

***The Aesthetic Pleasures of Girl Teen Film,*
by Samantha Colling. Bloomsbury Academic,
2017 (167 pages).**

Desirée de Jesus

When Cyndi Lauper tweaked the lyrics of Robert Hazard’s “Girls Just Want to Have Fun” she gave us more than a 1980s feminist anthem about sexual freedom; she centred pleasurable female experiences in the pop-cultural imagination and made girlish fun a birthright. Since its release, the song has functioned as narrative shorthand for feminine enjoyment, accompanying film and television sequences that expand its meaning beyond its erotic origins and spotlight female-identified protagonists indulging in fun activities. While not all on-screen moments of girlish fun rely on Lauper’s remake, they hold in common the spectacularised expression of a feminine sensibility presumably shared by all girls and women.

Samantha Colling’s book *The Aesthetic Pleasures of Girl Teen Film* explores how these moments of girlish fun and affective pleasure are created in Hollywood teen films released between 2000 and 2010. The book presents a striking critical analysis of the ways the fairy-tale realism of girl teen film aesthetics reinforces the gender norms that constrain girlhood behaviour and defines the different types of girlish fun, pleasures, and experiences made available to audiences. If, as some have argued, female-driven stories are seen to lack the depth of their male-centric counterparts, light-hearted commercial films about girls’ lives are disparaged all the more. Colling’s book tackles these implicit biases through its examination of how these films construct instances of “girl fun” and shows us why understanding pleasures deemed feminine and frivolous is of crucial importance. Certainly, there is no shortage of millennial Hollywood films about teen girls having fun, falling in love, and living their best lives. *The Aesthetic Pleasures of Girl Teen Film* sifts through this multitude and isolates a selection of films that depict teen girlhood in the “fun mode”. Inspired by the difficulties she and her A-level film students shared pinpointing and describing what made *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004) pleasurable, Colling examines popular films such as *Blue Crush* (John Stockwell, 2002), *13 Going on 30* (Gary Winick, 2004) and *Easy A* (Will Gluck, 2010).

One of the book’s strengths is that it acknowledges the sociocultural specificities of “girl fun” in Hollywood teen film (i.e. able-bodied, white, middle and upper-class) and the ways these categories determine the kinds of pleasures and experiences the films portray and offer to viewers. However, following from this, a point that is less clear is why this offering is seen to invite certain audiences to become enchanted and enjoy these affective experiences while excluding others. The rationale appears to be that millennial girl teen film’s selective inclusion and exclusion of viewers corresponds directly to how an individual’s sociocultural identity informs her lived experiences and the ways she perceives film.

With this in mind, the book focuses on films that show their girl protagonists enjoying stereotypically gendered objects and activities that also make them highly visible. Whether depicting girls walking the fashion catwalk, taking part in makeovers, displaying athletic prowess, being noticed by boys, or presenting song-and-dance routines, girl teen films show us what joyous feminine experiences look and feel like. They also show us that white, able-bodied, heterosexual girls from middle- and upper-class families have the most fun.

In making Hollywood films about white adolescent girlhood its focus, the book appears poised to retrace the steps of most scholarship on girlhood and cinema. However, this is not the case. Instead, Colling offers a fresh approach to a familiar territory, digging beneath the surface of these conventional representations to theorise how audiences might find the films' gendered objects and the experiences they represent pleasurable. The book is organised into seven chapters, with the first and last chapters constituting, respectively, the Introduction and a "Conclusions and Future Research" section. While the book's structure and flow of argumentation give away its doctoral dissertation origins, these organisational choices present a clear progression of thought that deftly guides readers through cinematic terrain they may have previously considered unremarkable.

Drawing on film phenomenology and affect film theory, *The Aesthetic Pleasures of Girl Teen Film* steers clear of the usual symptomatic readings that either use a film's reflection of feminist or misogynistic ideas to gauge its merits, or that favour verisimilar depictions of girlhood on-screen while neglecting consideration of a film's aesthetic and affective dimensions. The Introduction lays crucial groundwork by charting the cinematic legacy of girl teen films in the fun mode and exposing ideological fault lines in the genre's ideas of wholesome teen fun. Colling traces these thematic lines to the clean teen films of the 1950s and 1960s, such as the *Gidget* franchise and the American International Pictures (AIP) beach party film series, noting how their brands of carefree adolescence were emblematic of an affluent, white, heterosexual vantage point. As reassuring counterpoints to the radical societal changes happening in the United States, these films offered a privileged version of American adolescence that bracketed out consideration of real-world events, confining social instability to the vicissitudes of teenage romance.

Most incisively, this genealogical excavation also unearths a tonal connection with the ironic, knowing teen films of the late 1980s, citing cult classics from John Hughes's oeuvre like *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Pretty in Pink* (1986), and *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987), and Michael Lehmann's *Heathers* (1988) as exemplars. This through line continues with millennial girl teen film's inheritance of a generic self-consciousness that winks at its own participation in prevailing representations of commercial American teen culture. According to Colling, Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995) is a clear progenitor of this overt self-consciousness in girl teen films in the fun mode, with its double-coding of teen popular culture conventions and box-office success spawning a surge of girl teen film production during the late 1990s. Through these, Colling sheds insight on how pastiche and double-coding techniques became essential features of films in the fun mode and the primary means by which audiences could choose to accept or reject the filmic pleasures on offer. Additional consideration of how this knowingness functioned in relation to characters' class, (dis)ability, gender, race, and sexuality would have enriched this section and outlined the films' tonal limitations. As a result, the reader is left with several questions: How did *Clueless* and girl teen films of the late 1990s use these techniques to situate minority, differently abled and queer girls in relation to commercial teen culture? What kinds of activities are these

“othered” girls shown enjoying? How do these early modes of representing differences between teen girls compare with what we now see in millennial girl teen films like *Mean Girls*?

The second chapter, entitled “Cinderella’s Pleasures”, outlines the ways that the fairy tale context of girl teen films in the fun mode creates and embodies certain affects, feelings, pleasures and realities. Colling argues that, rather than directly reproduce the specifics of a particular version of the Cinderella story, these films evoke the tale’s essence by emphasising the aesthetic surfaces that give the titular heroine tactile and kinaesthetic pleasures: costumes, glamorous spaces and places, as well as techniques or moments that increase her visibility and highlight her uniqueness. These elements are shown to be complicated in millennial girl teen film by depictions of activities that elicit feelings of freedom and allude to the notion of “happily ever after”, and by the music video aesthetics that spectacularise mundane practices of femininity. The chapter focuses on the idea of transformation underlying the Cinderella story—the promise of hidden potential finally realised—and, by way of contrast, the Deleuzian notion of “modulation” operating in girl teen films, which gives the illusion of metamorphosis but undermines the liberation it purports to bestow, by limiting the kinds of change possible. Another key difference pertains to the aims of transformation; where heterosexual romance and marriage are Cinderella’s rewards, girl teen film’s Cinderella character-icon finds pleasure and fulfilment in becoming more visible through self-spectacularisation, wherein the achievement of glamour indicates her coming of age. For Colling, this phenomenon can be seen, for example, in the dramatic costume changes of girl characters in films like *Mean Girls*, *A Cinderella Story* (2004), and *The House Bunny* (2008), insofar as their glamorous makeovers appear to be vehicles that improve social positioning and change lives. Here, double-coding resurfaces through the films’ self-conscious imitation of fairy tale generic affects and conventions, wherein drawing audience attention to this imitation is part of the fun. This analytical focus allows Colling to interrogate the hidden paradoxes of Hollywood adolescent girlhood and problematise how these aesthetic surfaces create feelings of empowerment and the impression that freedom is within reach but restrict the heroine’s potential for transformation within classed and raced feminine ideals.

Chapter Three, entitled “Celebrity Glamour”, explores how glamorous spaces and places increase girl teen film heroines’ visibility in varying degrees and cause the girls’ improved symbolic capital to feel pleasurable to audiences. The chapter focuses on the intertwining of discourses about celebrity and girlhood and winds its way through an exploration of how these films normalise the Cinderella character-icon’s desire for fame and position her self-spectacularisation as the only pathway to her empowerment and pleasure. Case studies include *Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen* (Sara Sugarman, 2004), *Easy A*, and *The Lizzie McGuire Movie* (Jim Fall, 2003). In these films, the girl figure’s visibility is not simply related to her costume but works in tandem with glamorous spaces and places to create affective and material experiences of celebrity.

Correspondences between Cinderella and girl teen film heroines, such as *Mean Girls*’ Cady (Lindsay Lohan) and Daphne (Amanda Bynes) from *What a Girl Wants* (2003), are most clear in the second and third chapters, with the reward of increased visibility and recognition directly realised through the aesthetic surfaces of glamorous costume, space and place. However, the fairy tale connections of the fourth chapter’s subject—the active, athletic girl body on screen—are less obvious. “Sporting Pleasures” seeks to show how athletic performances provide opportunities to increase a girl’s visibility and the recognition of her unique talents. Colling uses *Blue Crush*, *Stick It* (Jessica Bendinger, 2006), and the *Bring It On* franchise (2000–2009) as principal case studies

and aims to examine the filmic techniques that position the Cinderella character-icon's athletic body as a glamorous "spectacle of perfection" and convey to audiences what training, successful performance, and teamwork feel like for teen girls (78). In this chapter, the force of Colling's argument lays in her discussion of how these portrayals conflict with girls' experiences of the constraints placed on their comportment and mobility and embody the contradictory qualities that structure Hollywood adolescent girlhood. Colling also explores how the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality come into play. Pointing to the sports films' stereotypical portrayals of Black and White working-class femininities, Colling shows how these classed girl bodies are linked to dance forms that foreground their "natural rhythms" and overt sexuality but are contrasted with affluent white girls' restraint and "frigidity".

Colling's interest in kinaesthetic pleasures generated by the active girl body continues in the book's fifth and sixth chapters, which explore the use of popular music in girl teen film. In exploring how films that foreground singing and dancing engage contradictory themes of expansion and confinement, the fifth chapter, entitled "Musical Address," makes the case that these musical numbers allow for the limited expression of young female sexuality on-screen and enchants audiences, so they can physically experience their own momentary expansions. Colling notes how musical numbers in *Another Cinderella Story* (Damon Santostefano, 2008) and *Save the Last Dance* (Thomas Carter, 2001) can be seen to resolve difficulties and differences between characters. However, what is uniquely captivating about millennial girl teen films, and *Mean Girls*, the book's principal case study, is the intertwinement of double-coding and musical address. Despite self-consciously winking at its own imitation of musical film, the millennial girl teen film uses the techniques of musical address to halt narrative progression and momentarily create a fantasy space that characters experience as unrestraining.

In the sixth chapter, "Music Video Aesthetics", Colling seeks to demonstrate how gendering post-continuity techniques lends greater affective force to the aesthetic surfaces creating girl teen film's "Cinderella moments" and convey an ostensible commonality among girls (127). While the chapter does not refer specifically to the pop song mentioned in my introduction, it reflects on the ways that adding music to images of girls performing ordinary activities constructs these moments as fun, imbues them with greater affective force, and circumscribes these pleasurable offerings in "modulations that constantly play out feelings of innocence and experience, expansion and confinement" (130). To illustrate how music-video aesthetics make these ordinary activities spectacular, the author looks closely at Jenna's (Jennifer Garner) party preparations in *13 Going on 30* as she dresses and applies makeup. For Colling, the ordinariness of this moment becomes imprinted with the musical uplift of an iconic pop song and its impact on the rhythm and energy of the editing. These additions are seen to convey both the enjoyable feelings and constrained possibilities of feminine adolescence.

All in all, *The Aesthetic Pleasures of Girl Teen Film* is a fascinating study of a much-maligned category of film. The author's attention to the filmic techniques that make girls' visibility pleasurable for characters and certain audiences creates opportunities to reflect on the contradictions that construct and constrain millennial teenage girlhood. To her credit, Colling keeps in view the interplay between the Cinderella character icon's visibility and the abled, classed and raced ideas of femininity that regulate her appearance and behaviour. In this way, the sociocultural specificities that construct the Hollywood version of feminine adolescence are also interrogated, insofar as they relate to the fairy tale pleasures of the Cinderella story. The decision to use this iconic figure as an analytical frame of reference results in certain chapters offering a

stronger, more direct line of argumentation about the affective force of particular aesthetic surfaces than in others. The Conclusion raises a series of questions that exceed the scope of each chapter by considering how contemporaneous female-centric fare outside of the Hollywood paradigm complicates the claims the book puts forward. In addition, it generously points readers to resources that explore other girlhood modalities and use fairy tales to explore alternative experiences and representations.

Therefore, the book's chief contribution to the fields of aesthetic theory and film and girlhood studies is that it presents a compelling and nonhierarchical model for understanding how the aesthetic pleasures of girl teen film are designed to engage the body, which offers new ways for thinking through gendered notions of fun. In doing so, Colling's impressive insights can be seen to recuperate these light-hearted, female-centric films and demonstrate their intrinsic worthiness as objects of critical analysis.

References

- Another Cinderella Story*. Directed by Damon Santostefano, Warner Home Video, 2008.
- Blue Crush*. Directed by John Stockwell, Universal Studios, 2002.
- The Breakfast Club*. Directed by John Hughes, Universal Studios, 1985.
- Clueless*. Directed by Amy Heckerling, Paramount, 1995.
- Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen*. Directed by Sara Sugarman, Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 2004.
- Easy A*. Directed by Will Gluck, Sony Pictures, 2010.
- Hazard, Robert. "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." Record Plant, 1979.
- Heathers*. Directed by Michael Lehmann, Sony Pictures, 1988.
- Laufer, Cyndi. "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." Portrait Records, 1983.
- The Lizzie McGuire Movie*. Directed by Jim Fall, Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 2003.
- Make It Happen*. Directed by Duane Grant, The Weinstein Company, 2008.
- Mean Girls*. Directed by Mark Waters, Warner Brothers, 2004.
- Pretty in Pink*. Directed by John Hughes, Paramount, 1986.
- Save the Last Dance*. Directed by Thomas Carter, Paramount, 2001.
- Shaviro, Steven. *Post-Cinematic Affect*. Zero Books, 2010.

Some Kind of Wonderful. Directed by John Hughes, Paramount, 1987.

13 Going on 30. Directed by Gary Winick, Sony Pictures, 2004.

Suggested Citation

de Jesus, Desirée. “*The Aesthetic Pleasures of Girl Teen Film*, by Samantha Colling.” Book Review. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 16, Winter 2018, pp. 103–108. www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue16/ReviewDeJesus.pdf.

Desirée de Jesus is a Film and Moving Image Studies PhD candidate in the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema at Concordia University. Her doctoral research focuses on representations of displaced girls and marginalised women in popular culture.