Glossing Over, Normalising or Just a Cliché?: *The Craft* (1996), Northern Irish Girls and Teen Cinema

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Abstract

Using *The Craft* (Andrew Fleming, 1996) as an example from the teen cinema genre, this research seeks to examine what topics and discussions emerge when film is used as a specifically discursive rather than analytical tool. Using ethnographic methods – shared viewing, data collection, questionnaire, discussion and observation – and working with teen girls from Northern Ireland, this research explores film viewing preferences and responses to a particular type of cinema, and to a particular film. It engages directly with teen viewers to examine the relationships between those who are expected to view these films and the films themselves. This material offers fascinating insights not simply into teen responses to cinema, but how participants are engaging with the onscreen material and putting it to use. Through these findings, distinct trends emerge about film taste, as well as individual responses which strongly articulate a deeper, personal engagement with film and with the representations which are on offer.

Keywords: Teens, Teen cinema, Girlhood, Audiences, Participatory response, Northern Ireland

Introduction

> 'They don't show real representations. They exaggerate.' (R1)
> 'They gloss over topics or normalize them, they stereotype teens.' (R5)
> 'They touch sensitive subjects but don't deal with them well.' (R7)

The above responses were gathered from a group of teenaged girls in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 2017, with the female respondents quick to point out the limitations and inadequacies of teen cinema when it came to representation. Yet if appropriate representation is lacking, what is the purpose, use and function of teen cinema for teens? This research seeks to examine what topics and discussions emerge when film is used as a specifically discursive rather than analytical tool. Using *The Craft* (Andrew Fleming, 1996) as an example from the teen cinema genre, it explores how film can prompt discussions in group settings which move beyond content and open up space for respondents to discuss whatever *they* deem to be relevant.

In seeking to give voice to the respondents and prioritise their values, judgements and ideas, this approach is not text-based film analysis rooted in the discipline of film studies, but rather relies upon active participant engagement. It prioritises discussion, reflection and personal response over knowledge and detailed understanding. Collecting this data offers a range of possible uses; to reflect on preferences and tastes, to explore the significance of a specific genre of films, or perhaps to consider the absence of films for a particular demographic. My focus was on response as a means of both amplifying teen voices and articulating teen issues, an approach similar to that adopted by Anna Blagrove in her thesis on teen viewers. Blagrove explores how teens 'from different social groups define and discuss their film consumption, and visits to different cinema, in the wider contexts of their leisure, cultural and social practices', and builds on work by Aveyard, Couldry and others which call for more examination of 'structures which inform people's consumption practices' (2020: 12). While my focus is less on consumption practices and more on discussion, response and reflection, it does share a declared objective with Blagrove's work in that both foreground 'hearing from young people themselves in order to give them voice' (2020: 13). By focusing on the use of images, narrative, characters, and tropes from *The Craft*, and how they are discussed by these teen respondents, this work suggests new ways of thinking about teen viewers and teen film.

Angela McRobbie has suggested that 'everyday life becomes at least partly comprehensible within the very terms and images offered by the media, popular culture, education and the arts' (2000: 39). In showcasing the 'everydayness' of the teenage experience, teen films offer promising ways to explore the relationship between this demographic and the films specifically designed for their consumption. Teen films are not realistic, but what they offer is a set of familiar and powerful images which can operate as a site of identification, disavowal, recognition or rejection. Onscreen issues of bullying, friendship, self-harm and sexuality can and do contribute to broader socio-cultural

understandings and articulations, but moving beyond straightforward issues of representation to foreground *response* to filmic representations can indicate how participants, rather than filmmakers, teachers or parents respond to such representations. This work engages directly with teen viewers to examine the complex relationships between those who are expected to view these films and the films themselves.

The screening and focus group session which forms the basis of this research took place on 6 June 2017 with 16 participants aged 15 – 17, living in or around Belfast in Northern Ireland, and who identified as female. While some were studying film at school, this was not a requirement; the only requirement was an interest in discussing film, which was how participants were recruited and events were publicised. Attendees came from two local schools, one an all-girls Catholic school, the other a co-ed Grammar school, and a further respondent was volunteering at a local film festival. My decision to prioritise a female experience rather than a teen experience stemmed from a desire to amplify female voices at a time when voices from and for this demographic were not being heard in Northern Ireland. The acclaimed comedy TV series 'Derry Girls' (Channel 4, 2018 – 22) by Lisa McGee was first broadcast in January 2018, after this research was carried out, and if the research was carried out today, would undoubtedly be a key reference point for the teen girl respondents, specifically as it uses the background of the Troubles to shape its narratives and act as a foil for its characters, rather than as a focus.

The responses from this focus group, screening and questionnaire offer fascinating insights, not simply into teen responses to cinema, but how they are engaging with the onscreen material and putting it to use. As my findings will show, distinct trends emerge about taste, as well as responses which strongly articulate a deeper, personal engagement with film and with the representations on offer.

Methodology

The work draws upon both reception studies and audience studies. As Karina Aveyard points out, reception studies allows exploration of 'how meaning is created when texts are inserted into particular sociocultural situations' while audience studies considers 'the personal situations of viewers and their individual backgrounds' and allows for more direct engagement with audiences via ethnographic and anthropological methodologies (2016: 144-5). My approach utilises ethnographic methods – shared viewing, data collection, questionnaire, discussion and observation – to gather data about film preferences and responses to a particular type of cinema, and to a particular film. As Mary Celeste Kearney has observed in *Mediated Girlhoods*, a methodology which adopts such methods allows for an investigation into the 'tastes, values, practices and responses of everyday people' (2011, 2). Within this research, attention will be centred on 'tastes, values, practices and responses' as part of the qualitative methods being deployed and by focusing on the personal, this approach also pays attention to the act of collective viewing. Stuart Hall's ideas about the

'giving and taking of meaning between the members of a society or group' (1997, 2) are particularly useful here as it speaks to conceptions of teens having their own shared language; this can be extended to incorporate discussion as part of the collective viewing experience. Similarly to Annette Kuhn's 2002 work on 1930s audiences where she challenges the notion of the 'spectator in the text' this work is less concerned with this transactional nature of spectatorship, but rather the way in which the film text encourages viewers to find their own critical and emotional voices.

The film screened for this group was *The Craft* (Andrew Fleming, 1996). In this film, troubled Sarah is drawn into a high school coven of witches comprising Nancy, Rochelle and Bonnie. Her arrival brings power to the coven, causing a magical awakening and the girls begin to act on their newfound abilities to improve their lives and to avenge themselves on their enemies. The decision to screen this film rested upon three key issues. Firstly, selecting a film which was not recently made, provided an opportunity for respondents to move beyond immediate relatability and to look for other ways in which the film might resonate with them. Screening a film made before the respondents were born allowed for an element of historical distance and relative 'safety' for discussion, but which could still 'speak' to teenage preoccupations and concerns. As well as being historically distant the film is also geographically distant, taking place in America. While the content may have been unfamiliar, the settings, characters and issues would all have been easily recognisable as fixed components of the teen film which has evolved and diversified over time, but still retains the key semantic and syntactic elements which make it accessible for different generations of viewers.

Secondly, films about Northern Ireland which focus on teens and young people are relatively rare and where they do exist, narratives about this region are dominated and informed by its contentious past. While all of the respondents would have been too young to remember the period of Northern Irish 'Troubles', their lives have been indelibly shaped by this period and cinematic narratives continue to be framed by the years of sectarian political violence. Representations of childhood in films set in these years such as *Mickeybo and Me* (Terry Loane, 2004) offer images of hope for the future, yet there is an absence of teen representation, and specifically of girls and young women, although 'Derry Girls' has recently emerged to help fill this gap. Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones have identified that, through 'attending to the individuality and particularity of film texts, produced from within a variety of national settings, we are able to dig down into both the local specificity of girl culture and its participation within and contribution to, transnational discourses concerning the figure of the girl' (2016: 5). Yet with the relative absence of Northern Irish-produced films exploring or featuring teen girls a new approach was needed, specifically how to use film *without* a local connection to understand local teen girl responses.

Finally, and related to the above issue of local omission, the third reason for selecting this film was its importance as an atypical film from the teen genre. While it contains tropes typically found in teen cinema - bullying, cliques, self-harm, teen sex – it also includes more unusual content, such as the supernatural horror. In addition, it also contains significant

textual details which sets it apart from other teen films; the school which is featured is explicitly presented as a Catholic School, and formal school uniform is worn by all pupils with the girls wearing plaid skirts, ties and blazers. Crucifixes are prominently displayed throughout, teaching is delivered by nuns, and pupils attend chapel as part of their education. Religion is an important force in Northern Ireland, and education for the majority of students is traditional and non-secular. I was interested to see how this local experience shaped response to the religious iconography and setting within the film.

Ideological and social conservatism still dominates in Northern Ireland and church, family and community remain significant ties. LGBTQ rights and women's issues lag far behind the rest of the UK and Europe with the decriminalisation of abortion and legalisation of same-sex marriage only occurring in October 2019 (after this research was carried out). The 2011 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey with Northern Irish young people aged 16 and under revealed that issues pertinent to teenagers, including sexual health, sexuality and sex education, were cited as inadequate. While 42% of respondents noted that lessons at school were the most helpful source of information about sexual matters but discussing with teachers was awkward (Schubotz, 2012), a study on sex education provision by the NSPCC indicated that greater openness is needed on sexual issues (Beckett: 2014, 108). Beckett also identifies that such openness has consistently been an issue within Northern Ireland, with adolescent sexuality denied agency or policed by strong conservative forces, such as the Church. Again, I was interested to see to what extent the responses from participants would be shaped by their background, their tastes and their values.

Context, Location and Mapping the Field

Film focusing on teenagers has been thoroughly explored, with scholars paying particular attention to specific periods of cinema, for example the 1950s and the 1980s, where teen cinema was prevalent as well as the uses of nostalgia in re-imagining teenage worlds or experiences. Yet as Frances Smith has more recently noted, 'the notion of a genre that specifically accommodates adolescent tastes is a relatively recent one' (2019: 8). Following its emergence in the 1950s, in subsequent decades the focus shifted from adolescent rebellion to nostalgia with a slew of 1970s films aiming to capture the rock and roll heyday of the 1950s and package this for new audiences. Teen cinema in the 1980s became synonymous with the work of John Hughes with films such as *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Pretty in Pink* (1986) and which focused on the high school difficulties of fitting in and self-discovery. More recent iterations of the genre have explored feminism and post-feminism with significant titles including *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995), *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004) and *Easy A* (Will Gluck, 2010), all of which focus on the teen-girl experience.

Discussions of girlhood and the experience of being a teenager girl have long been represented within dominant cultural forms, including film, television and popular music, yet very few of these representations are produced by those within this demographic. As Timothy

Shary has pointed out 'while they address young people they are not produced by young people, for children and teens are effectively restricted from the filmmaking process. Thus, screen images of youth have always been traditionally filtered through adult perspectives' (2014: 2). Discussions of girlhood also draw on feminist theory and specifically critiques ideas of sexualization, of female imagery and of female representation within mainstream culture. As Samantha Colling has argued, 'the girl is a figure created by a set of discourses and girl teen film gives us images and ideas of 'girls'' (2011: 136) while Catherine Driscoll suggests:

> Girlhood is invested with a range of meanings by film genres and dominant understandings of the film audience. Some of these meanings are framed by repetitions of dominant social structures and ideologies […] but generic conventions provide not only frames for reception but also modes of reception. (2003: 228)

More recently, Handyside and Taylor-Jones have posited that 'the figure of the girl offers an accessible way to debate the legacies of feminism and the impact of globalisation on gender roles and identities in the contemporary period' (2016: 3). Their work, along with that of Driscoll and others, highlights the inadequacy of a model which offers a singular and unified experience of girlhood or teen experience and suggests ways in which more recent models of teen representation are evolving in response to broader socio-cultural developments. While dominant messages and tropes may abound within teen cinema, to position them as populist carriers of messages to uncritical audiences is to fundamentally misunderstand the process of reception and to mischaracterise this genre. As R. Danielle Egan argues, 'media consumption is a more complex and dynamic process that involves more than the simple transmission and indoctrination of unmediated ideological messages; rather its contents and values are used, referenced and even rejected by viewers' (2013: 45). Such simplicity also undermines the media literacy and expertise of generation Z who unquestionably demand more variety from media representation than previous generations.

Frequently the falseness of what is presented as 'typical' acts as a useful counterpoint for viewers to offer their own insights and to articulate ideas through oppositional rather than identification discourses. In this study viewers vigorously commented on the gulf between the fictional teen experience and the lived teen experience affirming what Egan (2013) has highlighted; specifically, that ignoring findings which foreground the personal perspectives of teenaged girls, such as that gathered via empirical methods, silences the very voices which should be central to discussions of girlhood and teen experience. The development of girlhood studies has seen the debate shift from concerns about sexualisation and exploitation and appropriation of imagery to discussions about girlhood in the age of post-feminism. Jessica Ringrose (2006) posited the mean girl or the violent girl, pointing to press discourses of teen behaviour which speaks directly to tensions and anxieties within this demographic and how they are related through the mainstream media, while Sarah Hill suggests that one of the dominant images to emerge in recent years is 'the figure of the can-do girl who

embodies Western neoliberal ideals around hard work, success and social mobility' (2022: 7). More recent additions to this broad genre such as *Ladybird* (Greta Gerwig, 2017) and *Booksmart* (Olivia Wilde, 2019) have offered more diverse insights into teenaged life, specifically addressing postfeminist ideas of sexuality, sexual behaviour, friendship, female solidarity and systems of support. Both of these films were released after the conclusion of this research but would undoubtedly have been points of reference during discussions, especially as both are made by women.

While the tropes and imagery of teen girlhood are often positioned as universal, Roz Kaveney (2006) has argued that much of this is an American construction which has colonised the collective imagination of the western world and created a folk memory of teen life. The lived teen experience of millions of girls will bear no resemblance to the world of American high school, of jocks and cheerleaders, lockers in the hall and the Prom, which dominate visible images of teenage girlhood – in that these images pay little attention to race, class, religion and region. Yet it retains its dominance within popular culture and the semantics and syntax of teen cinema remains stable and easily recognisable. For this reason, the selection of an American film to screen to Northern Irish teen viewers posed few issues of understanding as the messages and representations such films contain, offer easy points of access for viewers.

In his consideration of *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007) and his critique of the cultural studies model, Juan Antonio Tarancón contends that 'films constitute a remarkable communicative situation that tells us something about how social reality is constructed, but they belong to the fictional world of cinema' (2012: 457). He posits that 'a film like *Juno* cannot be said to show what teenagers do or what they are like. Instead, it addresses the contradictions contemporary society poses for adolescents as they come of age' (Ibid: 463). These films act less as a mirror for teens or for society, but rather a visual mechanism or spur for 'working through' a selection of teen-based issues and presenting nuance and complexity as part of teenage life. One of the strengths of teen cinema is that through characterisation, situation comedy or drama and narrative, a variety of idea, viewpoints, arguments and contradictions can be explored. Colling (2011) argues that these films resonate so easily due to the dominance of their thematic concerns; coming of age narratives, rites of passage and maturity as a narrative obstacle, as well as repetition of the supposed common emotional experience – making and repeating fixed desires, fantasies and pleasures – and how these 'speak' specifically to their intended audience. This is a key idea that this research sets out to explore: specifically how understanding these filmic narratives, reading them and understanding their circulating discourses make them useful vehicles for broader discussions.

Data Collection

The data collected comprised three strands: a questionnaire, small group discussions to respond to the screening and a full group discussion.[1] The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather information on participants' film viewing, what they liked and why. My analysis of the questionnaire material will focus specifically on questions related to film taste and preferences, as well as issues of teenage representation. This data will then be placed alongside data gathered in the small and full group discussions to map how tastes and preferences align with discussions that emerge after watching a specific teen film.

The respondents were asked: **What is your favourite film? (you can list up to 5).**

Baywatch (x 2)	*Guardians of the Galaxy*	*Peter Pan*
Beauty and the Beast	*Harry Potter*	*Practical Magic*
Boyhood	*Hobbit*	*Schindler's List*
Braveheart	*Juno*	*Shark Tale*
Breakfast Club	*Jurassic Park*	*Shawshank Redemption*
Cabin in the Woods	*Kill Bill*	*Side Effects*
Carol	*Kingsman: The Secret Service*	*Sing Street*
Clueless	*La La Land*	*Skyfall*
Dark Knight Rises	*Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*	*Spongebob Movie*
Deadpool	*Moana* (x 2)	*Stand by Me*
Diary of a Wimpy Kid	*Mulan*	*Star Wars* (esp. *The Force Awakens*)
Dirty Dancing	*My Girl*	*Stepbrothers*
ET	*My Sister's Keeper*	*The Hills Have Eyes*
Evil Dead (x 2)	*Nightmare before Christmas*	*The Proposal* (x 2)
Fast Furious 1-8	*Pan's Labyrinth*	*Train to Busan*
Get Out	*Perks of Being a Wallflower*	

Figure 1: Films referenced in questionnaire

The responses recorded spoke to the participant's age and demographic and fitted in with notions of pleasure and entertainment. Animation is well represented with *Beauty and the Beast, Shark Tale, Moana, Mulan, Peter Pan*, and *Spongebob Movie*, while general 'family friendly films' include *Harry Potter*, *Sing Street*, and *La La Land*. A large number of

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[1] The questionnaire included project information and corresponded to the University code of conduct related to ethics in research. Participants could withdraw from the session at any time or to refrain from completing questions on the questionnaire. Additional consent was also elicited from the class teachers in attendance as the session comprised 16 female-identifying participants aged 15-17 from St Roses Dominican College, Belfast Wellington College, Belfast and Cinemagic Film Festival. The small group and full group discussions were not recorded but notes made by the groups were retained after the session and form the basis for the analysis here.

blockbusters, franchises, and action films are included, notably *ET, Jurassic Park, Dark Night Rises, Skyfall, Braveheart, Kingsman, Star Wars, Fast and the Furious*, and *The Hobbit*. Auterist cinema is lightly represented by *Kill Bill*, *Boyhood*, and *Carol*. Genre cinema is evidenced by horror – *Pan's Labyrinth, Get Out, Evil Dead,* and *Cabin in the Woods* – and coming of age narratives *Dirty Dancing* and *Practical Magic,* while films specifically aimed at the teen market include *The Breakfast Club, Clueless, The Perks of Being a Wallflower,* and *Juno.*

The titles cited were predominantly Hollywood-made and taken together, are indicative of the tastes of this particular group which would have been shaped by access, availability and age. There is a strong strain of nostalgia and a predilection for fairytales and animation, although genre cinema does emerge with horror and some auteurist cinema included. If I were conducting the research now I would include a question on streaming access and how much of this material they watch online in order to get a better understanding of how their tastes were being shaped. As a follow up question, respondents were asked: Why do you like these particular films so much, what do they mean to you? Themes of personal and emotional engagement emerge strongly in their responses. One respondent commented, 'I feel very in tune with them when they have interesting plots [sic] points' (R5), another noted 'I empathise with characters, feel what they are feeling' (R6) while a third stated 'they make me feel like I'm in the movie' (R8).[2] Another respondent claimed, 'I relate to characters and they accurately represent how I feel' (R4). The reflections here are about experience and how film relates to them as individuals. Another respondent focuses on the shared viewing experience and suggests that watching films allows for 'good craic with family and friends' (R2), while others cite 'excitement' and 'action' (R6, R11, R12). Four further respondents mention 'funny' (R1, R3, R5, R7) as reasons for film choices, two mention film as escapism (R2, R7) and two others reference nostalgia. Of these, one refers to 'childhood films which I still like to watch' (R13) while the other writes, '*ET* is probably nostalgia based and makes me cry' (R4).

Some of the most personal responses focus on the specific qualities of the films each respondent has selected. Although respondents in this group lack the vocabulary to discuss the specifics of film, their responses illuminate how they perceive the relationship between the films they choose to watch and how these films make them feel. As well as identifying that films are good at addressing 'issues' (R4, R9), further comments note the significance of 'emotional reaction from audience' when watching a film (R6). Another respondent highlights '*Mulan* focuses on a girl who needs no man' (R12) while another offers the personal revelation that '*Carol* made me realize I was gay' (R10). While the broad range of responses highlights the significance of pleasure and film as escapism, these highly personal responses reveal how for some individual respondents, film offers more than escapism and that in drawing on film characters in the way they are, they are positioning themselves in a direct relationship to these films.

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[2] Participants are indicated by number, for example respondent 6 from the session is R6.

Drawing these observations together with responses to the question**: How do you feel films generally present teenagers or teen 'issues'? e.g. bullying, sexuality, relationships etc.** indicates how these participants perceive film about teenagers more generally. These respondents felt filmic representation of teenagers was broadly negative with only three positive responses; 'I feel although there is currently a good representation of suicide in the media through '13 Reasons Why' (R13), 'some good [representation]' (R3), 'It's quite realistic but sometimes it's overdone e.g. *Mean Girls, The Craft'* (R9). As well as some general negative reflections on teenage representation, 'I feel they aren't presented well as they touch sensitive subjects but don't deal with them well' (R7), specific criticism focused on exaggeration, superficiality and over-reliance on stereotypes. Respondents noted that representations were 'over dramatic and cliché. Example: *Mean Girls*, popular people and low-class people are in groups' (R2), 'Films present teens too dramatically' (R12), 'they also exaggerate and make the viewer feel like the world is ending just because of the issues they are currently facing' (R1). The respondents here also felt teenagers were being presented in a superficial way: 'they gloss over topics or normalize them, they create a lot of stigma for being the thin, pretty or the fat, ugly character' (R5), 'I feel they aren't presented well as they touch sensitive subjects but don't deal with them well' (R7), and 'not very well because some issues are just brushed over or normalized' (R10). When it came to stereotypes, respondents noted 'they don't show real representations' (R1), and 'they don't portray them uniquely' (R14). Two respondents also offered personal critiques of teen films recording, 'I feel like they [teen films] don't go into depth about real teen issues like sexual assault or bullying' (R8) and 'I feel that sexuality and confusion surrounding this is extremely under-represented' (R13).

The sense of frustration of being misrepresented as superficial, overly dramatic and preoccupied with irrelevancies emerges strongly here, with respondents drawing closely on their own experiences. These responses challenge Tarancón's suggestions of teen films being a site of complexity and nuance, with this group considering them to be frustratingly reductive and simplistic. The responses and examples cited indicate that, for these participants, their cultural capital is rooted in American film. Gathering individual responses via questionnaire allowed for specific participant voices to emerge and I was interested to see how the processes of negotiating meaning and response would evolve and emerge in discussions, first in small groups and then in a larger full group discussion.

Post-Screening Discussion and Analysis: *The Craft*

Participant response to the film was mixed and their responses were encouraged by getting the girls to work in groups, to discuss and subsequently collate their thoughts and responses on large sheets of paper. This prioritised discussion and response to the film, while encouraging them to share response and for all respondents to contribute.

The data from these large sheets indicate the responses to the film and also suggests the processes of discussion and negotiation which underpinned these findings. Comments

about the film's plot, narrative and style noted 'heavy scenes', 'disturbing', 'a bit intense', 'jumpy', 'escalated quickly' and a 'bit scary' while participants also observed 'there was no cliché ending' and the film 'showed an abnormal plot development.' One group appreciated the film's gothic style and placed it securely within the horror genre while two further groups noted the 'mix' and 'confusion' of genres within the film and another praised the mise-en-scène and the music. Much of the negative response focused on the way the film has aged. Comments noted 'not much sign of modern age – social media', that the film was 'made in 2D', that it was 'obviously 90s' and 'not relatable to the 21st century'. In seeking to analyse these group responses and the broader discussion, I categorised the collated material thematically around 7 broad topics; **handling of tricky topics; stereotypes; peer pressure; body image; female characters, female voices and female representation; morality; family.**

The film was praised for **handling tricky topics** and not avoiding issues such as rape, bullying, racism, peer pressure, sex, and self-harm. Participants noted that the realistic handling of bullying and racism, along with rape and peer pressure, ensured that the film was 'still relatable for teenagers today'. Some respondents suggested that a modern film might not tackle these topics in the same way and might be more cautious. The film was praised for its 'real characters' and offering 'an accurate representation of teen rebellion' as well as its 'mature themes'. The representation and acknowledgement of self-harm was also singled out as being particularly significant and well handled. It was seen as overwhelmingly positive that the film presented this in a realistic way and did not sensationalise it but rather presented it as part of 'typical' teenage behaviour, and in the process 'breaks boundaries on stereotypical teenage activities'. This was significant as it led to conversations about more recent television productions and films which did approach such topics but did so in different ways. One group noted that the film 'tried to pack too many problems into a teen movie' and another suggested that it 'appealed to common fears', perhaps a reference to how adults might respond to the representations of teen behaviour in the film. One area of response which was particularly interesting was the comment made about the lack of romance in the film and frank treatment of sex and relationships. Many participants saw this as a positive: citing open discussions and honesty not 'sugar-coated' teen romance. Comments noted how the film 'plays on the idea that women owe men sex after a date, then challenges that', that it offers 'no false representation of love' and 'didn't show a false representation of a love story'. These responses indicate how participants are perceiving elements in the film to directly challenge the teen narratives that they are familiar with.

One of the most touched-upon topics was the film's reliance on **stereotypes**; comments noted, 'the most popular girl in school is the blonde bitchy girl', 'blonde mean girl, new girl, football jock, 'weird girls' and 'outcasts in school = witches'. During the session there was extended discussion over whether this was lazy stereotyping or if the film did offer a range of diverse characters with some arguing that all the female characters had their own characters and personalities and that the four principal female characters were very-well fleshed out. Interestingly, a number of the respondents took issue with stereotyping of teenage boys as sex-mad pests or idiots; one group noted pithily 'teen boys portrayed

stereotypically – mean.' Some participants also pointed out that they knew lots of boys – both at school and beyond – and that such representations were reductive and harmful.

An early point raised in the discussion was about **peer pressure** and all agreed that in the film there was a pressure to fit in - or to form your own clique. This prompted a wide-ranging discussion about their own experiences of peer pressure, friendships, gangs and bullying. Groups noted that the film 'touched on the topic of how teenagers can be peer pressured into doing things they do not want to do by their friends' and that 'Sarah felt pressured to have a boy like her'. Interestingly this discussion broadened into a debate about how friendships can be very damaging; one group cited 'possessive friends' while another pointed out that 'just because your (sic) friends with people doesn't mean you're the same'. Again, this offered participants an opportunity to offer their own insights drawn from their personal experiences.

There was a great deal of discussion about **body image** and how even though the film did offer strong female characters with interesting personalities and different looks, they were all still attractive and thin. Respondents mentioned the 'realistic' issues that faced some of the characters, specifically Bonnie and her skin disorder. One comment suggested that the character 'needs perfect skin to be pretty' but another noted that this was tied to confidence and that changing your appearance can improve your confidence which is what happens in the film. Here the film discussion developed into a fascinating exchange about confidence and body positivity, demonstrating how effectively the respondents were using the film as the starting point for bigger and significant conversations.

One of the most fascinating elements of the discussion and a topic that generated a great deal of comment was that of **female characters, female voices and female representation**. The range of female protagonists was seen as a positive, with comments noting the 'different representations of girls', 'interesting unique characters' and 'good character development'. Respondents commented that 'the characters had distinct, different personalities' they liked the 'female friendship group' and that there were some 'strong female characters'. One respondent celebrated 'finally a female I relate to!' while another group noted they could 'relate to the characters'. These ideas of relatability were echoed in comments about the film being well cast and that the different clothes and personalities suited individual characters. Fascinatingly, the only note of caution about female representation was sounded by a suggestion that perhaps the film could be read in a different way (and one which is more typical of the horror genre) in that 'when women have power, then things go wrong.' This more analytical reading indicates an awareness amongst some respondents of the different ways to read a film and the different ways viewers 'decode' those meanings.

A couple of unexpected things were mentioned. Firstly, **morality** and how the film dealt with right and wrong, and how power was abused in the film. Groups pondered 'was Sarah good or bad' and that she had 'good intentions... but abused her power sometimes'. There was a broader discussion about how the film 'makes you question good and bad', 'what goes around comes around' and that 'revenge went too far' as well as comments about

Nancy's erratic behaviour, and her descent into madness. There was also a discussion about responsibility, parents and **family**. A vocal group condemned the absent parents, while others suggested that as a horror film it was quite typical for the parents to be absent. Again, here we see a broader understanding of film genre, and of generic tropes, as well as insights drawn from participants' own expectations; Northern Ireland remains a place where family is hugely important and these attitudes are clearly evident in some of these responses.

Some Preliminary Findings and Observations

The ideas and responses which emerged from the discussion offer some fascinating insights into the negotiations taking place. The placing of the responses and observations in 7 broad categories - handling of tricky topics; stereotypes; peer pressure; body image; female characters, female voices and female representation; morality; family – allow for the breadth of response to be covered and reveals that while typical teen issues are very much part of these post-screening conversations, female representation and female voices are the topics most frequently referenced while ideas about morality and family – which one could argue fall outside typical teenage issues – are mentioned in a way which was both surprising and illuminating.

The references made to characters and their relatability is an issue which chimes with the shifts in girlhood studies which identify new and powerful models of feminine identity; most significantly here the identification within the film of the mean girls and violent girls as identified by Ringrose. A good example of the latter is Nancy, played by Faruza Balk, who revels in her gothic styling exemplified through leather coat, facial piercings and black fingernails and lipstick, whose character is spiky and unpredictable, and by turns violent and vulnerable. One focus group respondent referred specifically to Nancy as 'crazy, crazy' while another happily declared, 'Finally a female I relate to!'.

As discussions broadened and deepened, a higher number of participants became vocal, offering opinions and clearly participating in the 'giving and exchanging of information' and becoming emboldened by the presence of other active voices. As a mechanism to get a group to engage with and discuss typical 'teen issues' such as body image, stereotypes, bullying and peer pressure, using a film which contained all of this material and more, worked very well. The deliberate selection of an older film for the screening provided a useful mechanism of comparison. In discussion, the respondents frequently referred to other examples of teen films and cinema; *Juno, Mean Girls, Easy A, Clueless* were all cited in the discussions, as well as the television series '13 Reasons Why'. The frames of reference provided by such well-known material was a good counterpoint to addressing issues which emerged around *The Craft* and allowed for bigger discussions of what worked well in teen cinema, and how the participant's detailed knowledge of this genre gave them confidence to articulate their own ideas. It was also interesting to see that when different topics emerged in the discussions– mental health, self-harm, teen pregnancy, bullying, suicide – the

participants were happy to discuss all of these issues openly, without awkwardness or embarrassment. Their openness, frankness and willingness to articulate such views contrasts sharply with how teenagers in the region have perhaps been perceived, and how teen audiences are more generally regarded. Frances Smith has suggested that the broad genre of teen cinema is consistently dismissed by critics and the teenage audience characterised as 'artless naïfs without the discerning sensibilities of their more erudite elders' (2019: 12). Yet the articulate and thoughtful discussion generated during the sessions challenges any suggestion of a lack of understanding. Conversations were thoughtful, broad and inclusive and even the more contentious topics were framed carefully by the respondents. There was no discomfit when religious issues were mentioned, and the iconography throughout the film and the Catholic High School setting, replete with nuns, school chapel and compulsory prayer, was accepted without question. No respondents remarked upon this content as an issue of contention, challenging my own assumptions about the difficulty of discussing religious topics in Northern Ireland. In this discussion, religion as part of school life was accepted in a way that perhaps might not have been the case if this research had taken place elsewhere.

At the end of the full group discussion the conversation turned to the ways in which teen representation on film (which was felt to be very poor) could be addressed. These respondents felt strongly that teen cinema should be better and work harder at accurately representing their age group. While they had fixed ideas of what teen films should contain, how morality should be a factor in behaviour on screen and how stereotypes were being applied to both teenagers on and off screen, there was frustration with the blandness and homogeneity being offered.

Conclusions

All of the respondents identified a connection between themselves as teens and teen cinema, alluding to the familiarity of images, characters, plots and tropes which populate such films. Observations revealed a strong connection with film as a form, with *all* respondents, identifying representations and content which *they* deemed to be important. When asked about their own film tastes, some focused on what film meant to them personally, while others noted that it was a shared experience. Some highlighted particular film qualities, such as story or aesthetics, while others revealed how films made them feel, prioritising the significance of film as a site of emotional resonance. While some identified a straightforward relationship between the films they watched and their personal response, stressing relatability and empathy with characters, other respondents offered more nuanced and thoughtful suggestions of what film meant to them. This latter group drew heavily on their own personal experiences, for example 'made me realize I was gay', 'makes me cry', 'opens my eyes to real issues' as to why particular films mattered to them and move beyond film as a straightforward object of pleasure and relatability, to something much more significant and as a vehicle for expression, articulation or confirmation of identity.

What such responses reveal, and as further evidenced by the discussions following the screening, these respondents have a far more significant and nuanced relationship with film than they perhaps realise. Film is being mobilised by these participants in sophisticated and complex ways that are far beyond pleasurable, escapist entertainment. Film is seen to be an object of identification; a site of frustration and limitation; evidence of a social 'lack' or inadequacy; an object of comfort or safety; a sign of a culture which perceives and presents teenagers in a particular way; a vehicle to communicate relevant messages; and a means of establishing a shared language. The participant responses reveal a cynicism, and in some cases, disdain, for the supposedly dominant messages about coming of age, 'normal' teen behaviours and attitudes to sex, friendship and mental health presented in these films. It is perhaps here in these responses with their oppositional or conflicting readings and rebuttal of dominant messages, where the potentialities for such research lie. As Sonia Livingstone has identified in her reflections on audience research coupled with the significance of empirical work, 'inquiring into people's everyday lives reveals how they can surprise, resist or contradict expectations' (2013: 27). As this research has shown, asking teens about teen cinema does not prioritise on or off-screen relatability; rather it provides a useful place to begin, not conclude discussions about teenage experiences and allows teen viewers the opportunity to challenge or confound expectations.

All of the material gathered here reveals how significant teen film can be; both as an object and site of identification and affection, but also as an opportunity for discussion and to reject messages perceived to be unreliable, unhelpful or irrelevant. This research suggests a starting point for more studies which utilise these kinds of exploratory techniques and which give space and opportunity to this demographic to offer their own responses. Regardless of how close the connection is between the everyday life of teens on the screen and the real-life experiences of teens, teen films were still considered by these respondents to have value, points of identification and interest. In exploring them, respondents took charge of the discussion, articulated their own positions and their agency in relation to this material. By removing expectations of critical or technical analysis, the personal responses of individual girls and the collective groups were foregrounded, offering them an opportunity to set the agenda for the discussion. More work in this area is needed to deepen and develop these preliminary observations, but such approaches suggest new ways to think about teen film and teen engagement with cinema.

Biographical Note

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Filmography

Booksmart (Olivia Wilde, 2019)

The Breakfast Club (John Hughes, 1985)

Clueless (Amy Heckerling, 1995)

Easy A (Will Gluck, 2010)

Juno (Jason Reitman, 2007)

Ladybird (Greta Gerwig, 2017)

Mean Girls (Mark Waters, 2004)

Mickeybo and Me (Terry Loane, 2004)

Pretty in Pink (John Hughes, 1986)

The Virgin Suicides (Sofia Coppola, 1999)

The Craft (Andrew Fleming, 1996)

Television

'Derry Girls' (Channel 4, 2018-2022)