster alludes entail the loss of the relative freedoms and mobilities that characterize tomboyism as a resistant mode of gender; Stewart's treatment and ostensible devolution from tomboy to “trampire” exemplify the effects of the public's disciplinary gaze upon the (now) feminine subject whose existence it both impels and abhors.⁶¹

A revealing manifestation of this gaze, the top YouTube comment (determined by number of “likes” from other users) on the *Panic Room* trailer opines, “i liked kristen Steward [sic] better when she was a boy.” This offhand remark, simultaneously sincere and sarcastic,

⁶⁰ Jodie Foster, “Jodie Foster Blasts Kristen Stewart–Robert Pattinson Break-Up Spectacle.” *The Daily Beast*, 2012.

⁶¹ Actor-comedian Will Ferrell coined the term “trampire” in an August 2012 interview with Conan O'Brien; it refers to Stewart's role in the vampire series *Twilight*, in which she plays Robert Pattinson's love interest and on the set of which the two began dating. The online vendor Skreend offered t-shirts with slogans such as “Kristen Stewart is a Trampire,” “Kristen Stewart Fucking Sucks,” and “Trust No Bitch” printed over an image of Stewart's face.

attests to the degree to which extradiegetic factors and tangentially-related texts—what Stephen Barker and Brian Herrera have termed “parahistories”—influence the reception of literary objects over time, for better or for worse.⁶² As of 2014 one of the most maligned actresses of her generation, Stewart is seen as having betrayed her tomboyish identity in favor of conventional femininity, precisely the trajectory dictated by popular narrative—but she then careened past it into putative “slut” territory, and her former resistance to gender norms seems to amplify the magnitude of her apparent wrongdoing. Inverse to the ways in which Meg conjures by contrast Foster’s prior roles, the multichronal mode of viewership in which this YouTube user engages makes Stewart’s performance as Sarah at once queerer and more precarious, prompting contemporary audiences to mourn her future via her past and to wish themselves that her tomboyism could have survived.

Viewed retrospectively, *Panic Room* offers one possible reparative to such predicaments for Stewart, Foster, their characters, and mothers and children within and outside of Hollywood. Through its reversal of the tomboy-taming trope and its renunciation of chrononormative character development, the film makes available modes of defeminized motherhood and enduring tomboyism that exceed the bounds of the narrative, reaching into past, present, and future to foster more salutary encounters between females and the passage of time. Part of its work in doing so is to emphasize the act of viewing and the role that the audience plays in mediating among form, narrative and its own complicit spectatorship: following the suggestively and troublingly penetrative drilling scene in structure and chronological order, a second cross-

⁶² In Brian Herrera’s article “Compiling *West Side Story*’s Parahistories, 1949–2009,” he expands on Stephen Barker’s notion of “parahistories,” which Herrera describes as “those histories that are at once analogous and parallel to, but also distinct and separate from, a performance’s central, official history.” Although Herrera and Barker use this concept to discuss theatrical performance, the publicness of Hollywood and mediated accessibility to related gossip, side stories, and actors’ lives make it useful in considering film as well.

cutting sequence jumps between Burnham's point-of-view, a gaze through a magnifying lens to aid in unlocking the safe, and Meg scrambling around her house to destroy the security cameras. Even as she eliminates these two men's view of her, surveillance continues on a technical, less overt level, enforced by the cinematography and perpetrated by the spectator. The redoubled gaze the film thus effects is an ambivalent one, reasserting the violation of the female private sphere but also providing this uncommon and important view of tomboys interacting in a domestic space.

Bearing this ambivalence in mind, I conceive tomboyism not, finally, as a panacea or utopian vision of gender, but as a way to remobilize females—especially mothers—who flounder in the currents of a properly feminine trajectory, females whom queer theory and feminism alike have at times abandoned as either complicit propagators or dupes of heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies. Moreover, tomboyism is a position from which to critique such ideologies and their connections of related discourses of femaleness—including those with sexual, racial, and class underpinnings. While of course *Panic Room* or any one film will not reverse America's general low esteem for women nor deter politicians from espousing pure fictions about rape nor even prevent Hollywood from capitalizing on ideologically suspect tropes and situations, the female subjectivities it engenders and their interrelations animate a mode of resistance to such malignant discourses and hostile gazes and enable a mode of spectatorship that productively encourages us to view films and their inhabitants as they develop over time and drag their pasts, filmic and offscreen, along with them.

Patriarchy sees a danger in tomboys, and their treatment in popular narrative reflects this masculinist paranoia—the fear that rebellious females left unrehabilitated into society could overturn the male-dominated social order. It regards them as threats to its supremacy and

therefore mandates their “expiration.” The paranoid temporality to which Foster’s work gives life, rife as it is with resistant female characters, is not so much the suspicious simultaneity that Ngai ascribes to the individualized conspiracy thriller, but the systemic and virulent chronicity with which females in heterosexual and heterosocial relations are disadvantaged. The female homosociality that *Panic Room* presents, that *Little Girl* denies, and that *Flightplan* forecloses matters because it politicizes the tomboy in specific relation—a relation that mainstream narrative typically occludes—to feminist concerns about the sovereignty of females over their own bodies. It de-isolates the tomboy and grants her a (re)generative power, proliferating resistance and underscoring the need for that resistance.

AFTERWORD

To the Bitter End and Beyond

In the process of working on this dissertation over the past few years, I have been met with many a knowing remark from others both within and outside of academia about the apparently self-evident stakes I hold in the topic. While I would make no pretenses to deny my personal investment in the project, I also firmly believe that its arguments extend far beyond tomboyism and lesbianism and a small, particular spectatorial demographic that cleaves to their narratives. In exploring affiliations—presumed, perceived, and experienced—between and among tomboy and lesbian narrative, tomboyism, lesbianism, and feminism, I have worked to elucidate the ways cultural discourses of emotion, gender, and sexuality structure narrative and vice versa, the ways these queer female characters chafe at convention, and convention's failure to contain them fully. This dissertation has argued that the unhappiness and frustration queer and feminist-identified spectators experience while watching these films might be read infelicitously; that is, the form of such films undermines their heteronormative happy endings and ultimately propels the viewer backwards against the narrative and towards its moments of queer possibility. It has considered female-centered sports films as another manifestation of tomboy narrative; rooted in the ambivalent history of women's sports in the United States, the generously pessimistic mode of attachment that these films beget produces queer feminist critiques of the very narratives the cinematic cluster puts forth and the normative, future-driven temporalities its films both adhere to and repudiate. Finally, it has shown how *Panic Room* performs through its mother-daughter tomboy dynamic a kind of temporal drag that refutes mainstream film's conventional domestication of tomboys and conscription of adult females to victimized, heterosexualized, and/or maternal roles. This chapter has suggested, concomitantly, that Jodie

Foster's cumulative body of work calls attention to these tropes through the paranoia of her career's chronic thematization of the sexed and sexualized violences that inhere in heterosexual and heterosocial relations.

Although a single monograph on such a ubiquitous and understudied cultural phenomenon as tomboyism could hardly aspire to treat its subject exhaustively, I hope that it has illuminated the attachments we form to tomboy narratives as well as the ways that we might *detach* from them along queer feminist lines, that it helps to untangle without oversimplifying the mixed feelings they generate, that it brings to light contradictions and incoherencies within popular narrative which displace or subvert heteronormative logic and convention. In the concluding section of a project that so frequently tugs against tidy endings, it seems more appropriate here to raise further questions and sketch out other germane problems than to endeavor towards neat resolutions.

I began by delineating the exceptional aspects of *Fried Green Tomatoes* and the tomboy narrative it presents, which allows its protagonist to blossom into an adult tomboy and a lesbian, if only ambiguously so. This is not to say, of course, that *Tomatoes* is a perfect exemplar of radical queer film (nor indeed that radical queer film is the only place to turn for radical or queer politics) or that it is even entirely ideologically palatable. Exceptional components notwithstanding, it also remains largely conventional in one disturbing dimension: aside from the troublingly closeted nature of its lesbian elements (and the disavowal of said elements by many individuals involved in its production), the film's racial politics fall just short of appalling—and just short only because decades of Hollywood cinema have inured audiences to the customary consignment of black actors to a limited and problematic repertoire of roles. *Tomatoes* portrays not only docile and homogenously beneficent black characters, but black characters who appear

perfectly willing to risk life and limb for their white employers at the drop of a hat, black characters who blithely cook and feed one man to another.

As a whole, filmic tomboy narratives rely heavily on inimical racial tropes and figures in addition to their circumscribed representations of gender and sexuality: in this other unhappy phenomenon that haunts tomboy stories, characters of color in such films tend to be relegated to miserable typedom. While Michelle Abate's aforementioned book brings to light the association of the tomboy with African-American signifiers in American culture, literature, and to some extent film, her thoughtful analysis begs many more questions about how racial minorities themselves function within tomboy narratives—especially in regard to Hollywood cinema, where films so often pigeonhole black characters as obedient servants and mammy types, “gentle giants” or monstrous criminals.

In the rare event that they do allow their resistantly-gendered protagonists to survive as such, tomboy narratives compromise this ostensible victory by staking it to racial privilege and predicating any kind of liberation they offer the tomboy to the detriment of another marginalized character. The spectatorial ambivalence produced by tomboy films, then, does not result solely from compulsive viewing tendencies mixed with exasperating endings. Even in narratives like *Tomatoes*, *Panic Room*, and Gary Ross's *The Hunger Games* (2012), where the tomboy character's resistant behavior manages to endure the storyline to some degree, that survival typically comes at the cost of a racial minority. In the latter, for instance, heroine Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) survives in large part because Rue (Amanda Stenberg) and Thresh (Dayo Okeniyi), two black participants in the dystopian story's lottery-style contest of attrition, come to her assistance before dying themselves. At one point, Thresh opts to spare Katniss's life and kill off another participant instead, serving primarily as a plot device that allows Katniss to

remain beyond moral reproach in the viewer's eyes.¹ In *Tomatoes*, Ruth and Idgie's black servant, Sipsey (Cicely Tyson) grants her white employers the liberty to continue their implied lesbian relationship unimpeded by performing the dirty work of killing Ruth's abusive husband, Frank. Sarah Altman survives in *Panic Room* because black intruder Burnham supplies her with a crucial shot of insulin and because he eventually kills his former comrade, Raoul, who is just seconds away from murdering Sarah's mother.

In ostentatiously progressive-minded films such as *Juno*, as well, racial difference serves to bring out the protagonist's desirable qualities and to keep the tone of a comedic film appetizingly light. At one point, the pregnant, sixteen-year-old Juno drives to an abortion clinic and sees Su-Chin (Valerie Tian), a classmate of Asian descent, staging a solo pro-life protest outside. Su-Chin brandishes a sign that reads "No babies like murdering" as she informs the empty parking lot loudly and repeatedly that "All babies want to get borned!" Here, the film simultaneously and troublingly burdens its only racial minority (and, significantly, a female) with the sole, fanatical voice of anti-choice politics, and it discredits that voice immediately with stereotypical bad grammar, at perplexing but telling odds with the flawless syntax and distinctively Minnesotan accent that emerge over the course of Su-Chin's conversation with Juno. The frustrations, embarrassment, and anger that the deployment of such racially problematic tropes and typologies may trigger can be productive emotions—emotions that remind viewers, however marginalized themselves, of their own complicities in such

¹ It seems worth noting that the decision to cast black actors as Rue and Thresh in Ross's screen adaptation of the Suzanne Collins trilogy has sparked an outpouring of racist tweets and fan reactions, for more on which see Anna Holmes, "White Until Proven Black: Imagining Race in *Hunger Games*," *The New Yorker*, March 2012. Although none of the three books in the series ever explicitly mentions the characters' race (the trilogy's dystopian world, Panem, has neither continent nor country names to distinguish phenotypes geographically), she attributes to these two characters "bright, dark eyes and satiny brown skin" (98) in the first book.

representational systems and that demonstrate the foundational claims of black feminist thinkers including Audre Lorde and bell hooks, also “killjoys,” that the “liberation” of one oppressed group must not come at the expense of another, a notion that has been extended into more contemporary work by the likes of Sara Ahmed and José Esteban Muñoz.

These disturbing representations and the vexed relations they betray among marginalized forms of race, class, and gender warrant much further investigation. Yet rather than merely bemoaning the clichéd tropes and tired stereotypes within so many of these texts, we may also find more generative avenues in the glimpses they provide—not only of queer possibilities and opportunities for feminist resistance, but of the insidious racial and economic structures that often undergird them, and such infelicitous readings thus become a way of duly attending to the complexities of these structures and resisting the hegemony of heteronormative and racist narrative mandates. They constitute a starting point from which to consider individual stories in relation to larger national narratives of race, sex, gender, class, and age, and the roles that resistant femaleness plays (or is made to play) within them.

This study was constrained to cinema’s self-contained narratives in pursuing such stories, and its formal boundary raises the question of how tomboy storylines play out on smaller screens, where many of the same problematic ideologies lay hold but the technical and narrative means through which they are articulated may differ significantly. Television’s serial temporality, for example, seems to allow its tomboy characters greater license—if not to thrive, at least to prolong their resistant “stage,” to iterate and reiterate their tomboyism over episodes and seasons that may span years not only of their diegetic lives but of a spectator’s real life, too. On the other hand, it may rather bring home all the more forcefully the inevitable refutation of

non-normative femaleness through chronic “reminders” of tomboyish protagonists’ heterosexuality.

While Angel Bright and Watts saw their tomboyish dispositions succumb to the pervasive pressures of heteronormativity, the same cultural anxieties about deviant gender and sexuality were playing out on mainstream television networks as well. As if to herald the impending era of reactionary morality and neoliberal economics that the 1980s witnessed in response to the marked independence, ferocity, and confident sexuality of the many strong girl protagonists of the previous decade and to advertise a deeper “understanding” of homosexual ontology and the warning signs and dangers thereof, the first episode of NBC’s long-running sitcom *The Facts of Life* (1979-88) introduced itself in such a way as to preclude any undesirable misinterpretations of character. The tomboy Cindy (Julie Ann Haddock) makes her entrance in a baseball uniform, blonde tresses tucked up into her cap to suggest a masculine haircut. “What are you doing in a girls’ school?” she asks of a visiting boy in the foyer, to which he retorts, “I was gonna ask you the same thing.” On cue, the laugh track kicks in: already non-normative girlhood is abjected, made the butt of the iconic television show’s very first joke. In fact, the main thrust of the episode is to suggest the importance of monitoring and maintaining properly heteronormative—indeed, manifestly homophobic—behaviors and boundaries. The tension between Cindy and Blair (Lisa Whelchel), her vain, rich classmate, is expressed in implicitly anti-gay terms. When Cindy gives Blair a friendly nudge, the latter snaps, “Would you mind not pawing me? You are *strange*.”—a disproportionate response whose defensive character and governing anxieties grow clearer when Blair later admits to feeling threatened by Cindy’s participation, reluctant as it is, in the school’s Harvest Festival Queen contest. Cindy embraces another girl who volunteers to help her prepare, inciting further catty and disingenuous commentary from Blair:

BLAIR. Cindy, what's wrong with you? . . . All this touching and hugging girls, and 'I love yous.' Boy are you *strange*.

CINDY. Well, I didn't mean anything.

BLAIR. I just bet. You better think about what you mean.

As Blair exits the shot, Cindy stands alone and bewildered, still in her baseball uniform, another suddenly sad and isolated tomboy whose gender expression the show construes as a damning symptom of stigmatized sexuality, a precursor of future lesbianism.

Yet against the currents of this blatantly homophobic pilot episode, the show would later introduce Jo Polniaczek (Nancy McKeon) another tomboy character—much butcher than Cindy and featured in a more prominent role—whose affectionately antagonistic friendship with Blair is sustained and deepened over the course of eight seasons. Jo and Blair go on to become roommates in college, and though both have various boyfriends throughout the series, the show foregoes the type of ostentatious taming that tomboy films tend to perform.

In a similar vein, Aaron Spelling and Mike Nichols's ABC drama *Family* (1976-80) stars Kristy McNichol as Buddy Lawrence, a tomboy who maintains her unfemininity over the course of all four seasons. Although the show establishes her (presumptive) heterosexuality at intervals, she repeatedly declines when faced with opportunities to have sex with boys. Perhaps, then, the inherent extension of televisual time offers gender-deviant girls more leeway, allowing their resistant behavior to endure not only through a thirty or sixty minute episode but across months and even years—but does the protracted deferment of their not-so-inevitable taming outweigh the periodic “reminders” of their heterosexuality that these shows compulsively enact?

Both Buddy and Jo hail from the generic realms of comedy and drama, and this dissertation has looked primarily at romantic comedies, sports dramas, and the paranoid thrillers of Jodie Foster's *oeuvre*. A more sustained and expansive consideration of genre—whether filmic or televisual—is needed as well: certainly other genres, cycles, and clusters of film deploy

tomboy characters in different ways and to different ends. Dominant tropes and patterns along with elements of genre which Rick Altman has distinguished as semantic and syntactic in Westerns (*True Grit*, *Yellow Sky*, *Annie Oakley*, *Calamity Jane*), action films (*Hanna*, the *Alien* and *Tomb Raider* franchises, *Kickass*), and even musicals (*Annie Get Your Gun*, *West Side Story*) intersect with and diverge from tomboy tropes in varied and provocative ways.² Much work has been done by such critics as Linda Badley, Barbara Creed, Carol Clover, Jack Halberstam, Marc Jancovich, Tania Modleski, et al. on androgyny and phallicism in horror and action heroines, but most of this work focuses on adult characters rather than children. The racial politics of female action heroines—*tommes fatale*, as it were—who, despite possessing what Yvonne Tasker has termed “musculinity,” remain highly sexualized, appear to bear a close relation to those spirited if less lethal heroines of comedic and dramatic tomboy narratives.³ The former, too, are frequently played by dark-complected brunette actresses (Kate Beckinsale, Halle Berry, Sandra Bullock, Jennifer Garner, Angelina Jolie, Lucy Lawless, Lucy Liu, Rooney Mara, Alexa Vega, Sigourney Weaver, et al.), a commonality that speaks to the aforementioned cultural correlations between gender and color and also to the undertheorized role of age vis-à-vis both racial and gendered representations of deviance.

Many of these actresses and others have performed as tomboyish characters in multiple films, yet absent from the existing literary work on tomboys is any substantial contemplation of celebrity image and the accretion of meaning a given performer inevitably develops over time and across various roles. This critical lacuna makes an examination of the filmic tomboy narrative all the more potent and compelling, given the tremendous popularity of many tomboy

² Rick Altman, “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre” *Cinema Journal* 23.3 (Spring 1984), 6-18.

³ Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

actresses and the powerful (and not always benign) emotional attachments viewers form to them. Dating back as far as Baby Marie (Marie Osborne Yeats) and Baby Peggy (Diana Serra Cary) of the silent film era, girl actors have long been subject to a peculiarly obsessive fandom, which reached its nadir with John Hinckley Jr.'s 1981 attempt to assassinate Ronald Reagan in a bid for Jodie Foster's attentions. Further, the tendency of girl actors to repeat tomboy roles (and/or of studios, filmmakers, and audiences to sponsor that repetition) contributes to the cumulative aspect of their tomboyism and sends it spilling over from one role to another in spite of each individual narrative's normative, tomboy-taming ending.

Curiously—or perhaps after all unsurprisingly—many of Hollywood's most iconic tomboy actresses, including Jodie Foster, Tatum O'Neal, Kristy McNichol, Anna Paquin, Lindsay Lohan, and Ellen Page, have come out publically as lesbian or bisexual. Others, for example Mary Stuart Masterson, Anna Chlumsky, and Kristin Stewart, have not. What, if anything, does Hollywood's apparent casting acumen imply about the relationship between tomboyism and lesbianism? Or does the question coil more etiological knots than an answer could ever untangle?

As such celebrities age, sexuality notwithstanding, their vestigial tomboy resonances continue to inflect their adult roles. In this way, some incarnation of adult tomboyism may exist onscreen with or without being recast as lesbianism, butch or otherwise. How do the narratives of resistant adult females resemble and differ from those of tomboy and lesbian characters? One figure who warrants study along these lines in both film and television is Allison Janney, whose repertoire of actual lesbians (*Rescuing Desire*, *The Hours*), perverse spinsters (in *10 Things I Hate About You*, *Liberal Arts*), imposing executives (*Nurse Betty*, *Strangers With Candy*, *Trust Me*), and debauched divorcées and mothers with dubious parenting credentials (*Drop Dead*

Gorgeous; The Way, Way Back; Struck By Lightning; Mom) often enlivens films, albeit typically from the periphery. Indeed, her most acclaimed role by far—White House senior aide C.J. Cregg of Aaron Sorkin’s *The West Wing* (1999-2006)—might productively be viewed as an adult tomboy. Certainly C.J.’s powerful position in a male-dominated environment, her insistently feminist attitudes, her independent-mindedness, that symbolically overdetermined short hair, a wardrobe full of power suits, and Janney’s lesbian-friendly *oeuvre* provoked anxieties even within the show that created her character; C.J.’s narrative arc is ridden with sporadic—almost neurotic—gestures at heteroromance in a series of repetitions demonstrative of what Adrienne Rich has termed “compulsory heterosexuality.”⁴ C.J.’s ability to evade pathological “career woman” typing is threatened by her general sexual dormancy, which prompts the show to “prove” her straightness at intervals. Yet the impact of her performance spills over and makes itself felt within the larger contexts of Janney’s *oeuvre* when, for example, her role as a repressed (and subsequently unrepressed) housewife on *Masters of Sex* seems to comment ironically on her concurrent part as a cougar-lush, “liberated”-but-still-in-spray-tan-shackles grandmother on *Mom*—and where both are inflected by contrast from her turn first as the president’s press secretary and later as chief of staff.

An alternate manifestation of tomboyism beyond childhood appears in Robert Tapert’s *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), a long-running action/adventure series with a cult following (and amid that following a large lesbian viewership). The show stars Lucy Lawless as a feminist avenger whose numerous tomboy characteristics serve her well in innumerable battles; through them and a sustained focus on Xena’s intimate friendship with her sidekick Gabrielle

⁴ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1994).

(Renée O'Connor), *Xena* also raises questions about lesbian (in)visibility, possibility, and the role of camp via this heroine and female companion whose *raison d'être* is to resist evil patriarchal forces and between whom the sexual tension could at times be cut with Xena's iconic (and yonic) chakram; the show's overtly feminist foundations, queer subtext, and actively antagonistic characters constellate to allow for a non-capitulatory, non-normative narrative whose ending proves no less queer than its beginning and middle.

Yet for all these vectors of embodied female deviance onscreen, the future of filmic tomboy narratives remains murky at best and its relation to the future of lesbian representation similarly obscure. With increasing cultural attention devoted to child homosexuality and gender deviance vis-à-vis anti-bullying discourses and the commercial success of series with lesbian components (Showtime's *The L Word* and *The Real L Word*, ABC's *The Fosters*, Netflix's *Orange is the New Black*, MTV's *Faking It*), one wonders whether the tenuous connection between tomboyism and lesbianism will be treated less phobically, or if unfeminine children will be subjected increasingly to normalizing impulses that "diagnose" them as lesbian or transgender, thereby reducing tomboyism to a symptom of a given sexuality rather than a mode of resistant gender expression.

The hope this dissertation seeks to elucidate, whatever directions mainstream film and television take, is one that leaves behind optimism for a future of satisfying endings in favor of a mode of spectatorship that affords queer and feminist viewers a kind of endurance conventionally denied to tomboys—the ability to take sustenance in the narratives that so often seek to abjure them, and the capacity to ameliorate these ambivalent representations even while remaining wary of them.

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