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Using Film to Teach Women's Studies Courses: A Teaching Aid Recommendation

By Diane Kholos Wysocki¹

I was recently sent a copy of the film "What a Girl Wants" (Produced by Elizabeth Massie, Made with a grant from the Teresa and H. John Heinz III Foundation, CHC Productions @2000, Distributed by Media Education Foundation www.Mediaed.org). I teach "Introduction to Women's Studies" and other classes with sex/gender/sexuality components built into them. My university is in the middle of Nebraska, where strict gender roles typically are firmly planted in the minds of my students, and I often use films as a way to help my students learn the lessons that are important to Women's Studies.

This 33-minute film uses the interviews of eleven girls, ages 8 to 16, from a variety of economic, ethnic, religious and racial backgrounds who talk about their views on media and how it impacts their lives. The film begins by introducing the young girls, and then is separated into seven different sections that include *Teen Products*, *Premature Toothpick*, *Big Ones*, *Get the Guy*, *Follow the Leader*, *Booty Shots* and *I Could Be Your Daughter*, and *All Girls Got Killed*. The view that gender is socially constructed, and that the differences between males and females is produced by the social experiences people have, rather than biology alone, is held by many of us who teach from a feminist perspective. As a result, the images that are displayed in various forms of media socialize us and shape our understandings of both femininity and masculinity. The social construction of gender is "taken for granted," pervasive in our culture (Lorber 1991), and gives us the scripts for how we display gender in our day-to-day lives (West and Zimmerman 1991).

The first section, *Teen Products*, shows teens stars such as Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Jessica Simpson and Mandy Moore whose success is dependent upon the way they portray themselves in their films. These young stars teach their viewers that they must be beautiful and sexy to be thought of as 'real' girls in our society. Even though the feminist movement has helped move forward the personal freedoms that allow people to live "outside the mold" that has been established through the media, young models show girls ways in which they should spend their money to attain the ideal beauty. Furthermore, more women and girls are spend increasing amounts of money on products to make them beautiful (Saltzberg and Chrisler 2000). The young girls in this film actually appear to see through the media's social construction of reality, but still choose to conform to it. As one of the girls states, the videos taught her that to "be sexy means life will be great!"

Adolescence is one of the most complex times in the lifespan and one that is greatly affected by the mass media. The media has been implicated in the formation of unrealistically thin body ideals for girls by relying on fashion models and actresses who are underweight (Story, Neumark-Sztainer and French. 2002). This, in turn, affects eating behaviors and contributes to eating disorders. The next section *Premature*

Toothpick, illustrates this fact by showing how young girls compare their own bodies to what they see in the media and, inevitably find their own bodies lacking. This section demonstrates how it is the norm for young girls in the United States to feel dissatisfied with their bodies and how they are willing to go to any length to turn their bodies into ones similar to those they see in the media. The pressure to look like a model makes it difficult for children and youth to accept and love their bodies as they are, which can lead to a negative body image, less confidence and decreased self-esteem (Snow 2000).

Since the sixteenth century, women have bound themselves into garments to alter their breasts and abdomens in such a way that it made it impossible to draw breath or to bend (Chrisler 2000). With the introduction of newer technology, this trend has continued with breast implants that have been promoted by the media and plastic surgeons as a way to increase the psychological and social well being of females (Jacobson 2000). While implants are for adults, the section of the film called *Big Ones*, shows the culture's obsession with large breasts and how this provides another source of insecurity for girls. Some of the girls in the film spoke about how their young friends have already had cosmetic surgery. Some also believe that "big boobs mean that you are more successful" in life and the desire to become large is one that starts early in life.

The fourth section is called *Get the Guy*. The message here is that for young girls and women, their primary goal in life should be to get a man and satisfy him. The film showed an example of a movie called *She's all That*, where the boys made a bet that they could turn the ugly girl into the prom queen. Once this was accomplished the girl got the boy and her life was much better for her than if she had stayed ugly, because being ugly means being alone.

Follow the Leader further explains how the media uses teen celebrities to sell products, ideas, and values. One 11 year old gave an example of how she learned to use make up from the media in order to cover the blemishes on her face. It didn't appear to me that her face had any blemishes, but then maybe I am just getting older and my reality is different from hers. The term "beauty" is reduced to a mere decorative quality, which makes women appear ornamental (Saltzberg and Chrisler 2000). The young girls in this movie seem to have learned this lesson well.

Booty Shots is the next section of the film, and it is exactly what it suggests. It's all about spring break videos where women are wearing next to nothing on the beach. Furthermore, spring break vacation provides a party atmosphere, high alcohol consumption, sexually suggestive contests and displays, and casual sex is common (Maticka, Herold, and Mewhinney 1998). During one spring break my youngest son worked for a company who sold the spring break packages to Cancun and came home with pictures of "Body Shot" and "Sexual Position" contests where two people, who often times don't even know each other, will get up on stage and perform sexual acts in front of thousands of other people for some type of prize. Unfortunately MTV, which shows much of these acts in detail, is the favorite TV station for 9-14 year olds. It was mentioned in *What a Girl Wants*, how powerful the *The Thong Song* by Sisco is for teens. Having never heard the song, I called a 15 year old who I know and asked her about the song and what it meant. Her answer was "of course I know what it is...it means that girls with great butts get the best boys." Enough said.

I Could Be Your Daughter shows how the media sexualizes children and teenagers and how "teenagers used to go to the movies to see adults have sex, but now

adults go to the movies to see teenagers having sex.” The theme of a grown man who lusts over a young girl is not new. It was the central theme of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* in 1955, the popular 1999 movie *American Beauty*, and many more works in between. However the bigger issue seems to be that this has become an accepted norm in our culture, even though the young girls in this film dismissed the theme as “gross.”

The final section is called *All Girls Got Killed*. While studies have found that adolescent girls were more likely to have been stabbed and injured than boys (Moskowitz, Griffith, DiScala, and Sege 2001), the media is all too quick to depict women and girls as victims of violence and often times this violence is sexualized. The images of male violence against women are way too common, they are seen as a normal reflection of the way things really are and seem to make fashion "art" out of violence. The young girls in this movie think of it as normal.

I believe that this movie is a good tool to use in classes on sociology, women’s studies, gender, or media to portray how media truly does play a huge part in the way young girls see themselves in relation to what they see on the screen. The movie is short enough to be used during class time, with extra time left during the class to discuss various issues portrayed in the film. Furthermore, the web site at <http://www.mediaed.org/videos/MediaGenderCulture/WhatAGirlWants> has great study guides to help in the classes with many links, exercises, learning objectives and media journal questions.

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