



Photo: Sarah Jane English

OF MOVIES & MODELS: GIRLS IN HOLLYWOOD

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Cet article traite de l'image sexiste des adolescentes dans les films. L'auteure remarque que les scripts présentent les filles comme des objets sexuels et ne s'intéressent pas à leurs sentiments, à leurs désirs ou à leur intellect.

Everywhere you go these days Brooke Shields, the commodity princess, smiles down seductively from Calvin Klein designer-jeans billboards, body awkwardly posed for the male and the female gaze, shirt unbuttoned and soul decidedly absent. Though her image is obscene, it is strangely sterile and asexual. So in its wake, like the latent content of a bad dream, another image arrives on yet another series of billboards: an anonymous young woman, tightly clad buttocks turned toward the passers-by and between them a long red snaking tail. What actually happens to poor Brooke Shields in the fantasies of millions and what corporate capitalism would do to us — is doing to us — given half a chance, is thus made explicit. On the streets, the girls come and go, affecting the costumes of these nymphets and inevitably experiencing a violation of their own sexual-

ities which many of them do not even have the words to describe.

Not a pretty picture, as Brooke Shields's first film *Pretty Baby* so clearly demonstrated. In keeping with her policy of censoring films whose explicit sexual content is also linked to social critiques of sexuality, the untiring Mary Brown and her censor board banned this film in Ontario and left most people with the impression that Louis Malle's film luridly condoned the sexual exploitation of young girls. But at least in some distinct ways, the content of his film did the opposite. Through the story of a young girl's life (Violet/Shields) as the daughter of a prostitute (Hattie/Susan Sarandon) in a turn-of-the-century New Orleans brothel, Malle gives us, at times, a brilliantly conceived metaphor of the way that girls are raised to become men's sex objects at the expense of their own feelings, desires, intellects, and spirits. Through the character of "Papa" Belloc (Keith Carradine), the only man in the film (beside the black piano player, "The Professor") with a non-predatory attitude toward women, Malle makes clear that what is not permitted — the real taboo — in this culture is *love*, not sex. By having Violet whipped for sexual games with two lads her own age, Malle underlines the point that girls (and, by extension, grown women) are not permitted their own freedom and sexual self-definition and unites this message to the issue of racism as well (one of the boys is black).

In fact, during the moments when Violet rehearses her words for the man who will pay for her virginity ("I'm the best you know. I'll do whatever you want") and during the moment when the auction takes place and the camera rests on the Professor's face (as memories of slave auctions are evoked), Malle rises to his finest work. As he gives us the portrait of the madame, an old woman who must kill her pain with cocaine and opium, whose polished vocabulary barely covers the rotten fabric of her anguished soul, Malle could almost be described as a feminist. Almost, but not quite, for while Belloc "loves"

Violet and we are meant to identify with and approve of him, he can, it seems, love only a child, not a woman. If we are meant to sympathize with his revulsion for the empty heads and false, coquettish ways of the "grown women" (the prostitutes) and if we too long for the recaptured spontaneity and genuine emotion of childhood, yet we can hardly share Belloc's decision to seek these with a girl-child, precisely because of what this decision signifies in the culture Malle has so aptly exposed.



This raises a problem with the making of the film and points toward the Shields magic at one and the same time. Ever since Lewis Carroll desired Alice, Freud talked about incestuous fantasy, and Nabokov wrote *Lolita*, we have had literary reference points for the idea of the "woman-child," a particularly masculine construction. A product of a man's imagination brought to life in books or films, she is young, naïve, malleable, adoring, and entirely sexually available. Her youth renders her non-challenging, unable to question or reject ideas intellectually, without power to contest socially. In a culture where sexual repression is omnipresent and in which women especially are not expected to be full sexual beings, that youth also paradoxically renders the girl more, rather than less, sexual. In our time, when psychologists gloat over the fabled epidemic of male impotence (blamed on women's increasing demand for sexual satisfaction), the child-woman takes on new and more odious dimensions.

Yet young girls do have sexual-

ities of their own and many might like to express themselves with people, including males, of various ages. Given how much more power men have than women and adults have than children, it is hard to tell the story of a young girl's sexuality with any man past his adolescence in a non-exploitative way. The only method that can hope to succeed at this point is perhaps its unfolding from *her* point of view — giving her feelings, desires, and initiatives pride of place and building identification with them. Malle, in *Pretty Baby*, does not entirely succeed in this, although the film has a discourse associated with Violet, and as a result he is not able to escape some of the voyeuristic and controlling dimensions of an exploitative treatment of these themes entirely.

Because of the social context in which the film is made and seen and because of the problem with point of view, Malle ends up willy-nilly participating to a certain extent in the premature sexualization and manipulation of a real girl — Brooke Shields — even as his film criticizes this with respect to a fictionalized character. However, we must not place the blame for the totality, or even the majority, of Shields's exploitation on Malle. *Pretty Baby* was only a stepping stone in a process whose fleshing out, so to speak, occurs in the collusion between profit-hungry production companies and fashion designers, with the mediation of a real-life madame, Mrs. Shields, as go-between.

The real horror show is not *Pretty Baby*, but that grotesque double bill *The Blue Lagoon* and *Endless Love*. In these films Brooke Shields the actress dies and is replaced by a zombie whose expressions run the gamut from A to B (as Dorothy Parker once said of someone else) and whose million-dollar body (replaced in all the nude sequences by a stand-in to avoid Brooke's corruption!) is so stiff we want to scream when she lies flat on her back in endless boredom as she is supposedly "made love to" by her endless love.

Despite their sexualization *ad*

nauseam, Shields's roles in *Endless Love* and *The Blue Lagoon* are Victorian throwbacks, in which young womanhood grows like a "hot house bloom" (to use the words of John Stuart Mill) under the imprisoning tutelage of the male. In *Endless Love*, the Victorian rite of passage is literally re-enacted in the second scene: young Jade leaves the cloying, incestuous arms of her dashing father and floats, white lace, gardenias, and all, up the staircase into the arms of her brooding young lover. In *The Blue Lagoon*, Emmeline (the young girl who since the age of five has lived alone with her young cousin in sexless bliss on a lush tropical island) basically spends her time cooking, braiding flowers in her hair, and finally having a baby, while her young boy John builds a palatial residence, chops stalks of bananas, spears fish, and, yes, takes sexual responsibility. Emmeline is so helpless she cannot even row their dinghy across the lagoon.

It is hard to believe one is watching a female of the same species when, in Ronald Maxwell's *Little Darlings*, Kristy McNichol's working-class Angel, cigarette dangling from her lips, expertly paddles her canoe across a lake to pick up the fellow she has targeted for her first full-scale sexual encounter. It is hard to restrain oneself from openly cheering for her as she hot-wires the camp bus and takes her friends out on a joy ride in search of condoms for the same occasion; or clapping when she hauls off and plows another girl for insulting her; or weeping when she cries after her first experience with intercourse and says: "I didn't know it would be anything like that. . . sex is so *personal*. . . I felt like you could see right through me. . . I feel so, so lonely." The film is even more remarkable for letting us watch Tatum O'Neill's bourgeois Ferris (Angel's initial rival and eventual friend) prove that all mincing around with the signifiers of femininity will get you is a horrible, sick feeling in the pit of your stomach and no respect whatsoever.

Among films which centrally treat young girls during puberty

and adolescence, *Little Darlings* is exceptional. Writers Kimi Peck and Dalene Young are two women with an incredible sense of humour, a flawless eye and ear for the horrors and joys of teenage summers at camp, and a strong feminist streak — Angel says to her mother after that first encounter with sex, "What's all this crap about sex being no big deal, anyway. You've been hanging out with jerks." This film stands head and shoulders, not only above Franco Zeffirelli's



Endless Love and Ronald Kleiser's *The Blue Lagoon*, but also over *Foxes* (with Jody Foster) and *Only When I Laugh* (with Marsha Mason and Kristy McNichol). These films are written by men sympathetic to girls but do not come from the girls' own experiences. (In the new sci-fi/fantasy films like *Dragonslayer*, *Excalibur*, *Outland*, *Time Bandits*, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, women are deprived of all character and achievement if they are not lesbian (the doctor in *Outland*) or evil (Morgana in *Excalibur*) — unless we want to call holding back the male hero an achievement, which some of us just might be tempted to do.)

So now we come to the depressing and all-too-predictable conclusion: *Little Darlings* played at Toronto theatres for perhaps a third of the time of *Foxes* and maybe a twentieth of the time of *The Blue Lagoon* and *Endless Love*. It was not promoted with the same resources and was essentially dismissed by the mainstream press (mostly male critics). Kristy McNichol is not (thank heaven for small mercies) plastered all over the billboards because she does not sell anything.

She probably could not sell a whole lot; her face is too full of character.

Growing up female means growing up looking at Brooke Shields — on the covers of *Seventeen*, *Glamour*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Vogue*, on billboards and in the movies — and learning to emulate her. Aside from the unplucked (but carefully brushed) eyebrows, nothing about her is natural. She is all surfaces and mechanized moves. She is the creation of industry, of commerce, of free trade and *laissez-faire*. Of course Brooke and her clones have something to do with sexism, a special kind, a particularly *capitalist* sexism. Shields started out as a model, a mannequin, and this continues to be her role *par excellence*. She sells passivity, sexual provocation, and clothes with one and the same fixed smile, and it is a crying shame what has been done to that girl.

An acquaintance of mine working deep in the heart of Hollywood remarked the other day, "Movies are the product of the tension between commerce and art," to which I say "amen." Too bad commerce wins so many times! One can go to the movies for years if one is not careful and never once see a girl or young woman with problems other than what to do about boys (or related issues like other girls, children, and so on). That problem is itself usually reduced to, or subsumed by, the great "overwhelming question" for teenage girls in our culture: just how good do I look? Read: just how much like Brooke Shields do I look? From there it is only a hop, skip, and jump to "how much like her do I act?" Looking and acting like Brooke Shields is a very expensive proposition for girls and very profitable for rich men.

But like a winking and oh-so-ironic Cheshire cat, McNichol's image, flashing in and out of the commodity tree, reminds women — young and old — that there is an alternative which is funnier, funkier, sexier, and a lot more exciting. So Mrs. Shields, eat your heart out. I hereby renounce Calvin Klein forever and propose a toast to *my* favourite little darling and all girls like her, everywhere.