

BOYHOOD YARNS BIG FILM THEME

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Just because females make up 51 percent of the world's population doesn't mean we take up half the space on movie screens. In fact, the current movie message is that females sprout full-grown into women, apparently never experiencing that strange and wonderful period of life called childhood.

Several recent films have centered around women (*Moonstruck* and *Broadcast News*), but the usual studio executive cynicism about audience interest in women's experience still prevails. The dearth of female roles has now filtered down into the screen's younger set, resulting in a new kind of male bonding movie, a pint-sized buddy film which relegates girls to minor roles or excludes them altogether.

Five recent films deal with growing up from a boy's point-of-view: *Hope and Glory* is director John Boorman's recollection of his own war-time experiences in London during the Blitz; *Au Revoir Les Enfants* is Louis Malle's memory of how his life was touched by war at a boy's school in France; *Empire of the Sun* is Steven Spielberg's rendition of the child affected by war, focusing on the experiences of a courageous youngster separated from

his parents during the Japanese takeover of Shanghai; *Le Grand Chemin*, one of most popular films of the past few years in France, deals with a young boy whose mother leaves him with friends so that she can give birth to her second child; and *My Life As A Dog* is about growing up from the point of view of a boy sent away from his dying mother. In fact, all of the films are strongly Oedipal, focusing partly or completely on the boy's attachment to his mother, and his difficult and painful response to their separation.

All five films are directed by men, several actually based on the director's own experiences. Clearly, the paucity of women directors contributes to the lack of roles for women and girls. Women behind the camera are as rare, it seems, as strong competent women in front of the camera.

Years ago, young girls were big stars, capturing the heart of the country in film after film. The appeal of a Shirley Temple, Judy Garland or Elizabeth Taylor was enormous and enduring, their experiences as exciting as those of any other adventurer. Remember, it is a Dorothy and not a Dick who leads a trio of misfit males to see the Wizard; and it is a Velvet and not a Victor who, disguised as a boy in *National Velvet*, rides her horse to victory in the Grand National. But the thirties and forties were the decades of the star, and the films these young performers appeared in were created largely for the display of their startling talent and the exploitation of their proven appeal.

Does the perceived lack of interest in the experiences of little girls suggest that their lives are no longer enough to sustain audience interest? Do people believe that little girls merely play with dolls and spend their recreational hours practicing

to become mummies when they grow up? Perhaps it tells us something about the values of recent movies, movies that seem to stress violence above compassion, self-determination and independence.

Even the girls who appear in the aforementioned recent movies are familiar stereotypes. The little friend in *Le Grand Chemin* is a young seductress, leading her pal into worlds of voyeurism, sex, mischief and danger. She is evocative of the adult temptress, an untamed being whose uncivilized nature cannot even bear the restrictiveness of shoes. The girl in *My Life As A Dog*, who tapes her breasts and dresses as a boy so that she can play on the soccer team, also expresses sexual curiosity in an aggressive manner frightening to the reluctant male protagonist. Both of these girls are youthful descendants of the dichotomous woman, the virgin/whore image which so pervades the history of American film.

How many films like *Risky Business* (an adolescent boy's fantasy of seducing myriad women) did we have before someone took a chance on *Dirty Dancing* (about the coming of age of a teenage girl who challenges her family's values)? And will the success of *Dirty Dancing* guarantee more of the same? Clearly, Hollywood's "inspiration" has always operated according to the principal of proven success, and girls, unfortunately, are still a risky business. Until little girls prove the box office equal of all the little boys we have seen so far, Hollywood will, undoubtedly, continue to support the idea that sugar and spice and everything nice cannot hold a candle to snakes and snails and puppy dog's tails.

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