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Seven Going on Seventeen

Tween Studies in the Culture of Girlhood

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Re-imagining Girlhood: Hollywood and the Tween Girl Film Market

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Introduction: Following the Money Trail, or Hollywood Goes after the Tween Audience

To understand the relationship of contemporary Hollywood cinema to tween culture, it is first necessary to understand why Hollywood has been searching for audiences for their films more generally since the 1950s. Such diverse scholars of film history as Murray Smith (2000), Richard Maltby (2000), Douglas Gomery (1998), and Peter Kramer (1999) generally agree that one of the central dynamics of the film industry in the post-World War II United States has been the problem of how to stem the tide of loss of viewership for their films. Prior to World War II, Hollywood enjoyed mass film attendance for their fare, as movie-going was an entrenched and enduring part of life in pre-World War II America. Hollywood has been grappling with declining overall viewership for the past forty years, however, caused in large part by such larger social transformations as the advent of suburbanization in the 1950s and the attendant rise in television watching and other leisure activities. Because of these larger-scale trends, ticket sales during the 1950s and 1960s declined to very low levels. Hollywood has been chasing after their elusive audience ever since and has seesawed between creating mass 'tent-pole' or 'blockbuster' pictures while at the same time trying to understand where they might customize their films for more specific audiences.

Though producing and marketing blockbuster films generally occupies the largest share of the movie studios' attention, then, there has also been a recent flowering of more 'niche' pictures directed to targeted audiences. Many of these films have done surprisingly well at the box office despite limited budgets and marketing. It is within this slice of the industry that

tween girls emerged as a viable niche audience to cultivate and create films for.

While it is now abundantly clear that 'tween' girl films have a place in the Hollywood production lineup, this development was by no means inevitable. In fact, the whole notion of a tween girl, as opposed to a child or teenager, is itself arguably the result of marketing initiatives by the advertising industry, which supposedly 'discovered' this group while tracking patterns of consumption among children and teenagers. These critics argue that the tween category is itself a 'media creation' which was devised by programmers as a new way to package their products.

Whether it is a real phenomenon or one invented by advertisers, the first media executive group to realize the potential spending power of tweens was the music industry. Tween girls were responsible for propelling such stars as Britney Spears, the Backstreet Boys, and 'NSync to superstardom. Television companies also decided that tweens were a sufficiently 'real' group to merit special programming, and the Disney Channel and Nickelodeon have devoted a good portion of their television line-up to them. Movie executives came somewhat later to the bandwagon, and it is only recently that they have produced fare explicitly for tweens. Media critic David Bloom (2002), for example, notes that:

Meanwhile Hollywood studios have produced a surfeit of tween-minded movies in the past 18 months. *Harry Potter* was the monster tween hit, but last summer the modestly budgeted *Spy Kids* scooped up \$113 million and a quick order for a sequel. Tweens also flocked to *Shrek*, *Ice Age*, *Big Fat Liar*, *Snow Dogs*, *Legally Blonde* and *The Princess Diaries*.

Bloom goes on to cite MGM Production President Alex Gartner, who, observing the success of these films, commented that "I think what you're seeing is a further definition of a demographic that got lumped together with the others." Some observers of the film industry believe that this was because film executives did not previously view tween girls as a viable market on their own. Commenting on this earlier received wisdom, film producer Jane Startz (cited in Chautard 2003) notes that:

The time I was growing up in this industry, the conventional wisdom was girls will watch something that has a boy [as the lead character], but the boys won't watch something that has a girl. That may or may not be true. But I think what people are

realizing is it really doesn't matter that much if the boys are going to come or not because there is such a faithful following for some of these girl projects.

How did Hollywood finally come to realize that there was indeed a 'faithful following' for films for tween girls especially? One indication that there was an audience separate and apart from other groups was the profitable success of 'chick flicks,' whose audiences consisted of a large majority of tween girls. Such recent films as *The Princess Diaries* (2001), *Legally Blonde* (2001), and *Save the Last Dance* (2001) were very large successes in part because they had a huge following of tween girls.

The success of these films is backed up by current numbers on the attendance rates overall for tween girls. Though variously described at different ages, tween girls are thought to be anywhere from 8–14. Generally, the best estimate for this media-driven category is that older tweens are 11- to 12-year-olds, and younger tweens are between 8–10 years old. Hollywood is continually trying to gain more clarity about this age range in order to target more efficiently to the tweens. And recently, it seems, they have hit their target with surprising skill. For example, *Freaky Friday* (2003), with Lindsay Lohan and Jamie Lee Curtis as the daughter and mother who switch bodies, grossed \$6 million dollars in its first 24 hours. Uttering lines like "So we're stuck in this suck-fest," the tween girl daughter had an immense appeal to the tween girl audience.

Currently, there is a whole slate of new films aimed specifically at the tween girl audience. Interestingly enough, many of these films draw on books that are also popular with girls, including *Ella Enchanted*, *Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen*, *All-American Girl*, and *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. These films, like their novel counterparts, often center on "Cinderella stories, coming-of-age tales and sassy comic novels" (Chautard 2003).

As a niche audience, tween girls are very attractive for a number of reasons. First, as a consumer group, though the numbers cited vary wildly, tween girls are considered to be very large consumers themselves as well as being highly influential in their parents' purchasing decisions. Their spending dollars have gone towards clothing, music, movie tickets, make-up, etc. Mandy Moore, who starred in the tween girl movie *How to Deal* (2003), believes that Hollywood is rightly catering to this important spending group as when she unself-consciously notes that:

We are the consumers. We are the people who are going to see most of these films and buy most of the music, magazines, clothes and whatnot. So of course I'm proud to be part of a movement that's catering to my generation, toward giving people what they want. (Cited in Stepp 2003)

In addition, in terms of their film habits, market research has also shown that tweens can be counted on to see the same film several times. They are repeat filmgoers, in other words, which is always an attractive proposition for a movie studio. As well, it is relatively inexpensive to market to girls, since they are already fragmented into different cable channel audiences and Internet sites and can therefore be targeted on these channels and sites. As one film executive has put it, "You can segment your audience with a laser" (cited in Dade 2003).

Finally, tweens are a desirable audience because they are particularly susceptible to word-of-mouth advertising, especially if it stems from older teens. Interestingly enough, it may be part of girl culture to share information with one another about their favorite books and movies and to recommend their favorites to other fans. This, in turn, fuels the kind of word-of-mouth advertising that Hollywood loves. The fact that the Internet now accelerates that kind of communication has also served as a boon to the industry, as these girls go online to spread the word about their favorite films.

From the production end, tween girls also prove to be an attractive demographic to create films for. Unlike many blockbuster films which are directed towards teenage boys, younger 'chick flick' movies generally cost a lot less to make, so the potential for profit is not offset by high production costs. Rob Reiner, who recently made *Alex and Emma* (2003), has observed, "Expensive, high-profile action flicks have to do big business to make money. You can hit a broad audience with a romantic comedy and the profit margin is huge" (cited in Cruz and Schwartz 2003).

Television executives have also realized the huge profit margin to be made by catering to tween girls, and Disney and Nickelodeon have been ahead of the pack in reaching out to this demographic. For example, Teen Nick is a block of programming that was created by Nickelodeon that adopted a strategy of playing to the tweens' desire to be perceived as teenagers. In so doing, Nickelodeon was able to realize a 10% jump in their tween audience for shows like *Caitlin's Way*, *As Told by Ginger*, and *The Brothers Garcia*. The Disney Channel has also adopted a similar strategy of marketing heavily to tweens in their creation of the Zoog Disney programming bloc.

The Lizzie McGuire Show is a prime example of this new marketing strategy and has paid off with high rates of audience viewing. Executives for these companies are not only proud to have 'discovered' this group of viewers, but as well, they contend that they can help them ride the rocky path from childhood to adolescence. As Rich Ross (cited in Bloom 2002) of the Disney Channel explained:

Four years ago, people didn't know what the word 'tween,' was.... They thought we were insane. But I'd like to think our programming is a decoder ring for kids who are getting ready to go through adolescence.

More generally, the emphasis on 'tween' culture has coincided with other developments in Hollywood, including the push towards 'synergy' between the various divisions within the 'parent' corporation. For example, the success of *The Lizzie McGuire Show* for the Disney Channel has also meant that the other divisions of Disney, which draw on 'Lizzie McGuire,' can also earn high profits. In fact, it could be argued that the success of Lizzie McGuire is fueling the overall profits for Disney in part because, as one analyst observed, "The Disney Channel is probably the best run of all the businesses at Disney" (cited in Boorstin and Wheat 2003). From *The Lizzie McGuire Show*, ancillary products flowed, which increased the overall profits of the Disney Company. Disney Press started to publish Lizzie books and Disney's music group has produced and released a soundtrack from the series, which included some songs sung by Hilary Duff, the actor who plays Lizzie. By September of 2002, *The Lizzie McGuire Show* was airing every day on the Disney Channel. From these initial products and programs, more products flowed. Here is a partial list (Boorstin and Wheat 2003):

Also in 2002, Disney's consumer products division began marketing everything from Lizzie dolls and sleeping bags to Lizzie pencils and notebooks. Last February it licensed the Lizzie name to retailer Kohl's for a line of apparel that is already a top seller in Kohl's 450 stores. Last May, Walt Disney Pictures released *The Lizzie McGuire Movie* (Duff's reported pay: \$1 million), which debuted as the No. 2 film in the country and grossed nearly \$50 million at the U.S. box office. Buena Vista released the movie soundtrack, of course; it went platinum too. It's hard to quantify how much the Lizzie franchise has earned Disney altogether, but it's reasonable to assume that the amount is nearing \$100 million.

As part of this synergy, tween girls' love of certain fiction, as mentioned earlier, coincides with Hollywood now giving the green light to movies that

are based on these books. There is great potential for these successful young adult books to attract loyal fans that will go to see the movie version of the book. These young readers are already a 'captive' audience who has formed an allegiance to the story and want to see it realized on screen. At the same time, Hollywood has also found that they can make a film that has not previously been in book form and then release the book version of the movie—e.g., *Tuck Everlasting* (2002)—as another way to generate profits.

Powerful Girls and Girl Power

In thinking about how tween girls are marketed to, it becomes clear that specific themes emerge in the storylines of these films. One marketing researcher, for example, has noted that stories that include themes such as family and friendships, revenge and rescue fantasies, and transformations are especially appealing to this group and "there's a strong fantasy element of 'I wish that could happen to me'" (cited in Bloom 2002). And, while they aspire to being teenagers, this does not necessarily mean that they are comfortable watching films that feature more sophisticated teen themes involving sex, drugs, or alcohol.

It is possible, for example, that the Britney Spears movie debacle, *Crossroads* (2002), had only a limited success because the plotline, which consists of Spears' good-girl character attempting to lose her virginity, was alienating for her tween girl fans. This would suggest that while this age group is thought to be more worldly than in previous generations, as evidenced by their clothing, for example, this does not mean that there have been fundamental changes in their core sense of self. As consumers, then, tween girls may be making choices for fashion items that are more daring than earlier generations (especially when these items are being heavily marketed to them), but there is no evidence to suggest that they have become miniature adults in all respects. And, judging by the success of such 'childish' films as *Shrek* (2001) and *Harry Potter* (2001) with the tween girl audience, it is clear that these young women can also be enthusiastic filmgoers for all kinds of films as long as there is precisely not an explicitly 'adult' theme such as losing one's virginity.

Thinking about compelling themes for tween girls, one popular motif in many of the new films coming out includes the portrayal of young women as powerful and able to exercise a degree of control over their lives. As Chris McGurk, vice chairperson and COO of MGM, puts it: "The studios have

found that there is a very strong market for movies that feature young women in roles that are empowering" (cited in Cruz and Schwartz 2003:). McGurk goes on to note that such films as *Legally Blond* (2001), which appealed primarily to young women, were incredibly successful, bringing in grosses of \$96 million dollars. This directly counters earlier thinking in Hollywood that it was necessary to create films that would appeal to the demographic cohort of 14–24-year-old males. Now, there is the realization that young girls constitute their own, very large audience and that the studios can generate large profits by catering specifically to them or as Nancy Utley, Fox Searchlight marketing president, observes, "the success of *Legally Blond* and female titles shows that when girls feel a connection to a movie they come out in droves. It's a very viable audience" (cited in Cruz and Schwartz 2003).

In thinking about this tween girl audience, some critics have noted that because this generation of young girls has in a sense grown up with the concept of 'girl power' in their own lives, at least in comparison with earlier generations, they are looking for images on film which also portray strong female characters such as Elle of *Legally Blonde*. Commenting on her role as Elle in *Legally Blonde*, Reese Witherspoon in fact describes choosing the role in part because it offered a vision of a young woman who doesn't have to choose between "Barbie or brainy": "[*Blonde*] had a modern, feminist attitude. It was about a woman who's girly and feminine, but is also really ambitious and successful and driven" (cited in Cruz and Schwartz 2003).

For anyone who has sat through *Legally Blonde*, however, Witherspoon's suggestion that her character has a feminist attitude would raise serious questions as to what exactly constitutes feminism in Hollywood today. While many of these movies are ostensibly about girls gaining power in some realm—for Elle, it was first Harvard Law School, and then in *Legally Blonde Two* (2003) the sequel, the Senate—the screen images are filled with another set of powerful, consumerist, and arguably anti-feminist messages, including high-consumption items such as cars, vacations, beautiful clothes, well-crafted, perfect bodies, etc. In addition, in terms of the issue of race, Hollywood still creates universes that are, for the most part, white, suburban and upper middle class. As media critic, Laura Sessions Stepp (2003) has noted:

Most female films this season may preach empowerment, but with thin plots, one-dimensional characters and unabashed emphasis on good looks and tight-fitting wardrobes, they ignore the myriad challenges that run through girls' lives.

In these films, then, much of what passes for empowerment is in reality the freedom for these young women to use their feminine skills and purchasing power to attain their goals. And, even in those films where feminine wile is not employed—since too much of it would be a turn-off to young girls anyway—there is nevertheless the usual ‘payoff’ where the girl becomes conventionally beautiful at the end of the film as a result of a ‘make-over.’ For example, in *Princess Diaries* (2001), the protagonist straightens her hair and puts on contact lenses in order to become the princess she was destined to be. This Cinderella story was so successful that it generated \$108 million in the box office. Money and the pursuit of beauty are the real visual substance of these films, no matter how progressive the ostensible message is supposed to be.

In this marriage of marketing and message, then, a seamless fit emerges where advertising for products, freedom to consume, and self-transformation are fused in an overall ‘feel good’ film. As part of this process of marketing and self-transformation, it becomes crucial for the tween girls to form an identification with the female protagonists in the film, who are themselves undergoing some kind of transformation. For that to happen, these actors must usually be identifiable somehow from other media worlds that the girls have already had some exposure to. That is why there is such a strong incentive to ‘recruit’ actors from the ranks of television, where the tween viewers have already become familiar with the characters. The thinking is that somehow, through their previous acts of consumption and identification, the tweens will transfer their loyalty to watching these actors on the big screen.

For example, actors such as Hilary Duff, or the Olsen Twins (Mary Kate and Ashley,) or Amanda Byrnes, are already a part of tween girls’ media world through the Nickelodeon and Disney channels. In their recent films, each of these young women undergoes a personal trial and thus arrives at a kind of self-knowledge. The feminist ‘moment’ in the story usually occurs when the girl realizes that it is more important to be who she is than to get ‘the guy,’ and often the guy is jettisoned in the process. More often, however, is the case where the boy waits passively on the sidelines while the girl enacts her own struggle, which only indirectly involves him. For tween girls, in other words, the drama that unfolds is only indirectly related to the heterosexual romance in the storyline.

Even in terms of the display of conventional beauty, tween girls will not accept this as an explicit goal for women, even if it becomes part of the ‘pay-

off' at the end of the film. In fact, it can become the foil for ironic humor, which accounts for the large success of *Miss Congeniality* (2000). In this film, Sandra Bullock self-consciously mocks the beauty pageant aesthetic, even as she is forced to go underground and become a beauty queen for her FBI job.

Generally speaking, since tween girls are in-between childhood and adolescence, they are drawn to not only young actresses from television but to teen and twenty-something actresses who have also formed part of their earlier media landscape. As long as the storyline is not too graphic in terms of sexuality or other serious, adult themes, tweens will be drawn to watching Jennifer Lopez, Kate Hudson, Sandra Bullock, etc., on screen, since they are already familiar with them from television and magazines. This may explain, in part, why such films as *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days* (2003), *Just Married* (2003), *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), *Two Weeks Notice* (2002), and *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), enjoyed such high box office receipts, derived in large part from the tween girl audience.

Commenting on the popularity of these romantic comedies for the tween girl audience, Peter Adey, president of worldwide marketing for MGM, observes that, "there's no question about it. There are just a lot of movies out there that the tween audience is driving. Teens are the main audience, followed by tweens" (cited in Puig 2003). In his view, teens are the first to go see these films, and they then tell their younger siblings about it, which brings in the tweens through this word-of-mouth network. Though these films are often romantic comedies, tween girls are not necessarily drawn to these films simply to see the romance occurring on screen. This is not to say that they do not generate interest and desire for the 'cute guy' in the film (witness the craze that Leonardo DiCaprio generated in *Titanic* with tween girl filmgoers), but that is not the only narrative they are drawn to. Tween girls enjoy watching the struggle that the female protagonist goes through, whether it is comedic or dramatic.

For example, in the film, *Maid in Manhattan*, film actor Jennifer Lopez's character works as a cleaner in a hotel where a rich politician (Ralph Fiennes) is staying. Through a wardrobe mishap, she is mistaken for a rich woman. In this film, the classic Cinderella fantasy is re-enacted. That she is loved in the end for being who she really is—that is, a working-class girl—also fits in with the themes of tween girl movies, which portray empowerment for girls through self-acceptance. And, while the ultimate feel-good message may be about loving oneself for who one is, once again a good

may be about loving oneself for who one is, once again a good portion of the film portrays a fantastic world of wealth and power.

Family Movies and the Tween Girl Audience

While films such as *How to Deal* or *The Princess Diaries* may have been produced specifically with tween girls in mind, it is also true that tween girls are desirable in large part because they can be counted on to attend other kinds of films as well. For example, Hollywood has dealt with their never-ending quest for audience attendance by producing films that can be considered family entertainment as a means of drawing children, tweens, and teens along with their parents. And, while romantic comedies are viewed as an important film genre that tween girls will be drawn to, there is an equally strong pull to market these 'family films' to tween girls, precisely because they enjoy and can be counted on to attend and/or rent or buy a variety of these family films.

When thinking about the relationship of tween girls to family films, it may be useful to review a brief history of the development of this particular genre of film. For example, film scholar Robert C. Allen (1999) has made the argument that these kinds of family films arose in the wake of such larger social transformations as the 'echo boom,' the rise of the VCR, and the post-modern family. In his view, after the baby 'bust' between 1965 to 1980, the birth rate finally began to climb back up, to the point where by 1995, 28 percent of the U.S. population was under the age of 18. In fact, by 1998, fully 70 million Americans were under the age of 18.

In addition to a new and sizable population of young people, during this period the VCR became to the echo bust generation what the television had been to the boomers. Commenting on the impact of the VCR on the American population, Allen writes that:

It took seventy years for the telephone to reach 50 per cent penetration of US households, cable television thirty-nine years, and television fifteen years. It took the VCR just twelve years, with 80 per cent of that penetration occurring in less than forty-eight months. To put this remarkable rate of adoption into perspective, we should recall that another revolutionary piece of electronic technology, the personal computer, was also introduced in the early 1980s. By the end of 1997, fewer than half of American households owned a computer, while nearly 90 percent owned a VCR. (111-112)

Given the enormous popularity of the VCR in the American home and the large percentage of Americans who are under the age of 18, it makes sense that the 'family' film would become an important genre to develop. And, in fact, Hollywood has attempted since that time to exploit the potential of VCRs, and now DVDS, with as many kinds of films as possible that a family might watch. What the VCR has done, in effect, is to multiply the potential profits of any given film from initial ticket sales in movie theaters, to repeat viewing in the 'home entertainment center.'

In terms of the question of genres, it is not immediately apparent what is considered a family film. Allen contends that the family film arose in the late 1980s and early 90s as a specific category, one that included a variety of other genres, such as realistic comedies, adventure fantasies, animated films and live action/animation hybrids. Thus, films as diverse as *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003), *Finding Nemo* (2003), *Seabiscuit* (2003), *The Little Mermaid* (1992), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Lion King* (1994), *Home Alone* (1990), etc., might all be considered family films. Also included may be films which are arguably inappropriate for younger children, but which are heavily marketed to them in an effort to draw their families into the theaters and video rental stores. Such films as *Spider-Man* (2002), which includes violent scenes, as well as Austin Powers in *Goldmember* (2002), which includes very suggestive sexual and scatological humor, are examples of films that had huge market campaigns that were directed in part at younger family members.

Writers such as A.O. Scott have observed that in the early 70s, Hollywood produced films that were far more challenging than the films cited above and that dealt with the social and political turmoil of the times. These films were clearly aimed at adults. Now, because of these changing demographics, 'mainstream' is considered the youth market. And this youth market does not simply include male teenagers but female teens and tweens as well as children and not least the parents who take them to the movies. As Scott (2003) notes:

The really big blockbusters—from *Shrek* to *Lord of the Rings*, from the *Toy Story* movies to the *Harry Potter* franchise—are engineered for maximum cross-generational appeal. Sometimes this is achieved by playing to the sweetness of the very young, the flippancy and vulgarity of their older siblings and the self-mocking nostalgia of the grownups. *Shrek* is the most successful recent example of such a strategy; it won over adults (and a good many critics) by pandering to their curious

need to feel smarter than the children sitting next to them, conquering the audience by dividing it.

Overall, this strategy of creating films that will have cross-generational appeal has meant that Hollywood now produces more films than ever that are rated PG or PG-13. These films are viewed not only in the movie theaters but are bought for home viewing as well, or as Allen (1999) notes, "the single largest category of video purchases is parents buying videos for children. Videos aimed specifically at kids...represent 37 percent of all video sales." (116)

Though the family film is not exclusively aimed at tween girls, once one takes into consideration that these girls have powerful influences in terms of their parents' purchasing decisions, it is easy to see why, as a member of the family, tween girls would become an important group to market to. In addition, since they are more open-ended in terms of their film preferences, enjoying both children's films as well as teenager and twenty-something films, they represent a group who can be exploited by Hollywood because they are not as fixed in their tastes. Thus, while the tween girl thoroughly enjoys the more targeted tween films such as *The Princess Bride* (1987), she can also be counted on to go to *Cheaper by the Dozen*, (the new Steve Martin film), or *Harry Potter* (2001), or *Titanic* (1997) as well.

Finally, even when a film is specifically targeted to the tween girl audience, there is oftentimes the effort to generate cross-generational appeal for that film. It would be difficult to make the case that *The Lizzie McGuire Movie* (2003) or *Passport to Paris* (1999) (with Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen) have any cross-generational appeal—to parents, for example. However, it is the case that other fare, such as *Josie and the Pussycats* (2001), *Freaky Friday* (2003), *Little Women* (1994), and *The Parent Trap* (1998) do have something for other generations as well. Sometimes the appeal is a kind of wink and a nod to the parents, whereas other times it may be more connected to the plot of the movie; still other times, it may be trying to create a sense of nostalgia for the parents. In fact, in some recent Hollywood films, all three strategies are at work: plots that portray parent-child conflicts as well as the use of irony and nostalgia.

'Freakin' Amazing'¹: Hollywood Re-Visions Tween Girlhood

In the recent Disney re-make of *Freaky Friday* (2003), these strategies of creating plots that involve a family dynamic, nostalgia, and irony are all in

evidence. The film was explicitly targeted to tween girls, or as one critic (Berardinelli 2003) observed, "*Freaky Friday* is aimed squarely at the tween audience, and they will universally enjoy this movie, as will mothers who end up accompanying their offspring to theaters." The commercials for the film on television played up the potential tween appeal of the film, as when we hear the daughter say, upon realizing she has her mother's body and face, "Oh, I'm like the crypt keeper!"

The plot revolves around the mother-daughter dynamic, played by Jamie Lee Curtis and Lindsay Lohan, respectively. As the mother, Tess (Curtis) is the incarnation of the Hollywood version of the 'new' mother as workaholic. Having been widowed in the not-too-distant past, Curtis is portrayed as a harried psychiatrist who is micro-managing every aspect of her family's life while at the same time being disconnected from their 'real' struggles. Once again, the family, despite having a single parent as the primary wage earner, nevertheless has a high earner single parent, so the lifestyle they are shown as leading is upper middle class. Curtis is engaged to marry a new man (Mark Harmon) and in combination with her wedding plans and best-selling book is portrayed as having precious little time for her daughter and son's real needs.

Anna (Lohan), the daughter, is portrayed as rebelling against her mother, in part due to the alienation she feels at being disconnected from her and pain at the fact that she is remarrying so soon after her father's death. Rather than dwell on these potentially real-life struggles that viewers might identify with, that is, with a single mm trying to keep it all together and stay connected to her children, we are instead quickly taken in an escapist or fantastic direction. After they have entered a Chinese restaurant and demonstrated their conflicts openly at the dinner table, a wise and knowing Chinese mother (played by Lucille Soong) who is working at the restaurant gives Anna and Tess a fortune cookie which, when broken, creates the body-switch between mother and daughter. Commenting on the role this other-mother character is meant to play, media scholar Cynthia Fuchs (2003) observes that "And so, once again, well-heeled Caucasians who've lost touch with 'traditional' values are serviced by the inscrutable local Others or, as Anna observes, 'It was some strange Asian voodoo.'"

From this point on, the humorous aspects of the body-switch predominate for the remainder of the film, and at the end of the film there is the requisite message that it is important to understand what the other is going

through in order to make peace with them and ultimately oneself. That the realization of this homily in fact leads to the mother and daughter being able to switch back reinforces this upbeat message of the need for acceptance of the other leading to reclaiming oneself. For the substance of the film, however, there are the comical aspects of what it means to be a modern-day teenager or a harried career woman. There is also the wish fulfillment for the mothers in the audience of a younger man being attracted to them as when Anna's would-be suitor ends up falling for Tess.

For tween girls, who may be working out the complications of coming out of latency, there is as well the specter of adult male desire as when the character played by Mark Harmon wants to kiss and hug his fiancée, and the audience watches him trying to kiss Lindsay Lohan. That aspect of the plot is quickly squelched, however, and for the remainder of the film, tween girls can enjoy the more pleasurable aspects of the film. Some of these filmic pleasures include being able to watch the daughter using Mom's credit card to make multiple purchases and watching with triumph as the mother discovers how unfair Anna's English teacher has been to her. And, of course, there is the ultimate fantasy at the end, which includes not only a harmonious resolution with the mom, but acceptance of the new father who will make the family whole again. Add to this the fact that the young suitor falls hard for the daughter again and that she is shown singing in a rock band at her mother's wedding at the end of the film, and it becomes clear why this film was such a success with tween girls.

While it is perhaps true that teen males might not have gone to see the film of their own accord, the film was clever enough and delivered enough jokes that it was able to appeal somewhat to other groups of viewers as well. Commenting on the cross-sex appeal of the film, film critic James Berardinelli (2003) notes that:

Freaky Friday is motion picture cotton candy—sweet while it lasts, easily disposed of, and insubstantial. It will please those who seek it out, and probably won't horrify or disgust anyone who ends up seeing it for other reasons (dragged along, bribed, or otherwise coerced). There are enough clever and/or funny moments to provoke laughter from even a scowling 13-year old boy who wants to be next door watching *Terminator 3* for the third time.

The larger point is that even a tween girl film that is explicitly marketed to tween girls can be even more successful to the degree that it taps into the family film's cross-generational appeal.

What Is Past Is Prologue: Hollywood Re-Makes the Tween Girl

In thinking about the larger questions of how tweens are represented in these contemporary Hollywood films, then, it may be instructive to compare the re-make of *Freaky Friday*, with its original 1976 version, which was itself drawn from the 1972 Mary Rodgers novel. When comparing the two, one interesting question immediately arises: what happened to the father? In the original version of the film, with Jodie Foster and Barbara Harris as the daughter and mother, respectively, the father is not dead but very much alive. In the earlier version, John Astin plays the father, and he is described quite explicitly as a "male chauvinist pig." In 1976, the theme of a sexist father ordering his child and stay-at-home wife around may have resonated with female audiences of that era, and Disney, not known for its proto-feminism, retained this theme which originated from the children's novel.

In the earlier version of the film, furthermore, Jodie Foster's character of Annabel is portrayed as a sloppy and careless and very talented athletically, in short, a 'tomboy.' Her mother, Tess, is portrayed as an alienated, cigarette-smoking bourgeois housewife, who must contend with a myriad of household duties as her family leaves the house for school and work. The tension that ensues once the bodies are switched has to do with Annabel learning how to manage a household, deal with carpet cleaners, drunken housekeepers, nosy neighbors, and so on. Interestingly enough, when Annabel realizes she has her mother's body, though she is horrified not to be herself, the camera nevertheless shows her smiling approvingly as she runs her hands along her newfound (mother's) breasts. Compare this smile to the 2003 re-make, where Jamie Lee Curtis smiles approvingly as she feels the buttocks of her daughter in her newly acquired daughter's body. It is no longer clear, in this sense, how far women have progressed if the mother is now portrayed as wanting the tween daughter's body rather than the other way around as it was in the original.

In all fairness, it is true that as the film was coming out, Jamie Lee Curtis was feted for appearing in a woman's magazine in her 'own' body; that is, she wanted women to see what a middle-aged star's body looks like when it is not re-touched by photography. She was lauded in the media for being so 'brave' as to show 'the truth' about the aging process for women. In this way, the 'supra-text' of the film dealt directly with what it means for a contemporary middle-aged woman to have a 'real' body in an age where young bodies are held out as the norm. At the same time, the text of the film itself

precisely played into middle-aged women's anxieties about not having a younger body. Thus, the cultural messages of the film in a sense undercut the seemingly progressive messages of the media publicity surrounding Curtis.

At another level, the portrayal of girlhood in the original film is arguably far more progressive than the vision we are offered in the re-make. For, in the earlier version, the Jodie Foster character is decidedly not a grown woman, and in the 1970s is not yet immersed in all the products and images that would engulf tween girls in later decades. The Foster character may be shown trying on her mother's rouge and false eyelashes, but in this version she ends up looking like a circus clown and is happier being the 'tomboy' she is. Counter this image of tween girlhood with the 2003 version of the film, where the daughter goes on a spending spree in her mother's body and creates a wardrobe for her that is intended to make her look more youthful. In this version, the daughter, far from being a tomboy, is a putative sex kitten, dressing her mother's body in slinky, tight-fitting outfits with high heels, piercing, etc. In this sense, the re-make has re-visioned what the stakes are for tween girls today: no longer tomboys but rather would-be hosts of a Hollywood makeover program. This is where the irony comes in as well. Tween girls can knowingly laugh at the daughter's frustration with her mother's dowdy looks and can enjoy watching the mother become a new, younger self with her daughter's wise guidance.

By the year 2003, then, *Freaky Friday* arguably took on a completely new set of meanings. First, all traces of sexism in the family have disappeared, and we are now instead faced with the specter of a castrating, workaholic mother figure. Part of the tension of the new version precisely consists of how the family will be 'blended' or reconstituted with a mother who is barely at home and with the arrival of a new father to replace the dead father. Whereas the old family, then, was troubled as a result of lingering sexism and the 'male chauvinist pig' behavior of the father, the new family is trying to figure out a way to bring a male back into its fold with a 'liberated' mother. Thus, one could make the argument that in this film—and many other 'family' films—it is precisely the modern fractured family that creates the dramatic tension. As well, it is this dynamic that would arguably appeal to both the tween girls as well as their (guilt-ridden) working mothers viewing the film together. The laugh may be on the mother, but the tensions in the film resonate with both daughters and mothers.

In terms of the specific images of what constitutes tween girlhood today, furthermore, it is clear that the 'tomboy' image is not valorized in the later version of the film. Rather, the new tween girl in the re-make is a beautiful, hair-dyed, would-be rock guitarist, who comes replete with Britney Spears like belly rings, short shifts and perfectly made-up face. The dramatic tension for this girl is that she supposedly cannot fit in at school and has created a garage band as an alternative identity to that displayed by the popular girls in school. That anyone could believe that the beautiful and sharply dressed Lindsay Lohan would ever be ostracized in any school stretches the imagination.

The more important point is that the earlier pre-teen angst for the Jodie Foster character lay in the fact that her identity as a tomboy did not fit in with her mother's image of who she wanted her to be. In the new version of the film, the stakes have shifted, and it is now the fact that the daughter tries to act too grown-up, piercing her belly, playing in a rock band, etc., that agonizes her mother. It could be argued, therefore, that tween girlhood, at least in Hollywood's representations, has thus gone from being the place where girls are negotiating the freedom of their childhood, which allowed them to be tomboys, to a place where they are demonstrating their rebellion through creating self-images that are far more sophisticated and sexual than their earlier counterparts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in this brief rehearsal of the relationship of contemporary Hollywood to tween girl culture, it is clear that tween girls have become an important group that studios are finally paying attention to. From its initial efforts to create films for a mass audience, to targeting adult audiences, to finally, the teen and then 'youth' market, Hollywood has been in a never-ending search to find the right films that will appeal to diverse audiences. In this search, tween girls were finally 'discovered,' and the studios have been scrambling to meet the increasing demand for films for tween girls ever since.

While these studios have been very successful in targeting this new demographic, a deeper question emerges—what kinds of images of girlhood are ultimately being portrayed on screen in these mainstream films? For, while the messages behind these films are often touted as being progressive and 'empowering,' the mise-en-scene of white, upper-middle-class suburban

landscapes in effect undercuts the progressive messages of the texts themselves. Add to this the effect of a steady stream of consumer activities and purchases that the protagonists oftentimes make in these films, and it is easy to criticize these films as one long commercial for a consumer society. Ultimately, the dominant image of tween girlhood that these films offer is one of a subject who is ensconced in a white, primarily suburban America, one where conflicts are raised and a resolution is found, and the girl gets the wardrobe, the intact family, and the guy to boot.

On a final note, though Hollywood has too often gone this conventional route in creating tween girl films, many exceptions might provide a pathway for other filmmakers to follow in the future. For example, the tween girl film *Blue Crush* (2002) is arguably in the group just described, that is, a progressive message film with a pretty white girl who is portrayed in a small bikini for a good portion of the film. However, the film, which is about a working-class girl who wants to be a world-class surfer, is redeemed somewhat by its accurate portrayal of working-class life and by its attempt to show how girls can have the same desires as men (as in *Rocky*) to fight against all odds for their goals. Similarly, films like *Little Women* (1994), with Wynona Ryder and Susan Sarandon, demonstrate that a female-bonding film can be entertaining and meaningful at the same time.

Finally, there are many non-US films, including such recent films as *Whale Rider* (2002) and *Bend It like Beckham* (2002), which do not simply valorize white upper-middle-class suburban life. In these films, women 'of color' are portrayed as struggling to offset the stereotypes and injunctions against females that exist in their worlds. The point is that Hollywood does not have to marry commerce with tween culture in order to create inspiring, popular films that tween girls will flock to. Speaking of the genesis of the 'chick flick' more generally, Paramount executive Lynda Obst (cited in McNary 2003) has observed that, "Chick flicks were originally first and foremost a form of counter programming, so I think it's a tremendous show of confidence that they now have enough muscle and crossover potential to open in the summer." The recent and surprise successes of films like *Whale Rider* and *Bend It Like Beckham* demonstrate that crossover films for tween girls can also be extremely popular and profitable. Ultimately, as more of these kinds of films get the 'green light' for production and are funded appropriately (including marketing campaigns and better distribution), girls will get to see varied and diverse images of empowered young women. Then,

tween girls might finally be able to get more than a sugarcoated and consumerist message from Hollywood about what their own empowerment could consist of.

Notes

- ¹ See Gordon and Smith (2003).

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