TOMBOY TENSIONS IN FILMS
FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

A Thesis

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Tracing the development of genre studies in critical film theory, Barry Keith Grant defines genre movies as "those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations" (xv). While Grant explains that early genre analyses focused primarily on gangster films and westerns (xv), broad conceptualizations of what constitutes a genre, such as that offered above, spelled the expansion of genre criticism to include a wide spectrum of film types. Ranging from melodrama to film noir, from musicals to war films, and everywhere in-between, genre criticism lends itself to innovation and expansion. It is in this space that I would like to discuss films targeted toward an adolescent female audience as a genre.

Common to many of the films in this genre is the presence of a tomboy character. Coded as gender outlaw/transgressor, the tomboy character poses a potential threat to hegemonic gender constructs. This threat, however, is often recuperated narratively by figuring the tomboy's transgressions as temporary. The containment of the tomboy character throughout the course of the character's development thus limits the transgressive potential of these films. Despite these limitations, however, it is possible to read these films against the grain and thus resist the narrative recuperation of these tomboy characters. Searching the subtexts allows space for the reader to put the film to
what Andrew Britton terms "unauthorized use" (201). These genre films then perform a double-edged and contradictory function, one that simultaneously enables and contains gender disobedience. My thesis explores those contradictions in six films representative of the genre.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Tracing the development of genre studies in critical film theory Barry Keith Grant defines genre movies as “those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations” (xv). While Grant explains that early genre analyses focused primarily on gangster films and westerns (xv), broad conceptualizations of what constitutes a genre, such as that offered above, spelled the expansion of genre criticism to include a wide spectrum of film types. Ranging from melodrama to film noir, from musicals to war films, and everywhere in-between, genre criticism lends itself to innovation and expansion. It is in this space that I would like to discuss films targeted toward an adolescent female audience as a genre.

Following in the footsteps of such Disney hits as The Parent Trap (1961) and Freaky Friday (1971), several recently released films serve as a testament to Hollywood’s rediscovery of female adolescents as a distinct and separate (from an adolescent male) target audience. In the year 1995 alone four films specifically directed toward these spectators were released, namely It Takes Two (1995), The Babysitter’s Club (1995), Now and Then (1995), and Gold Diggers: The Secret of Bear Mountain (1995). In addition to
these films several others directed to this audience, including *Fly Away Home* and *Harriet the Spy*, were released in the summer of 1996. In a recent article that appeared in The New York Times, “The Movies Discover the Teen-Age Girl,” Peggy Orenstein refers to 1996 as “the year of the girl” (Section 2 pg. 1) precisely because of Hollywood’s newfound interest in films for adolescent girls. While films targeted toward this audience by no means constitute a new genre, there has undoubtedly been a marked increase in the number of these films in the last few years.

Because similar narrative themes, characterizations and plot developments run through these films, it is legitimate to speak of these films as a genre. In deconstructing what appears to typify films of this genre, several recurring storylines and character portrayals present themselves as representative of the genre. Present among those storylines are the familiar adolescent issues of lost innocence, coming of age, identity development/ transformation, and discussions/explorations of sexuality. Often transpiring in the context of some great adventure or exciting undertaking, successful passage through what is figured as a sort of test or trial signals the completion of some level of identity formation. Oftentimes this trial involves a brush with death as in both *Gold Diggers* and *Now and Then*. Regardless of the nature of the challenge confronted by the characters, however, the experience in and of itself serves as a means by which the characters are drawn closer together. Female bonding and intense devotion between and among girl characters thus characterize films of this genre. Also bound up in the pursuit of whatever adventure or project the film’s protagonists engage in is the challenge and/or rejection of parental/adult authority. This challenge/rejection then signals an emerging independence on the part of the protagonist(s).

Directed toward an adolescent female audience, films of this genre necessarily utilize adolescent actresses. Placing adolescent girls as protagonists in roles and narratives that have been historically reserved for male characters, these films fill a void
left by films traditionally directed toward an adolescent (read *male* adolescent) audience. Where girl characters in popular children’s films like *Stand By Me* (1986), *Gremlins* (1984), *Goosies* (1985) and *Tom and Huck* (1996) were marginalized or absent altogether, the films of this genre foreground the roles and actions of their female characters and sometimes, as in *Gold Diggers*, virtually eliminate adolescent male characters. Placing girls center stage, these films offer adolescent girls the opportunity to identify not merely with another child, as girls are forced to do when fed nothing but images of adolescent male characters, but with characters of their same gender.

By their very nature, films targeted toward female adolescents privilege female characters. Looking at the casting practices for these films, it becomes apparent that several specific character types typify this genre. Most common among those appear to be the tomboy and her polar opposite, the hyperfeminized girly-girl. Occurring as frequently as they do, the presence of these characters represents one of the defining characteristics of the genre. While there is no doubt that other images of adolescent girls representing a wider range of the continuum between tomboy and ‘femme’ are present, the gender transgressor coded in the tomboy character is frequently canceled out or at least countered by the presence of the gender obedient feminine adolescent girl character. With this observation in mind, I would like to turn my attention to the construction and operation of one of those typical characters--the tomboy--in six films representative of the genre, namely *The Parent Trap* (1961), *Freaky Friday* (1977), *My Girl* (1992), *My Girl 2* (1994), *Now and Then* (1995) and *Gold Diggers: The Secret of Bear Mountain* (1995).

As explained above, one of the requisite features of genre films is their portrayal of familiar stories in familiar settings with familiar characters (Grant xv). As one of the familiar characters in this genre the tomboy must therefore be easily identifiable. As such there are both visual and behavioral signifiers that are coded as characteristically tomboyish. Visually the tomboy is most often clothed in t-shirts, jeans or shorts, and
comfortable sporty shoes. Her hair is frequently short or, if long, pulled back off her face in a simple ponytail. Ultimately her visual appearance is the one most suitable for the sorts of activities in which she is commonly engaged. Among those activities are the typically more boyish adolescent pursuits such as climbing trees, riding bikes, playing sports, etc. Beyond her enthusiasm for activities largely associated with males, she frequently possesses a fierce independence and strong sense of self. At her core she rejects or is disinterested in behaviors and appearances traditionally understood as feminine. In her simple rejection of the feminine she falls outside hegemonic gender paradigms and therefore takes on her gender outlaw status.

Elizabeth Segel writes on the tomboy character in children’s literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in her article, “Tomboy Taming and Gender Role Socialization: The Evidence of Children’s Books.” In her essay Segel notes the presence of societal tensions between the freedom and independence associated with tomboyish behavior and the restrictions of traditional gender roles for women in this historical time period. Building on this contextualization Segel then finds those same tensions reflected in the literature of the era. Taking the work of Louisa May Alcott in Little Women as exemplary of the ‘taming’ of the tomboy character in children’s literature of this time, Segel illuminates the at once progressive and status quo resolution of the potentially transgressive tomboy character. As she explains,

..now that her heroine has meekly accepted the narrow horizons and made the prescribed sacrifice, Alcott manages to have it both ways: to preach what her society wanted girls to learn but then to allow her compliant heroine to realize her original aspirations (57).

This resolution then, despite its permission of some expansion of prescribed gender roles, effectively contains that expansion within bounds acceptable to the patriarchal
order. Thus the narrative recuperation of the tomboy character’s resistance to prescribed gender roles signals the fleeting nature of that resistance. Figured as temporary such resistance not only gets understood simply as a function of adolescence, but also as benign in its temporality. Such is often the fate of tomboy characters in films geared toward an adolescent female audience.

Theorizing the relationship between genre films and the preservation and perpetuation of the status quo Judith Hess Wright asserts that these films “assist in the maintenance of the existing political structure” (Grant 49). While Wright focuses her attention on westerns, gangster films, horror movies and science fiction films, an extension of her notion of the function of genre films offers a possible explanation of the standard containment of the tomboy character in films tailored for an adolescent female audience. Traditional gender role expectations, originating by nature in the prescriptions of the dominant order, inform acceptable notions of what it means to be female in Western culture. Conceptualizing the cinema as a cultural agent of mainstream thought then, the containment of the tomboy character can be understood as a reflection of dominant gender ideologies. Safe in her independence, strong in her determinations, broad in her aspirations, and secure in her rejection of ‘normal’ girlish interests the tomboy falls outside patriarchal gender norms. Figured then as a gender outlaw the tomboy poses a potential threat to hegemonic gender constructions in her willful transcendence of prescribed gender roles. So, in the interests of maintaining the status quo, this outlaw status is acceptable only when its relinquishment is assured. Filmic recuperation and/or containment of the tomboy character then becomes a project of patriarchy.

Andrew Britton also notes the prescriptive intent of genre films, in his explanation that the
obligation of any film apparently to endorse, whatever its real intention, the norms which are massively reproduced within the culture as a whole is to discourage any process of generalization from the dramatic world to the reality inhabited by the spectator which fails to conduce to intimations of the rightness of the status quo (201).

For Britton, however, this function of genre films signals Hollywood’s ability both to enable and contain (201). Britton’s analysis, however, does not end with his observation of this seemingly contradictory function of genre films. Recognizing the ability of viewers to ‘read against the grain’ Britton maintains that “even films whose intention is conservative can leave room, in the very pursuit of their project, for unauthorized use” (201). Britton’s suggestion of the existence of a space for alternative readings of genre films disrupts the notion of genre films as singularly supportive of the status quo. Considering the scholarship of both Wright and Britton it becomes possible to understand Hollywood’s treatment of tomboy characters as both representative of hegemonic gender constructs and as potentially subversive of those same norms when read against the grain. It is this double-edged conceptualization of the function of genre films that frames my analysis of films targeted toward an adolescent female audience.
CHAPTER 2

TOMBOY/FEMME:

BINARY OPPOSITES OR VARIATION ON A THEME?

One of the primary identifying features of the tomboy character is her rejection of traditional gender norms. Whether crossing gender boundaries behaviorally, visually, or on both planes, the tomboy finds herself at home in territories traditionally reserved for male characters. While her rejection/transcendence of hegemonic gender prescriptives is commonly understood as temporary, and therefore benign, the very fact of her existence points to the limitations of bipolar conceptualizations of gender.

Straddling the divide between dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity, the tomboy character disrupts conceptualizations of gender as constituted solely in terms of the binary opposition male -v- female. By virtue of her positioning within and across gender paradigms that would attempt to reduce gender difference to the simplistic male/female and accompanying masculine/feminine model, the tomboy challenges polarized conceptualizations of gender. Located somewhere between traditional notions of ‘boy’ and ‘girl,’ the tomboy prompts analyses of gender as something to be conceptualized across a continuum, where there are a variety of possible locations. By upsetting dichotomous perceptions of gender and instead drawing
attention to a broad range of gendered identities, the tomboy explodes notions of gender as a naturalized category. Thus, rather than conceiving of gender-based difference as an essentialized dichotomy, gender is instead presented as a polyvalent socially constructed category of difference.

Once theorized both as a social construct and as an identity that is not simply reducible to a pair of polarized opposites, gender is no longer permitted to function as a/the definitive determinant of one’s identity. Rather one’s gendered identity is understood not as something one is born with, but, on the contrary, as something imposed on an individual by culturally constructed gender norms. Analyses of the tomboy character then become instructive as illuminations of these characteristics of gender.

Focusing on these same dynamics of gender in her book, Technologies of Gender, Teresa de Lauretis cites the cinema as one of the locations where gender is both represented and constructed (2). Employing Foucauldian conceptualizations of the prescriptive nature of discourse, de Lauretis theorizes the relationship between representations and constructions of gender. Explaining that gender is constructed in its representation, de Lauretis marks out locations where transgressions of hegemonic gender norms are possible. The spaces she allocates for these transgressions are located within discourses that point to the ideological nature of constructions/representations of gender. deLauretis ultimately concludes that these transgressions are also instrumental in constructions and representations of gender:

...the construction of gender is also effected by its deconstruction; that is to say, by any discourse, feminist or otherwise, that would discard it as ideological misrepresentation. For gender, like the real, is not only the effect of representation but also its excess, what remains outside discourse as a potential trauma which can rupture or destabilize, if not contained, any representation (3).
Where de Lauretis’s analysis is useful in conjunction with an examination of the tomboy character is in her acknowledgment of the constructedness of gender and in her conclusion that hegemonic constructions can be challenged and resisted. Thus what one finds in cinematic representations of the tomboy (read gender outlaw) is a space where gender is both constructed and disrupted.

Such is the case in two Walt Disney classics, *The Parent Trap* (1961) and *Freaky Friday* (1977). Containing model examples of the tomboy character, both films balance the presence of the tomboy character with a more traditional female character. Presenting narratives developed around role changes between the tomboy character and the femme character, these films highlight gender as something that is not only constructed, but also as something that is mutable and transferable. Gender identity in these films is coded both visually and behaviorally, and by emphasizing the ease with which these signifiers can be altered and transferred, gender is framed as a constructed category of difference.

Directed by David Swift and released in 1961, *The Parent Trap* traces the story of two adolescent girls, Sharon the femme and Susan the tomboy, who meet at summer camp and discover that their strikingly similar appearance is more than mere coincidence. Despite their initial rivalry, the girls quickly become friends after being forced to share a cabin as punishment for their antics in the early part of the film. Soon after being placed in isolation, the two discover that they share the same parents and are in fact identical twins. Separated as a result of yet another failed marriage in a climate where Sharon observes that “nobody stays together anymore,” the two decide that in order to rectify the fact that they have been cheated out of a normal family life they should attempt to reunite their parents. That neither of their parents remarried serves as sufficient evidence to Sharon that they must still share a “true love” for each
other that can be renewed if only they were to see each other again. In order to rekindle that relationship, the sisters switch places with each other hoping that such an action will foster a meeting between their parents. What ensues is a hilarious jumble of events revolving around Sharon and Susan’s successful attempt to disrupt their father’s relationship with his new fiancée Vicky and their accompanying struggle to reunite their parents in marriage.

Hayley Mills is double-cast in the film in both the role of Sharon and in the role of Susan. Employing fancy camera work, skillful editing and the occasional body double, the film successfully showcased the talents of the then up and coming young actress. While the film also starred then popular favorites Brian Keith in the role of Mitch McEndrick and Maureen O’Hara as Maggie Evers, the film clearly centers around Hayley Mills and her portrayals of rough and tumble Susan and refined Sharon. Central to the narrative involving the characters played by Mills is the switch that the sisters undergo in order to carry out their plan of reuniting their parents. It is in this space that I would like to analyze the representation of the tomboy character in conjunction with that of the more traditionally feminine character.

Mills first appears in the film in the role of Sharon Evers, the prim and proper young Bostonian who arrives at summer camp in a chauffeur driven limousine. It is clearly Sharon’s first camp experience as the chauffeur leaves her with a reminder to take her allergy pills, use her insect repellent and read her poetry book. After the driver departs, she meekly checks into camp and informs the camp counselor that she requires a “properly ventilated” tent. Later as her cabin-mates are bragging about the candy that one of their mothers sends, Sharon responds that she doesn’t eat candy because her Grandmother says it is “bad for her teeth.” That Sharon is clearly so out of touch with standard camp rituals is in keeping with the framing of her character as the gentrified femme. With her long, styled hair, refined speech, fashionable outfit and abundance of
luggage Sharon is the picture of white upper class late 1950's/early 1960's American girlhood. Introduced as well bred and visually and behaviorally feminine, the character embodied in Sharon is clearly gender obedient.

While Mills’ character Sharon is clearly feminized, Mills’ other character, Susan, is tomboy through and through. From her cropped hair, chewed up nails and gam smacking appearance to her boundless energy and tales of trekking and camping in the mountains, Susan fits the tomboy image to a t. Hailing from a ranch in Northern California, Susan embodies all the stereotypical representations of West coast youth from this time period. Where her East coast counterpart frets about insect bites, studies the piano, attends the theatre and speaks “proper” English, Susan camps, swims, rides horses and dances to the tunes of Ricky Nelson. Easy going, adventurous, free-spirited and down to earth, Susan appears as yet unaffected by gender norms that would have her unbridled behavior contained and under wraps.

As explained earlier, it is typical of films containing tomboy characters to balance the presence of that character with a more traditionally feminized female character. What is peculiar in this film is that both of these characters are played by the same actress. Given the popularity of Hayley Mills, such a decision surely added drawing power to the appeal of the film, yet what is interesting about this casting choice from the perspective of my analysis is how Mills’ double role points to the constructedness of gender. That Hayley Mills could be both the tomboy and the femme simultaneously disrupts notions of gender as a fixed and immutable category. If Mills could move between roles so believably and with such little effort, then gender could not possibly be a natural condition, and if gender is not a natural category then dominant conceptualizations of gender, polarized as they are, must function as prescriptives rather mere ordering devices. And, if such conceptualizations are prescriptive, one must
then ask both what the directive entails and to whose benefit such a directive contributes.

Judith Butler addresses these very questions in her recent essay, "Critically Queer." Theorizing the performative nature of gender, that is, the notion that gender lies somewhere beyond the subject to which it is attached, Butler presents the idea that gender is "the effect of a regulatory regime of gender differences in which genders are divided and hierarchized under constraint" (21). In her conceptualization, gender and gender norms are not only socially constructed, but are also part of a hegemonic structure devoted to perpetuating itself through the construction and maintenance of these norms. Compliance and/or resistance to these norms is carved out of the prescriptive and compulsory nature of such a regulatory regime. As Butler explains,

Gender performativity is not a matter of choosing which gender one will be today. Performativity is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of a gendered self. It is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will, but which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged (22).

It is thus in performances of gender, such as those undertaken by Hayley Mills in The Parent Trap, that gender is exposed as a constructed category. Whether those same performances can be read as subversive or not relies on the extent to which such performances challenge those same gender norms now exposed as constructed (Butler 22). In other words, in Butler's framework the critical component of transgressive acts is not the extent to which those acts disrupt naturalized conceptualizations of gender, rather that the acts themselves do not repeat gender norms. To enact the norms is therefore to implicate oneself in the hegemony of the norms.
As explained above, the central plot line of The Parent Trap revolves around the characters played by Hayley Mills and their ploy to reunite their parents in order to patch up their parents’ tattered relationship. The extent to which this scheme presents itself as possible hinges on the very ability of the main characters to engage in performances of gender that are explicitly marked as performances. Were it not possible for the girls to switch roles, and in this case the roles that are exchanged are precisely those attached to their gendered identity, such a scheme would not be possible. The distinguishing differences between Sharon and Susan are those grounded in their gendered identity, that is, those surrounding their coding as tomboy or femme, and these differences afford them the opportunity to carry out their plan.

Once the girls discover the fact that they are sisters and devise their plan to switch places with each other, they get to work on the project of learning each other’s respective gender identity. As discussed above, their difference is marked primarily by their gendered positioning, where Sharon is the femme and Susan is the tomboy. Their ability to change roles convincingly is therefore reliant upon their ability to learn their counterpart’s gender. Thus the tomboy must exchange her “aints” for “cän’ts” and “shän’ts” and allow her chewed up fingernails to grow out long and properly filed, while the femme must chomp on bubble gum, talk fast, and cut her long locks into a cropped bob. Not surprisingly, neither girl is too excited to take on the characteristics of the other. Sharon squints her eyes and bites her lip while a look of dread crosses her face as the most visible marker of her femininity, her long blonde hair, is shaped into a less gender specific style. She appears even less enchanted when Susan hurriedly instructs her to chew gum, talk fast and bite her nails. Susan, on the other hand, receives very little coaching from Sharon on the finer points of femininity, rather her lessons revolve around learning mundane details such as the layout of Sharon’s house in Boston. Aside
from the emphasis placed on her grammar and pronunciation, the femme has relatively few gender-based instructions for the tomboy.

It is telling that when it comes to teaching their respective gender positions the tomboy has less to learn than the femme. If gendered identities are indeed situated on a continuum rather than placed apart as polar opposites, and again this film points in that direction, and the femme is situated at one extreme of such a continuum, it follows that she would not be privy to the ways of the tomboy. The tomboy, on the other hand, while situated in the space between feminine and masculine, would be expected to have a bit of the femme in her.\(^1\) After all, her tomboyism is commonly thought of as temporary and transitory, as a time when her femininity, while largely latent, merely lies in wait. That the femme has more to learn to assume the tomboy position while the tomboy is “naturally” more attuned to the feminine is thus in keeping with the idea that tomboyism is nothing more than a temporary divergence from one’s natural positioning. Furthermore, the assumption that the tomboy is in some ways already schooled in the feminine, even if such a familiarity is present only in her rejection of that category, points to the assumption that the feminine is always already known—-is in fact natural. So while these performances of gender disrupt notions of gender grounded solely in terms of the masculine and the feminine, they fail to challenge hegemonic conceptualizations of what it means to be located at the feminine end of the spectrum.

While neither Sharon nor Susan is particularly excited about swapping her gender role, both girls are eager to meet the parent they have been separated from and are therefore fully prepared to switch places with each other in order to accomplish such a task. Their ability to grin and bear it is also shored up by the extent to which the

\(^1\) That Susan is at least partially feminine in a traditional sense is established earlier in the film when she is seen clothed in a pale pink party dress dancing with young Wilfred.
success of their scheme is dependent upon their ability to engage in these performances of gender. Neither girl shows any indication that she is unhappy in her new gender role until it appears that their plan may not succeed. When Mitch, the girls' father, tells Sharon, who is now posing as Susan, that he intends to marry Vicky, Sharon responds by storming around the room while smashing a pillow angrily into the furniture. Shouting out in a fit of frustration that

You can't get married, you'll ruin everything. All the plans we've made, and the work and the diagrams. And my hair, look at my hair, I cut it just for you. And my fingernails, I bit them all off just because of you. Of all the thick headed fathers, all for days and weeks and weeks and nothing but...riding and...my hair.

It is in this scene that Sharon first expresses her frustration and dislike of her new gender role. Prior to this point she appears to have settled comfortably into Susan's tomboy shoes, yet here it is revealed that her new gendered identity is only acceptable to her insofar as it works to further the reunion between her mother and father.

The same holds true with Susan and her foray into the feminine. Immediately after she learns of her father's intent to marry she 'comes out' as Susan and expresses her dislike of her new identity. While seated at breakfast with her mother and grandmother she spills the beans:

I'm not Sharon, I'm Susan. Sharon, your Sharon, is out in California with Daddy. Sharon and I met at camp so we decided to switch places, she bit off her fingernails and I cut her hair and now she's out in California with Dad swimming and riding my horse and having a keen time and I'm stuck here with these lousy music lessons and I hate them.
Following this confession Susan turns to her mother and makes a plea for her acceptance, asking tenderly “I wondered if you could love me as me, and not Sharon. Please?” It is revealing that upon her rejection of the feminine role she has recently assumed, Susan is instantly compelled to beg for her mother’s acceptance. It is as if Susan recognizes this rejection as a signifier not simply of difference, but of deviance and, more importantly, of disaffection. If Susan thus recognizes her “true” identity as potentially problematic, it can only be because she has some sense of the dislike such an identity engenders. The numerous shocked reactions to her shortened hair culminates in her Grandmother’s startled and judgmental commentary: “My Dear child, what have you done to your hair? It looks hoydenish. Are you a boy or a girl? Make up your mind.” It is then no surprise that she ponders her palatability after such an outright rejection. The perceptiveness with which Susan understands her gendered identity is indicative of her awareness of the penalties of falling outside normative conceptualizations of the feminine. Not surprisingly, Sharon does not share Susan’s fears, for her “true” identity is planted firmly within the parameters of traditional femininity, and is therefore not in any way resistant or transgressive.

As stated above, Susan and Sharon engage in their gender role switch in order to foster a reunion between their parents. Once this reunion has taken place, the girls step back into their “correct” gender roles long enough to enact yet another performance of gender. In an attempt to recreate the setting and atmosphere of their parent’s first date the girls transform their patio into a cozy Italian restaurant complete with dripping candles, violin music and checkered table clothes. As part of the entertainment the girls perform an inspiring duet of the lyrically suggestive “Let’s Get Together.” Now that their parents have been reunited, the two “perform” their respective gender roles. The femme Susan enters the scene clothed in a black velvet dress complete with lace trim and upon curtsying before her parents, takes her place at the piano and settles down to play
Beethoven's very proper Fifth Symphony. Meanwhile Sharon, back in her comfortable shoes, bounds onto the stage dressed in blue jeans, a vest and a white t-shirt and with guitar in hand bows before her parents. Susan then taunts the femme with her jest, "Hey, what's all this noise?" Sharon responds most gracefully with her request "Would you kindly get off the stage, I'm in the middle of a concert," but is met with Susan's frank reply "Honey, you're going to put the paying customers to sleep with all that jazz, you gotta get the new sound." Susan follows this bantering with her suggestion that they "compromise, you give a little, I'll give a little, let's get together." And compromise they do, as they find a space in which to perform a mixture of Sharon's highfalutin East coast Beethoven and Susan's more pedestrian West coast guitar.

Nowhere is the gender-based difference between Susan and Sharon more explicit than in this scene. While the girls play on and exploit this difference throughout the film, this scene is the first instance where the characters embodied in Susan and Sharon utilize that difference in their own names, that is, this the first time Susan plays up her tomboyism and Sharon seizes on her femininity. With respect to the tomboy and femme character and the idea of gender as a performance, even the girls' "true" identity is exposed as a construct. In other words, gender is not only a performance when deliberately altered and transferred, as in their earlier switch, but is always a category under construction and on stage. This scene highlights the performative aspect of gender by drawing attention to the ways in which gender is enacted even in its home location. If gender is performed even when done so by the femme as femme and tomboy as tomboy, could it then be a natural category, or must it be understood always as a product of social construction? Enacted as it is in these scenes, gender works as Judith Butler envisions it:

Gender is neither a purely psychic truth, conceived as 'internal' and 'hidden,' nor is it reducible to a surface
appearance; on the contrary, its undecidability is to be traced as the play *between* psyche and appearance (24).

As Butler would have it, there is no subject outside or beyond gender, and while gender norms regulate acceptable representations of gender, these same norms, in their narrowness, foster transgressions and "insubordination" (26). Susan and Sharon's gender performances are thus a predictable, even if unintentional, product of hegemonic gender constructs.

*The Parent Trap* exposes gender as a social construct through highlighting performances of gender in the switch between a tomboy sister and a femme sister. *Freaky Friday* (1977) works similarly. Directed by Gary Nelson and starring Jodie Foster and Barbara Harris, *Freaky Friday* tells the story of a tomboy daughter and a domestic mother who trade places for a day. Jodie Foster plays Annabel Andrews, the thirteen year old tomboy who, as she would imagine it, leads a terribly demanding life. Annabel's mother, Ellen, is portrayed by Barbara Harris, who in her estimation leads a harrowing life as well. Both characters, envious of each other's respective roles, make a wish that they could switch places for a day. As it would happen both characters make their wish at the same time on the morning of Friday the 13th, and in keeping with the superstitions attached to that day and date, their wish is fulfilled and Annabel's body is invaded by her mother's psyche and vice versa. What follows is an amusing series of scenarios where both characters bumble through the tasks and duties of their new role. After narrowly surviving the events of the day both characters realize that they are better off in their original roles and make a wish that they could have their own bodies back. Once repositioned and settled into their original identities, both characters appear content to follow their proper roles.

The early sequences of the film are devoted to presenting the film's main characters. Before Annabel appears on the screen her voice is heard as she begins to tell
the story of what happened on that freaky Friday. As the time on the alarm clock rolls back from 8:15 a.m. to 7:29 a.m. she quickly switches into present tense and the narrative begins to unfold. Annabel's first appearance on screen occurs while an overhead shot of her unkempt room pictures her rolling out of bed with mussed hair dressed in an old baseball jersey. The first words she speaks after revealing her name are in defense of her messy room and her fondness for the sort of ordered chaos her room represents. She then moves into a description of her appearance as she rolls out of bed and makes her way across her room toward the closet. Focusing on her physical characteristics, she describes herself as

female, blonde, natural of course, blue eyes, height about five foot two, I don't know what I weigh but I'm watching it which my mother says is ridiculous because I'm not completely mature in my figure yet...

Posed in front of the mirror she then inhales deeply, lifts her chest and sighs at the sight of her as yet underdeveloped breasts, holding out hope that "maybe by summer" she will be a bit more shapely.

In these opening scenes of the film, Annabel is marked as a character whose gendered identity is in flux and under construction. In one breath she brags about her expertise at field hockey and water skiing and in the next she drools over the neighborhood heart throb. While she is clearly unconcerned with the tidiness of her room, she frets about her hair style and body image. These movements between behaviors coded as feminine and those coded as tomboy position Annabel along the divide between tomboy and femme. Straddled as she is between both childhood and adolescence and tomboyhood and girlish femininity, Annabel's tomboyism gets coupled with what remains of her more childish inclinations. In other words, her tomboyism is equated with that phase of her life that she is clearly leaving behind, and, as the
narrative would have it, that “freaky Friday” turns out to be sufficient impetus for change.

The time Annabel spends performing her mother’s duties functions for her tomboy side as a schooling in that most feminine of activities known as motherhood. Over the course of the day she does the laundry, buys groceries, dresses in her mother’s garb and, generally speaking, attends to the needs of her family while her own needs fall by the wayside. Despite her dislike of housework and her astute observation that her father is a “male chauvinist pig,” Annabel ultimately finds something favorable out of her experiences of that freaky Friday for by the end of the film she has charted a course down a feminized trajectory. Despite her declaration that she is glad to be back in her body, it is made abundantly clear that she is not glad to be back in the tomboy position, but that she is glad to have undergone the transformation that has taken place as a result of the switch. Central to that transformation is an abandonment of her tomboyhood.

While the bulk of the narrative in the film has transpired by the time Annabel and Ellen have switched back to their correct roles, the last scene in the film is crucial to an analysis of the tomboy character. Where Annabel’s character was introduced first as a tomboy with hints of an emerging feminine consciousness, the closing scene of the film brings that undeveloped femininity to fruition. The film closes as it began, with Annabel examining herself in the mirror. Yet in this scene, the braces that once cluttered her mouth are now absent and her once straggly hair is now neatly combed and styled. Beyond her visual turn toward the feminine, she is now situated as object of the male gaze. Where the film opened with images of Annabel staring longingly after her male neighbor Borris, the film concludes with a reversal of that gaze. Borris now occupies the subject position as he looks in on Annabel while she brushes her hair. What is most revealing in this scene is the verbal exchange between the two youths. Where Borris kept
a watchful distance from Annabel before her transformation, he now visits her house
and initiates a complimentary and suggestive conversation:

B: You look great Annabel!
A: Thanks.
B: You know you're not the same way you used to be at all.
A: Is that good or bad?
B: I mean you're a completely different person.
A: Well, maybe not completely yet, but I'm working on it.

So, what is it that makes Annabel "completely different," and beyond that, what is it
that she is working on? Given the changes in her appearance and the gender deviance
associated with tomboyism, the most obvious answer is her gender identity. In order to
assure the narrative recuperation of the tomboy character, she must be properly
feminized, thus the task at hand for Annabel must then be the completion of her
transformation from tomboy to femme. It is revealing that Annabel does not pursue
Borris actively until she has switched places with her mother, for as 'Ellen' she is
unquestionably feminine. It is telling also that Borris has no interest in Annabel pre-
transformation, yet once she appears visibly more feminine he takes up the pursuit of
her.

As is typical in films of this genre, the tomboy character is canceled out or
counteracted by the presence of a more traditionally feminine character. While in many of
the films of this genre this role is taken up by another adolescent female character, in this
film the tomboy's gender role model is embodied in the character played by Barbara
Harris. Harris' character, Ellen Andrews, is Annabel's overworked and
underappreciated mother. The first mention of Ellen in the film is by way of Annabel's
description of mothers in general and her mother in particular as "sweet and kind and
lovely and gentle and LOUD." Following this verbal description, Ellen appears on
screen nagging Annabel to eat breakfast and clean her room. The next images of Ellen picture her preparing breakfast in the kitchen, tending to the laundry and fussing over her husband. Aside from her behavior, which is clearly coded as traditionally feminine, she is immediately framed as passive, peripheral and subordinate in her relationship with her husband.

While Annabel describes her father as a “fantastically cool person,” William Andrews is certainly far from fantastic from a feminist perspective. Rather, William, or Bill as he is referred to in the film, is an ungrateful, sexist, self-involved figure embodying patriarchal power relations. Whether it is ignoring his wife when she offers advice, ordering her to wear her “slinky black dress” to a social gathering or demanding that she polish his shoes, Bill is clearly figured as a representative of male dominance. This characterization of Bill is emphasized explicitly when Annabel, while still inhabiting her mother’s body, refers to her father as a “male chauvinist pig.” Framed in such terms, the significance of Annabel’s father lies in his reinforcement of hegemonic norms that structure the roles attached to men in general and fathers and husbands in particular.

What is remarkable in this film is the way in which the hyperstereotypical representations of both the mother and father go almost totally unexamined. The megadominance of Bill and the ultra-subordinance of Ellen are clearly exaggerated characterizations, yet Annabel is the only character who makes any critique of their polarized roles. From her gender deviant tomboy position Annabel is thrust into her mother’s hyperfemininity. Once there she is quickly bombarded by the ‘realities’ of both womanhood and motherhood. Whether it is taking orders from a bossy husband, struggling to “make things nice for everybody,” or fending off her husband’s sexy secretary, Annabel is exposed to the fate that awaits her as a female. Yet even with her observation that her father is a “super” father, but as a husband is “more like a traffic cop,” she moves quite eagerly and comfortably into the appropriately feminized
role. It is therefore only the tomboy as tomboy, meaning pre-transformation Annabel, who is critical of the stereotypical gender roles embodied by her mother and father. The implication is that only from a position of gender deviance are these roles problematic. So if tomboyism is just a phase, so too are the feminist perceptions that accompany tomboyhood.

In *The Parent Trap* and *Freaky Friday* the tomboy characters are forced to ‘try on’ femininity. In both instances, their trying on of this gender role works to expose the constructedness of gender as a naturalized category. In their performances of both their tomboyism and their enforced femininity, they disrupt dichotomous conceptualizations of gender. Gender is instead exposed as a construct with a variety of fluid subject positions. These films can be read as transgressive insofar as they disrupt fixed and binary conceptualizations of gender, but in their repetition of that gender norms that bolster those same conceptualizations of gender, they fall sort of being altogether subversive. Again the tomboy is transgressive but only within parameters acceptable to the dominant order.
CHAPTER 3

TOMBOY TURNED FEMME:
NARRATIVE RECUPERATION AND THE TOMBOY TRANSFORMED

While the tomboy character, by definition, rejects traditional gender norms, her rebellion does not necessarily bring about long-term or permanent transgressions of those norms. As explained earlier, much of what makes the tomboy character palatable in her state of gender disobedience, is the understanding that her transgressions are transitional. Understood as temporary, such transgressions fail to threaten seriously hegemonic notions of gender identity. What most commonly follows these conceptualizations of tomboy behavior as temporary and therefore benign, are visions of the tomboy transformed. Such a transformation signifies the tomboy’s abandonment of gender disobedient behavior and her accompanying assumption of a traditionally feminized gender identity. Close analyses of the development of the tomboy character in the 1992 film My Girl and its 1994 sequel My Girl 2 offer an excellent example of the narrative and visual recuperation of the tomboy character from gender defiant to gender compliant.

Starring Anna Chlumsky and Macaulay Culkin, My Girl tells the story of the budding friendship shared between Chlumsky’s character, Vada Sultenfuss, and her
companion, Thomas Jay, played by Culkin. Released in 1992 to both critical and commercial acclaim, the film is set in small-town Pennsylvania during the summer of 1972 and thus follows the conventionally nostalgic form of contemporary films for adolescent girls. Focusing on the adventures of eleven year old tomboy Vada, *My Girl* unravels the story behind the development of Vada’s relationship with her next-door neighbor Thomas Jay. The film traces the evolution of Vada and Thomas Jay’s relationship from one of playmates and confidants to one straddling the border between crush and first love. The relationship shared by Vada and Thomas Jay ultimately turns tragic, however, when Thomas Jay dies after being stung by a horde of bees. Over the course of the film Vada undergoes the transformation from carefree, independent, bike riding neighborhood tomboy to the early stages of her initiation into hegemonic gender paradigms involving both femininity and heterosexuality.

Running alongside the storyline focused on the relationship between Vada and Thomas Jay is a secondary plot line devoted to an explication of the relationship between Vada’s father Harry and his employee Shelly. While the story around the development of this relationship is not the central focus of the film, Vada’s involvement in this secondary narrative reveals critical components of her character, especially with respect to her transformation from tomboy to femme. Consideration of this plot line is thus also instructive in the analysis of Vada’s conversion from deviant youth to compliant teen.

Picking up where *My Girl* left off in the transformation of Vada from gender bending tomboy to gender obedient teenage girl, *My Girl 2* completes the recuperation of the tomboy Vada into the compulsory heterosexual narrative. Building on the success of *My Girl*, the film’s sequel, *My Girl 2*, was released in 1994. In the sequel the focus is again placed on Vada and her “coming of age.” Framed around Vada’s search for clues about her deceased mother’s life, the second film develops Vada’s character in more
detail than in the original story. With the introduction of an adolescent male counterpart, Nick, and their subsequent “first kiss,” Vada’s induction into normative heterosexuality is complete by the conclusion of My Girl 2. Again a secondary plot line focused on heterosexual coupling practices, this time between Vada’s uncle Phil and his employer Rose, runs alongside the primary narrative. A close reading of the development and transformation of the tomboy character over the course of these two films, My Girl and My Girl 2, reveals both the framing of tomboyism as temporary and the recuperation of the tomboy character into hegemonic gender norms.

Sporting the requisite tomboy look—cut off shorts, a denim shirt, high top sneakers and pulled back hair—the character embodied in Vada Sultenfuss is coded visually as a tomboy. This visual appearance combined with her gender bending behavior—she appears happiest climbing trees, fishing and riding her bike—unmistakably marks her as gender outlaw. This coding, however, is not marked as obviously as what is coded as tomboy behavior in the other films this thesis examines. If one were to measure levels of tomboyism on a sort of gender continuum where “total tomboy” was a 10 and “total femme” was a 0, Vada would probably fall at 7 whereas Jody, the tomboy character in Gold Diggers, would fall at 10. So, while Vada is not tomboy incarnate, she has enough tomboy characteristics to attach convincingly the tomboy label to both her appearance and her behavior. In fact, Chlumsky’s character was repeatedly described as a tomboy in both reviews of the film and in text that appears on the back of the videotape\(^1\). Vada’s gender deviance, however, is short lived as Vada is feminized to such an extent that her character in the second film could not be read as tomboy were it not for her characterization in the first film. Because Vada’s early gender deviance poses

\(^1\) The back of the videotape reads: “Chlumsky makes an extraordinary acting debut as Vada Sultenfuss, a precocious 11-year old tomboy obsessed with death.”
a threat to hegemonic gender constructs, the central project across the course of the two films becomes the transformation of tomboy Vada to feminized Vada. Thus what the film offers in the discourse on tomboyism is a view of what happens to the tomboy youth as she moves out of her gender disobedience phase and moves into adolescence and gender compliant behavior.

Central to Vada’s characterization in the first film are her obsessions with death and illness. It is with the following disclosure that Vada Sultenfuss introduces herself to the viewers of My Girl (1992):

I was born jaundiced, once I sat on a toilet seat in a truck stop and caught hemorrhoids, and I’ve learned to live with this chicken bone that’s been lodged in my throat for the past three years, so I knew Dad would be devastated when he learned of my latest affliction...Dad, I don’t want to upset you but my left breast is developing at a significantly faster rate than my right, it can only mean one thing, cancer, I’m dying.

The character is seen speaking directly into the camera’s eye in a one-shot close-up. The spectator is spoken to as if in private conversation with the character. Because this personal disclosure is the spectator’s first interaction with the film’s main character, the scene functions as a definitive and critical moment in the presentation of Vada’s identity. Vada’s revelation thus signals the spectator that the disclosed characteristic functions as a fundamental component of the character’s identity.

While Vada’s preoccupation with death could easily be attributed to the fact that her father is a mortician and that they reside in the funeral home, such an explanation misses the moments where this obsession works symbolically. Cloaked as a sort of comical or amusing quirk, Vada’s interest in death clearly serves a comedic function. When she introduces herself to the viewer as “jaundiced,” a sufferer of hemorrhoids, and a victim of cancer, there can little question that she is playing some
sort of game. Yet, despite performing this comedic function, Vada’s interest in death also operates on a symbolic level. Read on this other level, her pre-occupation with death closely parallels her tomboyism. Understood as such, both her interest in death and her gender deviance can be easily dismissed by her elders as little more than the passing fascinations of adolescence.

Read with her physical appearance and her rambunctious behavior, Vada’s hypochondria performs a symbolic function. Evidence that Vada’s “abnormal” physical condition operates on such a level can be culled from both Vada’s delivery of what would seemingly be a disturbing pronouncement and the reaction, or lack thereof, with which her father receives the news. Presented with a blank look on her face and conveyed with a frank and emotionless tone, Vada’s disclosure falls on deaf ears. Immediately following her announcement the camera falls away from a direct focus on Vada’s face and reveals Vada seated at a kitchen table where her father is busy making a sandwich. Visibly unfazed by Vada’s revelation, the spectator is left to conclude either that Vada’s father’s failure to respond is a function of the frivolity with which he approaches her “condition” or simply that he pays no attention to what she has just revealed because he is mindless of her presence. Either conclusion works to instruct the spectator to regard Vada’s revelation with a levity otherwise undue such a grim pronouncement. Because Vada’s physical “illnesses” are met with such an absence of concern and are therefore clearly feigned, the spectator is directed to approach this condition not only as an amusing quirk, but symbolically as a manifestation or indication of alterity on a level other than the physical. Vada’s otherness is then not emblematic of her physical condition, but rather speaks to a symbolic otherness representative of some psychic or sexual aberration. Given her tomboy markings, the disclosure of herself as “ill” (read abnormal), can then be read alternately as an indication of her gender deviance, that is, it marks her difference as a function not of her
physicality, but of her tomboyism. It is thus at the symbolic level that Vada’s obsession becomes intertwined with her tomboyism.

Framed as little more than a child’s fleeting preoccupation, Vada’s hypochondria and her accompanying obsession with death closely parallel her temporary disregard for the feminine pole of the gender continuum. If Vada’s passage out of her hypochondria and her obsession with death signal the completion of what can be understood as little more than an adolescent phase and the preoccupations with sickness and death mirror her gender deviant behavior (her tomboyism), then it follows that her tomboyism must also be understood as nothing more disconcerting than yet another temporary, and therefore benign, adolescent phase. Thus Vada’s father’s absence of concern for his daughter’s preoccupation with sickness and death and his disregard for her gender-bending behavior spells no cause for concern precisely because both “conditions” are understood as temporary.

Presenting herself directly to the spectator as physically diseased, the “normality” of the character embodied in Vada Sultenfuss, is immediately called into question. While it could be argued that Vada’s feigned physical illnesses are merely a function of her youth and her obsession with death, additional indications of this parallel between her hypochondria and obsession with death and her gender disobedience manifest themselves in her relationship with Thomas Jay. It is no accident that Vada’s physical appearance takes on a visibly more feminine flair after her first real encounter with the death of a loved one. With the death of Thomas Jay comes the concomitant death of the “Thom” in Vada, that is, the symbolic death of Vada’s tomboy identity, for it is not until after Thomas Jay’s death that Vada appears clad in the more gender appropriate sundress and accompanying feminine sandals. Also, prior to Thomas Jay’s death, Vada does not reveal any affinity with the neighborhood girls with whom she might be likely to seek companionship were it not for her gender deviant
positioning. This absence of female bonding comes to a close, however, when it is Vada's classmate Judy who appears at Vada's door in an attempt to comfort Vada through the trauma of Thomas Jay's death. And while Vada does not receive Judy at that initial visit, it is with Judy that Vada is seen playing at the film's conclusion. Vada also offers the beast that she and Judy will share a homeroom when school resumes as an indication that she has come to terms with Thomas Jay's death and that her life has taken a turn for the better.

Another scene symbolizing Vada's relinquishment of her attachment to both Thomas Jay and her "tom" side occurs in the summer poetry class she has been attending throughout the first film of the series. Reading aloud from the poem she has written, Vada reflects on death and her experience of the loss of Thomas Jay. Reading from the poem in a somber tone and with downcast eyes, Vada shares,

Weeping willow with your tears running down,
Why do you always weep and frown?
Is it because he left you one day?
Is it because he could not stay?
On your branches he would swing,
Do you long for the happiness that they would bring?
He found shelter in your shade
He thought his laughter would never fade
Weeping willow stop your tears
There is something to calm your fears
You think death has ripped you forever apart
But I know I'll always be in your heart

It is with this coded verbalization of her experience of loss that Vada comes to terms with the multiple deaths she has experienced. That this act symbolizes Vada's acceptance of loss follows from Vada's upbeat demeanor and cheerful outlook in the next and final scene of the My Girl. Immediately following her recitation of the poem she has written, the eponymous song of the film begins to play and Vada's dark mood is replaced by a bright smile. Set over the lyrics, 'I've got sunshine on a cloudy day, when
it's cold outside I've got the month of May," Vada leaves the classroom and is pictured bounding down the steps of the school with her new female companion, Judy. As the film closes Vada leaves the spectator with the assurance that she does, in fact, have sunshine on a cloudy day, chirping that "Things are a little better these days. I finally swallowed that chicken bone, Judy and I are going to be in the same homeroom and the Republican party just renominated President Nixon." Layered over the complete version of the song "My Girl," Vada is seen riding off into the sunset on the trail of the girl companion who has stepped in for Thomas Jay. Concluding the film with the vibrant sounds of the song and the rejuvenated image of Vada and Judy, there can be little doubt that Vada has experienced a rebirth. While she does indeed mourn as a result of her experiences of loss, she quickly adjusts to the changes accompanying those losses and settles into her new self. Central to this new "self" is a more feminized Vada, and as the song would confirm, this Vada is now my girl, not my tomboy.

In addition to the above mentioned scenes, Vada's statement that she has at last swallowed the chicken bone that has been lodged in her throat throughout the film, draws further attention to her movement out of her tomboy "phase." Given my earlier discussion of the symbolic link between Vada's hypochondria/obsession with death and her tomboyism, it is striking that it is not until after she lets go of her attachment to Thomas Jay that she is finally able to swallow the chicken bone. Vada's passage out of the tomboy stage is thus not only mirrored in the death of Thomas Jay, but also in her movement out of her hypochondria phase. Where the film shouts out explicitly that things are looking brighter now that she has grown out of her childish obsession with physical illness and has found a new companion, it suggest implicitly that things will be looking up for Vada now that she has taken on a more gender appropriate role. Again, Vada is now "my girl."
Since the primary project across the course of both films is the transformation of Vada from tomboy to femme, and since Vada’s tomboyism is reflected in her relationship with Thomas Jay, it follows that the death of Thomas Jay would signal a character change in Vada. So while Thomas Jay’s death brings on the symbolic death of the film’s other “thorn,” it also awakens the tomboy’s presumed corollary, the feminized girl poised on the brink of assuming a more traditionally acceptable gender role. The behavioral and visual changes that result from this feminization thus advance the visual and narrative recuperation of the tomboy character into hegemonic gender norms.

While Vada’s tomboyism fails to be addressed explicitly by her father or any of the other characters in the film, she is continually bombarded by images of conventional femininity. Where the tomboy character in both Gold Diggers and Now and Then is balanced or countered by the presence of a hyperfeminized adolescent female character, there is no such character present in My Girl or My Girl 2. Instead, Vada’s tomboyism is offset by the character embodied in Shelly, played by Jamie Lee Curtis. Excessively feminine on multiple levels, Shelly stands in as an adult version of the hyperfeminine adolescent girl character.

Appearing in the film as a cosmetician in search of a job involving make-up application, Shelly answers an advertisement for such a position placed by Vada’s father, Harry Sultenfuss. Despite being unaware that the advertisement to which she has responded entails applying make-up to the recently deceased, Shelly cheerfully expresses her interest and gladly accepts the job. After working with Harry for a short while Shelly initiates a date between the two characters and thus begins the development of a relationship that culminates in the union of the two in marriage and Shelly’s eventual initiation into motherhood. Over the course of the two films Shelly consistently stands in as the appropriately feminized answer first to Vada’s tomboyism,
and later to Vada’s own budding femininity. Functioning as a model to which Vada is instructed to aspire, Shelly furthers Vada’s initiation into hegemonic gender constructs.

The first such scene where Shelly functions in this manner occurs midway through *My Girl*. Immediately following Shelly’s hinting to Harry that she enjoys the drive-in and would like to see *Love Story* because it is so romantic, Vada observes Shelly doling herself up for her date with Harry and states “I think lipstick looks fake, no-one’s lips are that color.” Set over a simplistic musical score, reminiscent of the sounds that issue from a child’s music box, Vada is then seen seated on the bathroom toilet willingly subjecting herself to Shelly’s make-up artistry. Before being coated in a heavy layer of lipstick and eye shadow, Vada questions Shelly about her appearance, “Do you think I’m pretty?” Shelly’s quick response in the affirmative is followed by her instructions to Vada to close her eyes so that Shelly can “bring out the gorgeous color in them.” Vada then advises Shelly not pursue her make-up career in Hollywood, presumably because even as the tomboy she is, Vada recognizes Shelly’s excess as over the top. Despite this recognition however, the next scene pictures Vada performing what she understands to be a sexy strut complete with swaying hips and erotically charged background music.

Performing before Thomas Jay in such a hypersexualized manner, Vada’s “trying on” of the role of feminized adolescent girl functions as just that, a performance. While it is driven by the hyperfeminized character and foreshadows the Vada to come, at this point in the development of her character, the figuring of Vada as excessively feminine is visibly and narratively strained. While Vada willingly makes herself an object of the male gaze, her performance clearly parodies such sexualized displays of femininity. As a parody her performance is in keeping with her tomboy characterization, for such a performance done without this comedic element would stand in contradiction to Vada’s gender disobedience.
That Thomas Jay, the film’s other “tom,” laughs off her performance, reinforces the absurdity of both her appearance and her behavior in that moment. Asking Vada “What’s wrong with your eyes, is your lip bleeding?” Thomas Jay’s response to Vada’s performance highlights the comic effect Vada’s feminization is meant to engender. Replying to Thomas Jay’s amusing query, Vada throws back the advice she has just been given by Shelly, “A girl can never wear too much eye shadow.” Yet, even Vada’s quick defense of her painted-on femininity has a forced feel to it. Taking no notice of this defense, Thomas Jay asks Vada “Where’s your bike?” Shrugging off her dabble with femininity, Thomas Jay quickly reroutes Vada back into her rough and tumble self. In her inability to impress Thomas Jay with her made-up appearance, Vada simply fails to be convincing in the femininized role Shelly has constructed for her.

In the scenes following this performance Vada and Thomas Jay are pictured back in their active and adventurous roles. While Vada’s brief assumption of a feminized role is then quickly shed, Vada’s performance does serve an important function in the feminization of Vada’s character. The introduction of images of a girly, made-up Vada draws attention to the imminent feminization into which she, as a female, will most “naturally” fall. That the excessively feminized Shelly is the one responsible for introducing such images of Vada makes sense given the opposition between the two characters. The very presence of such excessive femininity in the hyperfeminized character marks the absence of an even marginal amount of femininity in the tomboy character. In addition to highlighting that absence, the character also serves as a constant reminder to the tomboy character that she can expect a more feminine future.

Shelly continues to operate in this role of furthering along Vada’s feminization. Shortly after Shelly introduces Vada to the world of lipstick and eye shadow, Vada runs to Shelly frightened and screaming that she is “hemorrhaging.” Functioning here as a motherly figure, Shelly allays Vada’s fears by explaining that she has started to
menstruate. Accompanying Shelly’s talk on menstruation is the requisite explanation of heterosexual sex, which is met by Vada with little enthusiasm and the commentary, “I think it should be outlawed.” Appearing more concerned by her inability to swim for five to seven days, than by her ability to reproduce, Vada is clearly disinterested in what her ability to menstruate means for her as a female, and therefore potential mother. Despite Vada’s disinterest in her bodily changes, the onset of menstruation serves as an additional narrative marker of her ensuing feminization. That the hyperfeminine character is the character who instructs Vada in this moment further indicates the function Shelly performs in advancing Vada’s initiation into femininity.

By the end of the first film the feminization of Vada has set in and Vada has thus begun the transformation from rambunctious tomboy youth to properly feminized adolescent girl. As the film draws to a close Vada is now seen clothed in a cutesy yellow sundress and sandals rather than the scruffy shorts, T-shirts, and sneakers of her tomboy period, thus visibly shedding her tomboy appearance. Aided in this transformation by the advice and guidance of the excessively feminized character embodied in Shelly, Vada appears poised to adopt more gender-obedient behavior. Where the film climaxes with the literal death of Thomas Jay and the symbolic death of the “tom” in Vada, the concluding scenes clearly illuminate Vada’s turn toward the feminine.

Picking up where My Girl leaves off, the second film in the series, My Girl 2, completes the taming of Vada from scruffy tomboy youth to gender compliant feminized teen. As the conclusion of My Girl clearly depicts, Vada makes a turn toward more traditionally feminine behavior, and the second film in the series, My Girl 2, expands and elaborates on that characterization of Vada. Where My Girl left off with images of Vada clothed in a sundress and girly sandals, My Girl 2 pictures Vada similarly but adds earrings and a heightened interest in heterosexual teen-age dating rituals. While
remnants of the tomboy in Vada resurface in the second film, a reading of those characteristics as tomboyish requires familiarity with the Vada of the early part of *My Girl*. In other words, it is unlikely that the Vada of *My Girl 2*, while at moments independent, adventurous and daring, would be read as tomboy were it not for her characterization in the first film. Read in isolation to the Vada from *My Girl*, the Vada of *My Girl 2* fails to test gender norms in the same way the Vada of the early part of *My Girl* did. Thus, rather than challenging hegemonic notions of gender behavior, the Vada of the second film functions alternately in the reinforcement of those very same gender norms.

Accompanying Vada’s transformation from gender disobedience to gender compliance is a parallel shift in Vada’s orientation toward normative heterosexuality and heterosexual coupling practices. While in her tomboy stage Vada’s thoughts on heterosexual relationships run the range from disgust to indifference. When the neighborhood girls taunt her for hanging out with Thomas Jay and suggest that they are more than friends Vada’s horrified response attests to her feelings on heterosexual couplings. Snapping that “Ew, do you think I would kiss that old thing?,” Vada’s disgust with the very thought of kissing Thomas Jay is consistent with her gender disobedient behavior at this point in the narrative.

As the relationship between Vada and Thomas Jay unfolds Vada becomes increasingly interested in heterosexual coupling practices. Although it is revealed early in *My Girl* that Vada has a crush on her grade school English teacher and this crush remains an issue throughout the film, it is in her relationship with Thomas Jay that Vada makes her first exploration into heterosexuality. Marked by a conversation about marriage and the sharing of their “first kiss,” Vada’s exploration into heterosexuality with Thomas Jay functions as another “trying on” of more gender appropriate behavior. Because Vada’s tomboyism is bound up in her relationship with Thomas Jay this first
kiss cannot function as anything more than an innocent experiment. However, it is immediately after this exchange that Thomas Jay, and therefore the “tom” in Vada, dies thus bringing about a shift in Vada’s gender disobedient behavior. So, while her kiss with Thomas Jay does not indicate a total heterosexualization of Vada, it does signal the beginning of her initiation into heterosexual coupling practices.

Where *My Girl* climaxed with Vada’s identity crisis and an eventual abandonment of Vada’s gender disobedient behavior, *My Girl 2* elaborates on this transformation and develops Vada’s character along that feminized trajectory. Themes of heterosexual coupling reappear and are in fact foregrounded in *My Girl 2*. The presence of such themes then work to widen the gap between Vada as tomboy and Vada as feminized adolescent. These narrative structures also offer Vada the opportunity to delve further into her budding femininity.

Early in the narrative Vada and her female companion Judy are seen trying on different perfumes at the local drug store. While discussing which perfume smells best, one of Vada and Judy’s male classmates appears and Judy makes a fuss about trying to “act natural.” After a brief interaction between the three, Vada and Judy have a short discussion about flirting and how to tell if a boy is interested in dating. Confused yet intrigued by the whole process, Vada returns home and probes her father and Shelly, who are now married, about dating practices. Having exchanged her tomboy behavior and appearance for her more gender compliant femininity, Vada’s interest in boys and dating now makes narrative sense. Fitting Vada into the heterosexual narrative functions as yet another aspect of the transformation of Vada from tomboy to femme.

Where Vada’s relationship with Thomas Jay mirrors her tomboyism, her relationship with Nick, her companion in the second film, mirrors her feminization and her corresponding introduction into normative heterosexuality. Nick is worked into the plot line as Vada’s guide and companion during her visit to Los Angeles, and while the
two are initially annoyed with each other, their relationship develops quickly and soon they harbor thoughts of courtship.

Nowhere is Vada’s transformation from asexual tomboy to heterosexualized femme more evident than in this relationship with Nick. Where the tomboy Vada of *My Girl* was disgusted by the very thought of kissing Thomas Jay, the feminized Vada of *My Girl 2* falls comfortably into the position of object of the male gaze. Vada’s assumption of this role is portrayed blatantly in a scene where Nick enters the kitchen late at night and is pictured gazing longingly at the “sleeping” Vada and her exposed shoulder. Framed as some sort of sleeping beauty, Vada has clearly moved from subject to object in this moment. And, rather than resisting this gaze as the tomboy Vada might have done, the feminized Vada smiles at the knowledge that she is the object of Nick’s gaze. In their next interactions the couple share an evening together and discuss the possibilities of their courtship if Nick’s mother and Vada’s uncle were to marry. Upon concluding that they would not be related in a way that would hinder the possibility of their sharing a relationship, each appears relieved. When the time arrives for Vada to leave Los Angeles, the two share a long embrace and a gentle kiss farewell before Vada departs. Although this is not Vada’s first kiss, it is clearly framed as the first time she experiences a kiss with a boy to whom she is attracted. With this kiss and the relationship she and Nick have established, Vada has completed the journey from tomboyhood to normative heterosexuality.

Again, the transformed Vada of the second film no longer challenges hegemonic notions of gender behavior as the tomboy Vada of the first film did. Instead, the feminized Vada of *My Girl 2* works to reinforce those very same gender norms. One of the ways Vada performs this function can be observed by comparing her reactions to and involvement in the heterosexual couplings that occur in both *My Girl* and *My Girl 2*. Where the tomboy Vada in *My Girl* works to disrupt the union between Shelly and her
father, the transformed Vada of *My Girl 2* actively advances the relationship between her uncle Phil and his partner Rose. Vada’s transformation from obstacle to vehicle for heterosexual coupling thus parallels her movement from gender outlaw to gender obedient feminized teen.

In the first film of the series, Vada is confronted with the unsettling possibility that her father will become romantically involved with Shelly, his newly hired make-up artist. Soon after Shelly has been hired to work at the funeral parlour, Vada questions Shelly about her marital status, and upon being told that Shelly is recently divorced, responds that her father disapproves of divorce. That Vada is so quick to probe into Shelly’s personal life draws attention to Vada’s familiarity with heterosexual coupling practices. This early questioning of Shelly thus signifies Vada’s awareness that Shelly’s marital status makes her a potential partner in a relationship between Shelly and Harry. Vada’s frank and swift disclosure of her father’s feelings on divorce signal an attempt on Vada’s part to discourage Shelly from pursuing a relationship with Harry. Such an effort indicates Vada’s displeasure with the notion that her father and Shelly might become romantically involved.

Vada’s early attempt to discourage Shelly’s interest in Harry is but one of several instances where Vada works to disrupt the possibility of a union between her father and Shelly. On the occasion of Harry and Shelly’s first date, Vada sneaks out of the house and plans to spy on her father and Shelly while they are on their date. After conning Thomas Jay into joining her by calling him a “pacifist and bed wetter” when he hesitates, the two set out to keep a close eye on Harry and Shelly’s interactions. Vada’s sleuthing leads her to the local Bingo Hall where Harry and Shelly are only passively engaged in a game of Bingo. From their squatted position below the window, Vada and Thomas Jay arrive just in time to see Harry and Shelly turning to kiss each other over their Bingo cards. Determined to prevent that first kiss, Vada yells out “Bingo,” and the
commotion in the Hall startles Harry and Shelly enough to deter them from sharing a kiss. Successful in this venture, Vada runs home and waits quietly in her bed for her father’s return. Vada’s success is only temporary however, for Harry and Shelly bid each other good night with a long embrace and kiss. From this point in the narrative forward, Harry and Shelly function as a couple.

While Vada does not witness the kiss that initiates the coupling between Harry and Shelly, she clearly understands what has transpired and the ramifications of such an occurrence. Several scenes display Vada’s annoyance with this coupling and its attendant meaning. The first of such scenes occurs the next day in the grocery store. While Vada and her father are shopping for a Fourth of July barbecue, Shelly appears on the scene and strikes up a conversation with Harry. Visibly annoyed by Shelly’s intrusion, Vada forces out a polite, but subdued “Hi,” and with rolling eyes and an exasperated expression continues to push the grocery cart along the aisle as her father turns his attention to Shelly. Attempting to divert Harry’s attention back to her, Vada intentionally slams her basket into the back of Harry’s legs. Vada’s attempt to garner her father’s attention fails however, as Harry immediately turns his focus back to Shelly. Vada continues this type of disruptive behavior yet ultimately fails to gain her father’s attention. She finally reveals her feelings about the developing relationship between Shelly and her father in a coded voice over about her play with a pair of Ken and Barbie dolls. Pictured angrily slamming canned vegetables in her basket Vada remarks in a sharp and disgusted tone that

I used to like to play with my Ken and Barbie dolls. Ken was my favorite. Then one Christmas I got them a camper, and all they wanted to do was hang out in it by themselves, so I wasn’t too upset when they took that wrong turn and went over the cliff.
From Vada’s perception then, what her father and Shelly’s union means is her marginalization.

Vada again works to disrupt this coupling between her father and Shelly in her behavior at the barbecue itself. At one point Vada literally shoves her body between Harry and Shelly in an effort to keep them divided. Vada’s attempt to get her father’s attention fails again, however, and Vada returns to the picnic. Shortly after this exchange, Shelly’s ex-husband appears and interrupts the picnic. When Shelly introduces him to Harry and Vada and the rest of the party, Vada asks with eager eyes, “Are you here to take Shelly back?” So, despite her inability to garner any reaction out of her father, Vada repeatedly conveys her dislike of Shelly and her involvement with Harry.

Vada’s anger and frustration over the relationship between Shelly and her father is displayed most blatantly after Harry and Shelly inform Vada of their decision to marry. While taking in the pleasures of a local carnival, Harry and Shelly reveal their marriage plans to Vada. Vada reacts to this news with shock, dropping the bagged goldfish she has just won. Following this announcement, Shelly expresses her desire to ride the bumper cars. Harry is apprehensive however, so Vada cunningly offers to ride with Shelly. Seizing the opportunity to square off with Shelly, Vada runs to the dodgems and settles into her car anxious to battle it out with Shelly. Once seated, Shelly turns to Vada in fun and says “I’m gonna get you.” Vada returns Shelly’s taunt with a sharply raised thumb and a challenging gaze, as Creedence Clearwater Revival’s “Bad Moon Rising” begins to play. Set over the lyrics “I see a bad moon rising, I see trouble on the way,” Vada charges off after Shelly and repeatedly slams into the car she is driving. Still reeling with the news of her father’s wedding plans, Vada uses these attacks to convey some of the anger she feels toward Shelly. While Shelly clearly approaches the ride in the spirit of fun, Vada’s looks of contentment when she smashes
into Shelly reveal her more complex approach to the “game.” Rather than representing just a quick and friendly bout of dodgems, this scene offers Vada the opportunity to release some of the aggression she feels toward Shelly.

Where the carnival scene presents Vada with an outlet for her anger, the following scene gets to the heart of what has troubled Vada about the thought of her father and Shelly in a relationship. Unable to come to terms with the impending marriage, Vada runs away from home to sort out her feelings. Taking Thomas Jay, her closest companion, with her, Vada reveals her greatest concern regarding her father’s decision to marry while the two youths sit perched on the branch of a Weeping Willow tree. Turning to Thomas Jay for comfort and support, Vada expresses her fear that “He likes her better than me.” This fear of being replaced offers one explanation of Vada’s repeated attempts to disrupt the coupling of her father and Shelly. What is it though that makes Vada so certain that Harry prefers Shelly over his own daughter? While Vada’s fears are clearly well grounded (Harry showers Shelly with his time and attention, the very same time and attention Vada has craved and been denied throughout the film) this jealousy alone is too simplistic an explanation. Perhaps this fear of Vada’s is in some way attached to a recognition, even if subconscious, that her gender disobedience is less appealing to a man than the hyperfeminized gender appropriate behavior of Shelly. It is telling that the next detailed interactions between Vada and Thomas Jay center around a shared kiss and a discussion of marriage. Vada’s now heightened interest in marriage thus corresponds to a new recognition that she too will participate in a heterosexual union. It is not until Vada understands her place in this heterosexual ritual that her orientation toward heterosexual coupling changes. It is at this point that she begins to shift away from performing a disruptive function with respect to the heterosexual coupling to the more gender appropriate position of enabler.
As discussed above, Vada’s conversation with Thomas Jay about marriage represents a “trying on” of the gender obedient heterosexual role. Prior to this point in the narrative Vada’s repeated commentaries on marriage, sex and other heterosexual practices clearly establish her dislike and at times disgust of such rituals. That she makes such a radical reassessment and that this change is coupled with at least a subconscious recognition that participation in such rituals requires adoption of a socially acceptable feminized appearance and behavior signifies Vada’s accompanying recognition that gender disobedience and heterosexuality don’t mix. While Vada’s first exploration into this gender proper territory occurs as an interaction with Thomas Jay, it is clearly nothing more than an exploration, that is, this exchange does not bring about a shift in Vada’s characterization. Such a shift does not occur until the tomboy in Vada is overtaken by the more feminized adolescent, and since this shift is bound up both narratively and symbolically in the relationship between Thomas Jay and Vada, it is not possible for this shift to occur while the ‘Thom’ is still present. Despite Thomas Jay’s request that Vada consider marrying him if she is not able to marry her English teacher Mr. Bixler, such a union would not be possible precisely because Vada’s tomboyism is a central component of the relationship between Vada and Thomas Jay.

Because Thomas Jay’s death represents the symbolic death of the ‘thom’ in Vada, it is not until after Thomas Jay’s death that it is possible for Vada to verbalize her ‘desire’ for Mr. Bixler. After attending funeral services for Thomas Jay, where both ‘Thoms’ are laid to rest, Vada frantically runs to Mr. Bixler’s house and reveals her feelings for her teacher. Vada’s revelation is met with rejection, and, flooded by waves of sorrow, confusion and rejection Vada runs away to the Weeping Willow tree where she and Thomas Jay used to play. Here she re-imagines her earlier conversation with Thomas Jay about marriage while she stares blurry-eyed at an old photograph of her mother and father. Following this reflection, Vada returns home and asks her father if
she was responsible for the death of her mother, in effect asking if her birth precipitated the literal death of the relationship between her mother and father. It is in this series of scenes that Vada abandons both her gender outlaw status and her role as disrupter of heterosexual coupling. Once Vada is transformed, even reborn, as the feminized adolescent, she then proceeds to function as a vehicle for advancing heterosexual relationships. Although this cannot be observed in My Girl because the film comes to a conclusion soon after this takes place, My Girl 2 builds upon this character change and develops this function of Vada in more detail.

Vada’s movement from disrupter of heterosexual relationships to enabler of those same relationships is best observed in an analysis of her involvement in the advancement of heterosexual coupling in My Girl 2. That these themes of heterosexual coupling will be critical in the second film is made apparent early in My Girl 2. The opening shots of the film unfold over the sounds of Crosby Stills and Nash’s “Our House,” lyrically signaling the importance heterosexual unions will carry in the narrative. Lyrics like “Our house is a very, very fine house, with two cats in the yard, life used to be so hard,” both parallel and highlight the newly formed family created as a result of the marriage between Harry and Shelly. While Vada is not wholly pleased with the relationship between her father and Shelly, her anger seems to be directed largely toward her father and his failure to attend to her individual needs and desires. In any case, by this point in the narrative Vada has reconciled her dislike of Shelly and instead approaches Shelly as an ally. This reorientation toward Shelly is consistent with the transformation of Vada’s characterization from tomboy youth to feminized adolescent and her corresponding movement from disrupter to enabler of heterosexual coupling.

Vada’s interest in heterosexual relationships is evidenced variously by her questioning of her father and Shelly about dating practices, her probing of her father for information about the courtship between her parents, and her concern for her Uncle’s
relationship with his employer and lover. Her role as enabler, however, is nowhere more evident than in her active participation in the advancement of the union between her Uncle Phil and Rose. Vada’s Uncle Phil, who was present in the first film, moves to Los Angeles in the second film and works in a foreign auto repair shop owned and operated by his lover, Rose. Phil lives in the apartment owned by Rose that is above the shop. When taken to the apartment, Vada quickly catches on to the “arrangement” between Phil and Rose. Vada proceeds to question Phil about his involvement with Rose, drilling him to get him to reveal the specifics of their relationship. In the course of this conversation Vada accuses Phil of having a fear of commitment because he has not yet married Rose. When Phil stumbles over the explanation of their relationship Vada completes the sentences he is unable to finish and defines the relationship he struggles to name, concluding in the end that what is happening is more serious than dating. Phil explains to Vada that “Vada, I know that traditionally you are not supposed to do a lot of these things before you’re officially married, but these are very special circumstances.” Revealing an already present understanding of the intricacies of heterosexual relationships, Vada is heard saying to herself, “When sex is involved, it’s always special circumstances.” This nuanced understanding of the dynamics of such heterosexual couplings signals a progression in Vada’s movement away from her tomboyism toward her feminized role.

Throughout the course of the film Phil’s fear of commitment clearly strains the relationship between he and Rose. While Phil remains indecisive, Rose is actively courted by a customer of the shop and makes it known that she is free to date unless Phil is prepared to marry her. It is not until after several more scenes of this courtship between Rose and the customer, that Phil finally proposes. While Phil appears visibly nervous about making such a commitment, he takes Vada’s hand for support, and with Vada’s nod of approval proposes to Rose. Offering encouragement and support Vada
shows no signs of her earlier disaffection for heterosexual coupling, instead she operates as a vehicle for bringing the couple together. This role change is again consistent with her transformation from tomboy to femme.

Part of Vada’s transformation from tomboy to femme is her identification with the nuclear family structure. While Vada’s tomboyism is established early on in *My Girl*, so too is her absence from a traditional nuclear family, for as the opening scene of *My Girl* reveals, Vada’s family consists only of she and her father. This gap, however, is quickly filled by the hyperfeminized character played by Jamie Lee Curtis. While Vada initially resists inclusion in this family structure by attempting to disrupt the union between Shelly and her father, she eventually abandons this endeavor. And, not surprisingly, her acceptance of this family arrangement is coupled with her movement out of tomboyhood. So, once Vada’s recuperation into hegemonic gender paradigms begins, her alignment toward the nuclear family structure takes on a more gender appropriate orientation. And, whereas *My Girl* opens to an incomplete family structure, *My Girl 2* opens to images of Vada, Harry and a pregnant Shelly seated around a breakfast table. Vada’s identification with this paradigm is made complete as *My Girl 2* closes to scenes of Vada, her father and Shelly walking their newborn family member down the street. Having just arrived home from her first experience with heterosexual coupling practices, Vada is now planted firmly within the realm of normative heterosexuality and all its attendant circumstance. Positioned as such she is again the properly feminized teen rather than the gender outlaw of her tomboy phase.

The induction of Vada into the nuclear family paradigm is fueled by Vada’s search for clues about her deceased mother. Vada’s search for her mother can be read as a narrative manifestation of her ‘instinctual’ desire to recapture the nuclear family structure she lost as a result of the death of her mother. Given her earlier longings for clues about her mother and her dislike of Shelly, it is no surprise that she initiates such a
search in order to gain membership in this framework. Although at this point in the narrative Vada is already part of a traditional family unit, this unit does not appease her desire for claiming that unit through her birth mother rather than through Shelly. Ultimately, what Vada discovers in her search is that her mother—was a dreamer, a free-spirit, and a sexual renegade, all qualities Vada seems to admire, but none reflective of an adherence to conventional femininity. Because Vada’s mother does not conform to hegemonic gender norms she cannot be the image of femininity to which Vada is instructed to aspire. Instead, Vada must embrace the image of femininity presented by the ultra gender compliant Shelly. By placing herself in the family unit offered by Harry and Shelly Vada reaffirms hegemonic conceptualizations of the nuclear family structure.

Operating within heterosexual parameters, traditiona conceptualizations of the nuclear family structure breed and perpetuate hegemonic notions of gender identity. Functioning in this manner, the induction of Vada into such a framework allays the ever-present if forever unstated fear that the tomboy untamed will reject normative heterosexuality and the rituals that accompany such an arrangement. In other words, placing Vada securely within this paradigm confirms her heterosexuality.

Understood as little more than an adolescent phase, tomboyism in My Girl and My Girl 2 fails to challenge hegemonic conceptualizations of gender in ways that spell transgressive transformation of those same gender paradigms. Rather, those same paradigms are ultimately upheld and reinforced in the framing of tomboyhood as transitional and therefore benign. Where the other films examined in this thesis leave open spaces for alternate readings of the tomboy characters, these films do not provide such an option because the second film of the series develops the character along a feminized trajectory, the very same trajectory that supports the status quo.
CHAPTER 4

FROM TOMBOY TO DYKE?
THE TOMBOY UNCONTAINED

While The Parent Trap, Freaky Friday, and the My Girl series all contain tomboy characters engaged in what is the characteristic theoretical struggle for films of this genre, that is, the pull between the gender outlaw status of tomboyhood and the gender obedience of conventional femininity, two more recent films in this genre take on that same struggle, but do so to a level not attained in the other films. Where the tomboy characters in the other films press against hegemonic gender norms in a variety of ways, none take on issues of sexuality in quite the same way Now and Then and Gold Diggers: The Secret of Bear Mountain do. Although neither of these films explicitly challenges dominant paradigms of sexuality, subtextual analysis of the narratives lends itself to interpretations that do resist normative heterosexuality.

Judith Butler spells out the connection between gender norms and heterosexuality in her recent essay, “Critically Queer.” Defining the relationship between the two as one that is mutually reinforcing Butler says that “Gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones which are almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond” (22). In other words, a necessary element of the tomboy’s rejection of gender norms is on some level a rejection
of heterosexuality, and in both *Now and Then* and *Gold Diggers* this rejection is more evident than in the other films examined above. Because the tomboy characters in *Now and Then* and especially *Gold Diggers* are not as thoroughly contained, and in fact the tomboy character in *Gold Diggers* all but escapes narrative recuperation, a space is left open in which to read these films as subversive of normative heterosexuality. What follows, then, is an analysis of the tomboy characters in *Now and Then* and *Gold Diggers* that is to fueled by the search for the films’ lesbian subtext.

Directed by Lesli Linka Glatter and starring Christina Ricci, Rosie O’Donnell, Melanie Griffith, Thora Birch, Gaby Hoffman, Demi Moore, Ashleigh Aston Moore and Rita Wilson *Now and Then* (1995) contains all of the characteristics typical of films directed to adolescent female audience. The bulk of the film’s action takes place in a small Indiana town during the summer of 1970 and revolves around the adventures of a group of four adolescent girls in search of “independence and a place of our own.” Making their summer goal the quest to earn enough money to buy a prefabricated tree house, the girls stumble into a number of other adventures along the way. While pursuing their many undertakings the girls joke and wonder about sex, share family secrets, survive dangerous circumstances and confront difficult memories, all the while strengthening the bond they share. By the end of the summer they’ve got their tree house and their story closes as they seal their relationship with the pledge “All for one and one for all.”

Narrated by the adult version of the Samantha character, played by Demi Moore, the story of the girls’ adventures is framed around a reunion of the characters twenty-five years later. Reuniting for the birth of Chrissy’s baby, played as an adult by Rita Wilson and as a child by Ashleigh Aston Moore, the characters rediscover the depth and value of the relationships they established over the course of that eventful summer. While the presence of such big name stars as Demi Moore, Melanie Griffith and
Rosie O’Donnell surely served to broaden the audience to which the film appealed, the film’s story clearly belongs to the adolescent characters. Besides the obvious fact that the largest amount of screen time is given to the adolescent actresses, the opening scenes of the movie visually establish the film’s focus on the children’s story.

Set against the sounds of children chanting “Red rover, red rover, send Jamie right over,” the film opens with the visual image of colorful bicycles parked haphazardly on a field. The viewer is then introduced to the four main characters engaged in a heated game of Red Rover. In this short sequence the relationship among the girls is established visually. Closing with an image of the girls jumping and holding hands, the camera switches into slow motion and pans up and away from the children, creating a nostalgic feel to the scene. This sequence is followed by a shot of a framed photograph of the four children placed on a desk. Focusing in on Roberta’s face in the photo, played as a child by Christina Ricci, the camera then draws back and introduces Roberta as an adult, played by Rosie O’Donnell. That the adolescent actresses appear in the film’s opening scene and are then used to introduce the adult characters further reinforces the film’s focus on the girls’ story. The film thus qualifies as representative of the genre I am naming despite the presence and drawing power of the adult actresses.

While the adult characters are indeed marginal, their presence is important, especially with respect to the tomboy character. First introduced measuring her breasts as she fusses in front of a mirror, Roberta is tomboy incarnate. Sighing heavily and fretting that “No matter what I do they just keep getting bigger,” she crumples up the tape measure and reaches for a roll of thick masking tape. Wrapping it around her torso several times, she exasperatedly tapes down her breasts. Both in her reaction to the numerical results of her measurements and her frustrated demeanor as she attempts to conceal the signs of impending womanhood, it is evident that her disgust stems not simply from the growth of her breasts, but from their very presence.
Roberta’s next appearance on screen further establishes her tomboy status. Taunting the neighborhood bunch of boy bullies as they approach the four girls on their bikes, Roberta yells “Hey wormy Wurmers.” Responding by hailing the girls with Jell-O filled balloons, the boys continue their raid until Roberta takes off after them. Her determination to capture the boys and get even is made clear as she lunges her whole body at them. Unable to catch them because they escape on bikes, she falls and lands flat on her chest. Bounding up immediately, she screams “We owe you Wurmers and we always pay our debts.” Her warning, however, is laughed off as the eldest Wurmer screams back, “Yeah, like we’re really afraid of a bunch of girls.” Annoyed by their off-handed response, Roberta relays the seriousness of her threat as she returns “You should be.” Roberta’s swift retaliation, clear disregard for the ‘supposed’ superior strength of her attackers and manifest anger at being taken lightly simply because she’s a girl further code her as gender defiant. Such blatant disregard for gender roles/rules typify tomboy behavior.

While Roberta’s immediate and seemingly instinctual lunge at her attackers points on one hand to the tomboy’s defiance of gender appropriate behavior, her fall seems to point on the other to the price a tomboy must pay for such transgressions. Because of the inclusion of the earlier scene picturing Roberta struggling to contain her uncooperative breasts, the spectator is at least marginally/subconsciously aware that Roberta’s fall would have been painful. Even with her quick rebound from the fall, she has in some way been punished both for her attempt to bind and hide the visual markers of her emerging womanhood and her ‘unladylike’ behavior. So while the tomboy is quick to adopt a more aggressive (read male) defense to her attackers, her posturing comes complete with at least a symbolic reminder that such behavior is not without consequence. Again, the tomboy is simultaneously enabled and contained.
Several other scenes frame Roberta’s tomboyism and her accompanying gender deviance. At one point she is walking along the road with the other girls and for no apparent reason starts jumping in puddles. This ruffian behavior is met by Chrissy’s frustrated, “Why can’t you just act like a girl?” “Because ‘proper girls’ don’t get to have any fun,” Roberta might have said in response. Such a response would have surely been in keeping with her rebellious nature, especially in light of a later scene where she initiates and wins a fist fight after a neighborhood boy screams at her that “girls can’t play softball.” Both visibly disgusted by and actively defiant of the rules that tell her to keep her feet clean and encourage her to play with dolls rather than softballs, Roberta stretches and defies the boundaries imposed on her by her gender. Her seemingly boundless resistance is, however, circumscribed both by the narrative and by the presence of her counterbalance—the hyperfeminized character.

Countering the gender insubordinate Roberta is the gender goody-two-shoes Teeny. Played by Thora Birch as a child and Melanie Griffith as an adult, Teeny can’t reach womanhood fast enough. Where Roberta tapes down her breasts Tina stuffs her bra with pudding filled balloons because “men love them when they’re big.” Sporting her Cosmo magazine, covered in costume jewelry and anxiously awaiting her first kiss from a boy, Teeny openly embraces the mandates of gender socialization. Where Roberta is chastised for her boyish behavior, Teeny is free to be as hyperfeminine as she so desires. And, where the young Roberta’s gender disobedient behavior is clearly temporary in nature, Teeny’s obsessive femininity stays with her into adulthood as is evidenced by Melanie Griffith’s adornment in sky high skirts and skin-tight tops.

Most notable of the narrative circumscriptions is Roberta’s first experience with heterosexual coupling games. Approached by Scott, the eldest Wurmer boy, as she is shooting basketball in her driveway, the two get involved in a short game of one-on-one. After their game Roberta invites him to stay for a drink. While seated together on a
porch swing. Scott nervously asks Roberta if he can kiss her. After Roberta gives him the go ahead, Scott turns to her and gives her a quick peck on the lips, exclaiming afterwards: "That was great!" Roberta's response is less enthusiastic as she warns Scott "if you ever mention this to anyone, especially your brothers, I'll beat the shit out of you." Despite this less than enchanted response to her first kiss, we learn from the narrator that "that was the day Roberta quit taping her boobs." That her induction into heterosexuality is met with only mild resistance and that it signals the end of her strained attempts to hide the visible markers of her gender, is indicative of the temporary quality of her gender disobedience.

The ephemeral nature of her tomboy ways is further confirmed by the presence of her adult counterpart. In an early portion of the film, before we are introduced to 'Roberta the tomboy-Roberta the gender outlaw', we are introduced to 'Roberta the doctor-Roberta the heterosexual.' While Roberta's success in the public world, a world normally reserved for men, does signal the defiance of some gender prescriptions, her sexuality follows gender norms and effectively closes off a lesbian reading of her character. Chrissy reminds the viewer that "Roberta has chosen to be alternative; she lives with her boyfriend in sin, but she's normal." Alternative? Not as alternative as she might have been had she not chosen a boyfriend. She did choose a boyfriend though and in so doing assuaged that ever present threat: the tomboy uncontained--the tomboy turned lesbian. Roberta, then, gets to have it both ways. She breaks the rules that would confine her to the private domain, but surrenders to the rules that place her in a heterosexual coupling. Yet, considering the presently broad acceptance of women as paid laborers, the gender rules she breaks cannot really be understood as wildly transgressive.

While the character embodied in Roberta is thus not radically subversive with respect to hegemonic gender norms, neither is the adult version of her character fully
feminized. Despite the narrative assurance that Roberta abandons at least some of her
gender deviant behavior, particularly that most worrisome aspect of tomboyism—the
tomboy's disaffection with and rejection of heterosexual coupling practices—the adult
Roberta has not relinquished all of her tomboy ways. Where Teeny, her adolescent
counterbalance, arrives at their reunion caked in countless layers of make-up and soaked
in hyperfemininity, Roberta is visibly make-up free and only mildly feminine at best.
Besides her failure to embrace the aesthetics of conventional femininity, the adult
Roberta is also very clearly framed as independent, confident and self-fulfilled-
attributes carried over from her adolescent tomboy days. So while she cannot be read as
the most radical of tomboy characters, the tomboy turned dyke, neither must she be
understood as wholly acquiescent in terms of her gendered identity. As Andrew Britton
observed, Hollywood enables and contains (201).

Another recent release representative of films targeted toward an adolescent
James Dobson and starring Christina Ricci and Anna Chlumsky, Gold Diggers takes
place in the summer of 1980 and is "the story of how my best friend Jody and I got
rich." Narrated by Christina Ricci's character, Beth, the film tells the story of two
friends who follow a local legend in search of a hidden stash of gold. In pursuit of this
hidden treasure the girls stumble into trouble as Beth wrecks their boat and finds herself
trapped under fallen rocks inside Bear Mountain. Jumping quickly to Beth's rescue, Jody
takes off in search of help and the rescue squad arrives just in the nick of time.
Following their brush with death, Beth's mother forbids her from seeing Jody. In the
meantime Jody's mother's abusive boyfriend, Ray, kidnaps Jody and drags her to Bear
Mountain in search of the gold. Upon discovering Jody's disappearance, Beth
orchestrates a rescue plan because "Jody saved my life and I save hers, that's how it
works." Scouring the mining passages of the mountain, Beth finds Jody and the two
discover that what they had hoped to be a mound of gold is actually a pile of glow worms. Moments later the two are separated and Ray reappears prepared to harm Jody. Just then an elderly woman appears and knocks Ray over the head with a shovel. Returning home without the treasure, the girls each receive an anonymous gift bag full of gold nuggets several weeks later, presumably from Molly Morgan, the mountain’s most renowned prospector.

Overlaying the film’s basic plot developments is the story of Jody and Beth’s budding friendship. Prior to the narrative association of Beth and Jody, the two are coupled both visually and vocally in the opening sequences of the film. While placed in the role of narrator, Beth’s grown-up voice tells the viewer that this film is the story of how she and her best friend Jody got rich. Beth’s narration clearly establishes a close relationship between the two girls. This relationship is further solidified in Jody’s first visual appearance. Seen first from Beth’s viewpoint, Jody is shown beating up two boys on a street corner. As she turns and runs away after smashing her opponents, the background music grows subtle and the camera slows down as Jody turns and looks directly at Beth. The camera then literally moves from Jody’s viewpoint to a close up of Beth. Taken aback by what she has just witnessed, Beth recalls that “That was my first glance at Jody, the finest woman I know.” So before the viewer witnesses any one-on-one interaction between the girls, their relationship manifests itself through other means.

Jody’s tomboy status is evident from the moment she enters the story. Left as gender-ambiguous by the very use of her non gender-specific name, her gender remains unclear until she is seen running from a street corner where she was engaged in a brawl with two boys. Were it not for Beth’s narration informing the spectator that this was her first look at Jody, “the finest woman I know (my emphasis)”, Jody’s gender identity would have remained unclear. In fact, given the combination of Jody’s appearance and her behavior in this scene, it is far more likely that her character would have been
presumed to be a boy rather than a girl. Dressed in baggy shorts and a plaid shirt and wearing a messy boyish hairstyle, she breaks all the gender dress codes. Appearing visually ambiguous, Jody defies gender rules that would have her clothed in a frilly dress and petite shoes. It is thus in this first introduction of Jody that she is marked both visually and behaviorally gender deviant.

Described alternately as “trashy,” “bad news,” “not too dependable,” “a mental case” and “dangerous,” Jody Salerno is clearly figured as the town troublemaker. At a surface level, these descriptions of Jody are based primarily on evaluations of her family circumstances and her reputation for delinquent behavior, after all, she had been caught stealing on several occasions and it was common knowledge that her mother was an alcoholic. Yet read in conjunction with her tomboyism, these descriptions could just as easily stand in as assessments of her gender disobedience. Despite these less than flattering descriptions of Jody, however, Beth takes a quick liking to Jody and leaves her other, more sterile playmates boggled and agape as she darts off with the ‘disturbed’ tomboy. Thus begins a relationship of intense commitment and undivided loyalty.

Unlike the narrative containment of the tomboy character’s sexuality in *Now and Then*, the sexuality of Anna Chlumsky’s tomboy character in *Gold Diggers* is left more open to interpretation. Where *Now and Then* circumscribes the possibility of doing a lesbian reading of Roberta’s character, *Gold Diggers*’ treatment of Jody leaves the opportunity for such a reading wide open, and in fact, it all but begs for such a reading.

All visuals aside, the film’s dialogue alone bespeaks the trials of one living the secret life of a social outcast. Telling Beth that she cannot return to town because no one will believe that she killed her mother’s abusive boyfriend in self defense, Jody says “They’d say he was just trying to straighten me out when I killed him.” Responding to Beth’s pleas to go back to town and “tell them the truth,” Jody says
Everybody likes him, you liked him too, but they don’t feel that way about me. They’d never ever believe me. Look at all that stuff Tracy and Samantha told you. You’ll hear from your mom too, you wait.

Crying as Beth gives Jody a hug goodbye she says “I’m angry this happened to you. You didn’t do anything wrong. You shouldn’t have to hide.” Could this not be an exchange over the fears and dangers associated with a public exposure of one’s lesbian identity, especially in light of the fact that Jody was called “bad news” and “dangerous” from the start?

Marked as aberrant from the beginning, then, the relationship between Jody and Beth becomes problematic for Beth’s mother after their brush with death in Bear Mountain. It is after this experience that their intense devotion to each other is revealed. After shrieking and hugging as they are reunited in the hospital, Beth becomes hysterical as her mother wheels her away from Jody. This hysterical behavior is explained away by the appearance of Ray whom the viewer knows poses a threat to Jody. However, read subtextually, Beth’s reaction seems suitable also for someone being separated from a loved one. The sound of soft music layered over the image of tears falling down Beth’s face and the longing placement of her hand on the window as Jody is led away further lend themselves to a lesbian reading.

In a later scene Beth and her mother embrace on the side of the road as her mother realizes that she nearly lost her daughter to the girls’ adventure in Bear Mountain. Crying as she holds Beth to her chest she says “I am just keeping you so far away from that girl.” In response to this Beth pulls away abruptly and asks with a biting tone “I can’t see Jody?” After being told no, Beth jumps to Jody’s defense telling her mother, “You have no idea what an incredible person she is. She saved my life, she’s a hero.” Beth’s words fall on deaf ears however and she is forbidden to see Jody. This separation fails to curb Beth’s intense feelings for Jody as evidenced by Beth’s
impassioned declaration to her mother that “Jody is my friend and you can keep us apart for the rest of our lives but nothing you say will ever change the way I feel about her, ever.”

Beth’s reaction to Jody’s surprise appearance at a party is also indicative of Beth’s strong feelings for Jody. Leaving a pair of young male suitors in the lurch, Beth sprints to Jody’s side when she sees Jody signaling to her from behind the bushes. Giving Jody a big hug Beth exclaims, “I was going crazy. I didn’t know when I was going to see you again. It was the longest two weeks of my life.” Beth’s immediate abandonment of the boys gathered at her side once she has sighted Jody speaks to the depth of the connection between the two characters. Such intense devotion is perhaps not so unusual between adolescent girls, but Jody’s gender outlaw status adds a different dimension to the intensity of the relationship between the two girls.

Visually speaking there are numerous other scenes that lend themselves to a lesbian reading. Particularly suited for such a reading is the scene on the river when Jody is seen dancing on the top of the boat. While Jody spins around to the tune of the Bee Gees’ “You Should Be Dancing,” Beth is shown steering the boat. Jody’s placement above Beth adds to the already showy feel of Jody’s performance. Encouraging Jody’s performance, Beth chimes in “Go Jody.” Beth becomes so engaged in watching Jody’s dance that she releases the wheel of the boat and begins clapping. Gazing up at Jody for a brief second, Beth quickly lowers her eyes and turns her head away as if to convey the idea that her look only a moment ago was somehow inappropriate. Inappropriate perhaps, because girls aren’t supposed to become so enraptured with each other. Her sudden turn away from Jody makes no sense otherwise.
In addition to Jody’s tomboy appearance and behavior, her role as gender outlaw is further established in the repeated identification\(^1\) of her character with Molly Morgan. Described excitedly by Jody as “only the greatest woman that ever lived,” Molly Morgan is the woman prospector who, according to the legend, left the gold in Bear Mountain. Jody recounts Molly Morgan’s story as she and Beth travel down the river toward the mountain:

Molly was born in Scotland in 1900. She was exactly our age Beth when her father was killed in a factory explosion. Molly stole a loaf of bread to feed her family and she was arrested and sent to a work house where they worked you til ycu dropped. But they couldn’t keep her caged up, not Molly Morgan (my emphasis). They never caught her, they thought she drowned in the falls. But nothing could stop her, she stowed aboard a freighter and crossed the Atlantic to Canada. It was hard for a girl traveling alone, but she didn’t care, she crossed the entire continent. She dreamed of getting rich, she dreamed of gold. Back then girls couldn’t be miners so she smushed up her face and the next thing you knew a boy who called himself Morgan was one of the miners riding a boat to Bear Mountain.

While she tells the story, Molly is shown on the screen running away from a mob of men and a pack of dogs. Coming upon the edge of a waterfall Molly decides to jump rather than be caught by the men. She is then shown traversing the continent dressed in trousers and a man’s shirt, but is still identifiable as a girl with her long hair. Assuming a male persona, she is shown steering a boat with short hair, a hat on her head and a dirt covered face. There is then an immediate dissolve into a profile of Jody sailing

\(^1\) I’m using identification here for lack of a better word. Identification doesn’t fully convey the intensity of Jody’s bond with Molly. Jody’s relationship with Molly is deeper than one of admiration, but without being obsessive. There does not seem to be an appropriate word to convey the complexity of the feelings Jody has for Molly.
down the same river with an almost identical haircut. This dissolve clearly establishes the identification of Jody with Molly, so strongly in fact that one wonders if Jody is not some sort of reincarnation of Molly. This identification is further enforced when Jody is later shown running through the woods the same way Molly did while being chased by the angry mob of men. Growing tired in her effort to reach help before sunset, Jody calls upon Molly’s memory as a source of strength, urging herself to “be strong like Molly.” Jody’s identification² with Molly is complete when she reaches the road and collapses in exhaustion at the sight of a police officer. Revived by the officer, she tells him that Beth is trapped in Bear Mountain and needs help. When the officer asks her name she replies, “Molly Morgan.”

Jody’s repeated identification with Molly Morgan, a radical gender transgressor—a woman who couldn’t be “caged up”—lends plausibility to the reading of Jody as a lesbian character. Jody has a special connection with Molly: “sometimes when I’m in the woods, I can feel her, I can feel her watching me.” When Molly visually appears (her presence is made felt in other scenes through overhead camera shots) Jody is the only character that gets to see her. Is it that it takes one to know one? If so, one must then wonder if Jody will continue to resist the boundaries imposed on her because of her gender as she enters adulthood. The narrative leaves that question unresolved, thus creating a gap for speculation. In this simple decision to leave Jody’s future gender identity open to speculation, the film allows the tomboy to escape containment.

If there is any time in the film where the tomboy character faces the threat of narrative recuperation it is in her relationship with the film’s only significant male character. Matt Hollinger makes his way into the storyline through his position as local

² Again identification really doesn’t really work here, it’s almost like a fusion, yet they are obviously two distinct characters.
sheriff and childhood friend of Beth’s mother. While Matt is figured as a law enforcement agent who is trained to detect, monitor and punish criminal offenders, he also stands in as an agent of patriarchy. As such he patrols both Jody’s delinquency and her gender disobedience. Because Matt performs this double-edged function, his decision to place Jody on house arrest after Beth’s accident can be read as an attempt to punish her both as a juvenile delinquent and as a gender outlaw. It is therefore in this moment that the tomboy falls prey to the circumscriptions of the hegemonic order.

This narrative containment is short lived, however, as tomboyhood ultimately triumphs over institutionalized patriarchy. For the bulk of the film Matt’s authority is largely unquestioned. When Beth tells her mother that Jody’s stepfather Ray is physically abusive, it is the judgments of Matt that Beth’s mother believes. And when Ray lies about the incident leading up to Jody’s flight from home, Matt takes those words as truth rather than heeding Beth’s pleas to the contrary. This positioning of Matt as authority and the girls as misinformed is maintained until Ray knocks his wife unconscious and forces Jody to take him to the gold in the mountain. From this point forward Beth directs Matt’s actions and he is proven to be little more than an incompetent figurehead. While Matt follows behind Beth in the search for Jody, it is he who is seen stumbling up the path and panting in exhaustion, and it is Beth not Matt who finds Jody once inside the mountain. Although Beth is not the primary tomboy character in the film, she repeatedly aligns herself with Jody both in her adoption of tomboyish behaviors and in her displays of unwavering loyalty. Neither the restrictions placed on Beth by her mother nor the sheriff’s attempts to frame Jody as deviant successfully dislodge Beth from her attachment to Jody. The tomboy is then successful in dodging narrative recuperation. Furthermore, the tomboy’s successful subversion of the agent of patriarchy adds credence to the notion that she will again transgress
patriarchal conventions, perhaps following in the footsteps of her role model Molly Morgan.

Reserving only minute roles for adolescent boys and marginalizing the importance of the film’s secondary characters Gold Diggers truly grants primacy to the actions of its adolescent girl characters. The film’s gender disobedient character, while labeled “dangerous” and “a mental case,” escapes narrative recuperation and in so doing leaves a gap within which to imagine her gender defiance not as temporary but as central to her identity. Read in conjunction with Now and Then, the tomboy character in Gold Diggers is more clearly subject to an alternative reading. Both films however tread the line between both enabling and containing their tomboy characters.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In her seminal text *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics and the Cinema* Teresa de Lauretis applies a feminist perspective to semiotic analyses of the cinema. Employing this perspective she examines the constructed nature of the category Woman and the production of that construct in the context of the cinema. In de Lauretis' analysis, the production of this construct performs a "political function in the service of cultural domination" (26). Explaining that semiotics is an ordering system of signs and codes that construct social meaning (25), de Lauretis concludes that the cinema is a site for the construction of subjectivity. Furthermore, that constructed subjectivity is rooted in ideology and gets understood via semiotic processes of signification.

To apply de Lauretis' conclusions to an analysis of representations of tomboy characters in films for adolescent girls is to recognize the way meaning is made in these films and to attempt to understand the larger cultural ramifications of these texts. Because gender is constructed and because one of the sites of this construction is the cinema, representations of female characters in the cinema necessarily contribute to the construction of gendered subjectivity. When tomboyism is understood as a gendered identity, cinematic representations of tomboy characters necessarily inform conceptualizations of this identity. Because characterizations of the tomboy are so
often set in relief of representations of stereotypically defined femme characters, representations of tomboyism also inform conceptualizations of femininity.

Kathy Jackson draws connections between portrayals of children on screen and broader cultural conceptualizations of childhood in her book *Images of Children in American Film: A Sociocultural Analysis*. In her analysis, “images of children in film provide a cultural shorthand for determining attitudes toward childhood; they transmit some of the important social values, fears, and concerns that Americans have regarding children” (3). Read in conjunction with representations of tomboy characters in films for adolescent girls, it can be concluded that tomboyism does not pose a threat to conventional notions of gender identity as long as it is understood as temporary. Framed as a transitory product of adolescence, tomboyism disrupts naturalized conceptions of gender only insofar as it introduces the idea of gender as a continuum rather than as a binary opposition.

The tomboy’s greatest threat to hegemonic gender norms comes in her disaffection for heterosexual coupling practices. Yet as long as tomboyhood is understood as temporary, this rejection poses no serious challenge to normative heterosexuality. When left uncontained, however, fears surface about the tomboy’s ultimate compliance to dominant paradigms of sexuality. If tomboyism is permitted to develop beyond adolescence, the implicit fear is that the tomboy’s gender deviant behavior will express itself in ways that threaten to undermine one of the foundational components of the dominant culture, namely compulsory heterosexuality. It is therefore not surprising that the tomboy character is so often contained and/or recuperated in films for adolescent girls. It is surprising, however, that in the most subversive of the films examined above, *Gold Diggers*, the tomboy’s gender deviance is permitted to remain largely unchecked and, furthermore, that a subtextual reading of the film elicits themes, dialogue and images so clearly marked as lesbian. Given the temporality of
tomboyism, it is striking too that the tomboy character in Gold Diggers is repeatedly identified with Molly Morgan, a character who as an adult continued to transcend the boundaries of conventional femininity.

The films I have analyzed above offer the reader a range of contradictory readings. When Andrew Britton said that Hollywood genre films both enable and contain (201) he might well have been speaking directly to the plight of tomboy characters in films for adolescent girls. The six films discussed enable the tomboy’s gender defiance, but only insofar as that defiance can be contained within bounds acceptable to the dominant order. Whether being visually feminized, introduced to heterosexual coupling practices, or trained for motherhood, the tomboy is most frequently journeying toward conventional femininity. When she escapes narrative recupерation, as in the case of Jody in Gold Diggers, she does so only narrowly and not without first being labeled “trashy,” “bad news” and a “mental case.” It is only when one reads against the grain and puts these texts to “unauthorized use” (Britton 201) that transgressive interpretations of the tomboy character emerge. Nevertheless, the tomboy always represents an alternative to hegemonic gender prescriptive. That she must be battled at all points to the inability of dominant gender norms fully to enforce gender compliance.
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