

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON THIRTEEN A FILM BY CATHERINE HARDWICKE, CO-WRITTEN WITH NIKKI REED

Two Perspectives on *Thirteen*

Reflections on Race in *Thirteen*

Jeffrey M. Hornstein

Most critical commentary on the recent film *Thirteen* has focused on the 'shocking realism' of the film, the excellent performances of its cast, or on its failure to tell a compelling story. These lines of criticism are, in my view, legitimate. It is a reasonably disturbing film about the liminal moment between girlhood and womanhood and the contingency of it all.

The acting was about as good as American film gets. And it is also a film with scant character development: We are given nothing more than circumstantial evidence to explain how and why main characters Tracy and Evie got to be the way they are, and few clues to make sense of Tracy's rapid descent from normal pre-pubescence to drug-addled floozy under Evie's influence. We are supposed to take Evie's coolness and desirability, and her incredible self-centeredness that leads her to betray Tracy, for granted.

A reviewer in a Washington, DC magazine nicely summed up most of the criticism: "you can't complain too much about a movie that tries to rise above the norm, that strives to tell a story we've heard and seen countless times before, but this time with frankness and honesty." Well, I want to complain about this film, precisely because everyone seems to be letting it off the hook and ignoring the racial undertones to the story it tells. *Thirteen* is, perhaps inadvertently, rife with racist stereotypes.

Here's the story as I saw it: Tracy, a seemingly well-adjusted, white girl with a hard-working if flaky, financially struggling, ex-drinker single mom and decent enough guy for a brother suddenly ditches her studious model immigrant (South and East Asian) friends to pursue a life of sex and drugs under the influence of Evie, a manipulative and self-absorbed Latina. Evie draws Tracy into her world of cool older boys, nearly all of whom are African American. Amazingly, not one of these older males of color is possessed of any sort of moral compass. They are represented as utterly amoral, freely trafficking in

Thirteen: A view into the complex, inner life of an adolescent girl

Trey Teufel and Emily Greytak

"[*Thirteen*] made me recall last year when I was in 8th grade, blown away by the sugar melting off my previously pseudo content life. It's so refreshing that *Thirteen* accurately portrayed youth today, whether positive or negative. . . A lot of people probably think what the girls did in the movie was appalling but to me it was totally normal for kids to do." ([http:// forum.foxsearchlight.com](http://forum.foxsearchlight.com), 2003)

Few adults who grew up in American society can claim to have made it through adolescence unscathed. As teenagers become adults, they have the task of adapting to a changing body, added responsibilities and pressures in school, parents and the mysteries of sexuality. The landmark age of thirteen takes kids from the depths of childhood into puberty without warning. Young adults in their teens have difficult times through this maturation process, and the subject of Catherine Hardwicke's excellent film *Thirteen* (2003) is Tracy, a girl about to turn into a very different woman.

Melanie (Holly Hunter) and her two children Tracy (Evan Rachel Wood) and Mason (Brady Corbet) are a family living in Los Angeles while struggling to survive on the income of a single mother. Tracy comes to the forefront as a complex young woman of thirteen, enduring the pain she feels about her parents' divorce, the absence of a father figure, her mother's recovery from substance abuse and her inability to impress the in-crowd. At the beginning of the film, Tracy is more than a cookie-cutter teenager. While adhering to adult expectations she does her homework and plays with childhood friends, but her inner turmoil is evident as she diverges from these standards by turning to self-injury as a coping mechanism.

Soon Tracy befriends Evie (Nikki Reed), a free-spirit of sorts already involved in a life of petty crime, drinking, drugs and sex. Although Evie acts as the catalyst for Tracy's involvement in such activities, the film does not fall into the trap of painting Tracy as a "good-girl-gone-bad" with Evie serving as the evil temptress. Tracy had her own demons before meeting Evie. Yet her relationship with Evie provides her with new ways to express them.

Just how easy would it be for a thirteen-year-old to get caught up

drugs and sex with middle-school aged girls. I suppose this gives the audience the doubly transgressive thrill of watching 13 year old girls having interracial sex. Yet I was disturbed by the fact that none of the film's black males ever questions whether it's OK to commit statutory rape with 13 year old girls, to provide them with illicit drugs and alcohol, or to swap them like baseball cards.

Contrast this with the girls' single encounter with an older white guy. Luke, the lifeguard, rebuffs Evie's and Tracy's heavy handed attempt to seduce him, throwing the girls out of his house and calling them "jailbait." Somehow only this white male character has the moral fortitude to resist the wiles of these 13 year old nymphomaniacs.

Granted, the film's script was penned by a 15 year old girl and as such ought to be cut some slack. Other reviewers have noted that in the end, it's a bit of a reactionary film because it never seems to allow that it can be healthy (if not inevitable in modern consumer society) for teens to rebel against their parents' values before they've fully formulated their own - interesting, since the film was written by a teenager who hasn't yet had the time to recast her youthful indiscretions as mistakes. Yet adult directors make choices about how to represent the stories they bring to the screen, and thus one has to ask director Catherine Hardwicke why she did not cast at least one or two white guys in the 'bad guy' roles, or vice versa?

in a life filled with drugs, sex and thrills? It is not entirely due to peer pressure per se. Tracy's new found life provides her with something she was missing, something she was searching for. The film realistically portrays the complicated mix between the release and the rush she gets from these experiences and behaviors; a freedom and a power that she had not felt before. Prior to her involvement with Evie, Tracy dealt with her internal conflicts through her writing and self-injury. Tracy is clearly not alone in her use of self-mutilation as a coping mechanism; numerous adolescent girls cut themselves to deal with overwhelming feelings (Miller, 1994; Levenkron, 1998). It would be easy to explain her behavior as a "call for help" but the film prohibits the viewer from falling into that clichéd interpretation. Tracy takes great pains to hide her cutting, while at the same time trying to share her poetry with her mother. Mel is moved by the poem, but also too harried to devote the attention her daughters' needs expressed in the poem itself. Tracy attempts to hide her stealing, drug use, and piercing from her mother. These behaviors are not a mere cry for help. Instead they demonstrate an attempt to express her pain by acting out instead of through internalization. One could even argue that Tracy's antics are preferable to her silent suffering, alleviated only through her episodes of cutting.

Working as a hairdresser to support her two children, Tracy's mother Melanie is there for her daughter, but only to a limited degree. Again, the film doesn't fall into stereotypes regarding their relationship. Mel treats her daughter as more of a friend than a child in the beginning of the film. In actuality Tracy acts more like a caretaker than her mother, chastising Mel for giving complimentary haircuts and allowing friends to stay in their home free from any obligations. Once Tracy begins spending more time with Evie, Melanie continues her role as a friend to both the girls. Although it quickly becomes clear that she is not completely comfortable in this position, Mel still grants Tracy more freedom than she's comfortable giving (i.e., buying new clothes, allowing Evie to stay over often). Once Tracy's troubles continue to mount, Mel tries without success to exert the authority she never employed in the past. Mel is far from a perfect mother. She's no June Cleaver but she's not Joan Crawford either. She works hard to raise her family. She's successful in some areas of parenting just as she fails in others.

The significance in *Thirteen* is that it provides a glimpse into the world of a seemingly "normal" girl struggling with a need for belonging and an outlet for her pain. The film provides adults with the opportunity to understand the motivation behind adolescent "experimentation."

The value of this film is in the way it makes Tracy's journey and behaviors understandable. Educators, parents, and all those interested the welfare of youth can often be found shaking their heads, saying "I don't understand, why do kids do that . . ." This film makes Tracy's experience palpable, believable, and understandable to such well meaning adults. *Thirteen* clearly struck a chord in these viewers as evidenced by the numerous comments and questions it provoked in mothers (detailed in the message board section of the film's official website, <http://forum.foxsearchlight.com>, 2003).

By illustrating the very real benefits Tracy's choices provide her at first, the film *Thirteen* will help adults avoid the "just say no"

platitudes and provide insight into the complicated experiences of being an adolescent girl in today's society.

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