

Thirteen: What's Real About It?

By Aaron Kerner

Thirteen is a story of a young girl, Tracy (also known as Trace, played by Evan Rachel Wood), who, in her desire to be accepted, goes to great lengths to impress the “hottest girl in school,” Evie (Nikki Reed). Tracy’s story is in fact based on Reed’s experiences. She assisted the director, Catherine Hardwicke, in writing the script, giving the dialogue its ‘raw’ and ‘unadulterated’ character. The script, Reed’s presence on screen and the composition of the film itself are meant to verify the film’s overall authenticity, to make it ‘real.’

Tracy’s mother, Mel (played by Holly Hunter), is doing her best to raise Tracy and her brother (both teenagers), at least *appear* to be self-sufficient, and meet her own personal needs. Although their home is set in a seemingly comfortable suburban area of Los Angeles, it is clear that the family is just barely scraping by. To make a little extra money – over and above the alimony Mel receives from her former husband – she works as a hair-dresser, seeing clients in her home. To begin with Tracy seems like an innocent and sweet girl. We get a hint that she is beginning to change when she reads one of her poems to her mother to which Mel response, “That’s deep.” Sweet and innocent girls, however, don’t write ‘deep’ poetry, and we are given the first hint that something is not quite right.

During the opening sequence of the film the camera scurries about, darting in and out of rooms. The pace and the hand-held camera are supposed to match the frantic atmosphere of a single-parent home. The “real-world” dialogue and the camerawork is nothing short of a barrage, there is no doubt about the director’s intention; Hardwicke’s less than subtle message is: “This is real.” But regardless of how forcefully Hardwicke suppresses it, the spectator is still compelled to ask: “What’s real about it?”

On the whole, and in very general terms, not aesthetic ones though, there is little doubt that the film is ‘realistic.’ But what makes it any different from Nicholas Ray’s classic *Rebel without a Cause* (1955)? This too is a story of misguided youth who just wanted to be a part of something, feel that they have some sense of agency. Like *Thirteen*, Ray’s film is set in white suburbia, focusing on a family that is less than ideal, but, and despite its inadequacies, coping the best it can. Is *Rebel* any less ‘real’ than *Thirteen*?

A more contemporary comparison, Larry Clark’s *Kids* (1995), comes closest to *Thirteen* in terms of style and content. Clark’s film ultimately is more successful though, not only because it doesn’t emphasize cliché cinematography, but also because *Kids* presents the *consequences* of alcohol, drugs and risky sexual behavior, including exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. In *Thirteen*, aside from the emotional drama, consequences are conspicuously absent.

Despite this distinct difference *Kids* is the perfect complement to *Thirteen*, because in the former adolescent boys are the primary subject. In *Thirteen* it is adolescent girls’ experiences that are on display. And this probably forces me to review my initial inquiry; it’s not necessarily a matter of being ‘realistic’ or not, but rather what’s *new* about it? What’s supposedly new about *Thirteen* is that it showcases white suburbia as the epicenter of this seemingly ‘new’ crisis: female sexuality. The most sensational novelty is that the primary focus in *Thirteen* is adolescent female sexuality. Tracy’s

rebellion manifests in her sexual expressions, and as the film progresses she becomes increasingly more assertive sexually.

Rebel, on the other hand, skirts female sexuality in the opening sequence where we meet the three primary characters: Jim Stark (James Dean), Judy (Natalie Wood) and John Crawford (aka Plato played by Sal Mineo). Whereas Jim is in police custody for public drunkenness, and Plato has killed some puppies, Judy, on the other hand, is accused of being a streetwalker, or at least *looking* like one. Her father refers to her as a 'dirty tramp,' and the juvenile police investigator asks if she was looking for any 'company' prior to being picked-up by the police. Although Judy's story is somewhat on the periphery, her rebellion, like Tracy's, is also a matter of asserting *her* sexuality.

Kids gives considerable attention to adolescent female sexuality, but its narrative focuses on young male promiscuity, often in the form of date rape. What attracted the critical attention to *Thirteen*? Is it that this is the first time such stories have been addressed, or is it a 'genuinely new' phenomenon? I would suggest there is no radical change in the experience of adolescent girls, it is just the first time such experiences have been explicitly screened. I know that what takes place in *Thirteen* is 'realistic'; many of us have anecdotal evidence to support this, and no doubt have seen the grave consequences of risky adolescent behavior. And did any of us *completely* bypass the issues confronting Tracy? Didn't all of us desperately want to fit in, and didn't we do some stupid things in that endeavor? The issue of 'realism' in *Thirteen* is not really the point.

What's 'new,' and I am even skeptical of this, is that *Thirteen* is about a beautiful blond-haired girl from suburbia; she is by American standards the quintessence of "normal." Situating Trace as 'normal,' and by extension all that is 'good' and 'wholesome,' then the world that Trace comes in contact with, and ultimately contaminated by, is 'abnormal,' 'bad,' and 'unwholesome.' The preponderance of characters cast to play this unsavory crew are African Americans, truly a dubious arrangement. So what's 'real' or 'new' here? Is it that the symbol of delinquency in American media is the African American male? Is this some sort of confirmation, black men and their sexual prowess are seducing 'our' white women? What century is it?

On the other hand, and this is just as questionable, the African American males are portrayed as props in the narrative. They are not active characters; we rarely see them speak. Nor do they ever determine the direction of the plot. They are there to satisfy the desires of the female characters; they are pawns to be used by Tracy and Evie in their game of popularity. It's not so much that the young men of color are seducing Trace (or Evie), but the other way around. Tracy's rebellion is achieved in part *through* the African American male characters. Some might point to the fact, right or wrong, that there is a certain cachet attached to the African American male in our culture, that he represents the desirable 'bad boy,' and this might be in tune with the so-called 'realistic' nature of the film. Considered altogether however, the racial politics of the film are duplicitous, propped up by a compilation of various racial stereotypes. If we go back to review the 'wholesome' Tracy, and who her friends are the racial schematic becomes all that more dubious. At least one of her 'wholesome' friends was a young Asian girl. The Asian girl often symbolizes in American culture obedience, mild-mannered respectfulness and studiousness. Trace's transformation is marked not just in her behavior and attitude, but the complexion of her friends.

Ultimately *Thirteen* is a conservative film that reinforces many existing racial stereotypes and reaffirms the conservative platform of 'family values.' Tracy rapidly spins out of control, so the film suggests, because there is no strong paternal authority. While Tracy's mother is not 'out-rightly' blamed for Tracy's descent into self-destructive habits and moral decay, the film does nevertheless leave the spectator with the distinct impression that a single mother is incapable of raising children. Although the film might well be 'realistic' concerning its presentation of single-parent households, it doesn't conceal our culture's disdain for single mothers; even in the form of the film, the 'resolution' hardly seems like a resolution at all. No paternal figure has stepped in to 'lay-down the law,' and it is unclear if any will. The film, in the end then, reaffirms the beliefs held by conservative factions that, minorities, lower-income households, and the absence of a responsible father are the cause of moral disintegration and Tracy is a caveat, that these degenerative forces threaten to swallow up even the 'purest' of our culture: blond-hair sweet innocent girls.

Thirteen might have staying-power and this is the key to what *really* makes the film 'new' and 'real.' The film is sexy. Here are beautiful young bodies set in erotic environments. And let's not be coy, but when Evie and Trace mount their respective dates, it's not a far cry from the titillating foreplay found in pornographic films. The sexual advances made by these adolescent girls is fearless, because they are either unaware of the possible consequences of their actions, or they don't care and are will do anything to be accepted. What makes this film 'real' is *our* own sensual satisfaction, and this is why *Thirteen* will probably have a fairly long run. When we witness Trace and Evie passionately kiss, or when we see Trace, hair-up with wisps hanging to the side of her face walking the streets of Los Angeles with a supermodel-pout, we don't necessarily see a confused thirteen year-old kid, but a sexual object. Although there might be no apparent consequences for Trace (or Evie), for us we are faced with our own voyeuristic 'guilty pleasure.'

American culture expects that young (white) girls 'behave' themselves and remain innocent, and at the same time our culture celebrates young female sexuality. Innocent girls are supposedly boring, and as a consequence they are undesirable. Happiness, the desire to be wanted or liked, to be beautiful, is inextricably linked to sexuality, and sexual expression. The celebration of sexually charged imagery, and the consumerism associated with it, sends a clear message: sexiness is good, modesty is not. This is the paradox of American culture; *Thirteen* perhaps forces us to confront our own inconsistency, our revulsion *and* fascination with adolescent female sexuality. The nuance of the film, which doesn't allow for clear-cut answers, isn't actually in the film itself, but rather how the audience receives the film. The audience, lured into a narrative that eroticizes *thirteen-year-old girls*, must negotiate the arousal of conflicting emotions. There is little difference between the sassy and sexy Tracy that seduces adolescent boys, and the fetishistic glossy images of 'tarted-up' girls on the pages of *Teen Glamour*. And such expressions of sexuality do not correspond with our expectations of what a 'proper' girl should be. I am not suggesting that it has to be one way or another, but rather, that our culture wants it both ways. 'We want our cake, and eat it too.' It seems that our culture wants adolescent girls to be at once 'proper,' and at the same time sexually charged. At least this is the message that is being sent, and it is *Thirteen* that helps us to see not so much adolescent confusion, but adult confusion. Perhaps what makes *Thirteen*

both 'real' and 'new' is that it asks *us* to examine our own values in the face of sexualized youth who will do anything – beg, cheat and steal – to be the “hottest girl in school.”

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