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Lauren Karr

April 14, 2020

Liquid Liminality: Swimming Pools and the Contemporary American Teen Film

by

Lauren Karr

Dr. Timothy Holland

Adviser

Film and Media Studies

Dr. Timothy Holland

Adviser

Dr. Matthew Bernstein

Committee Member

Dr. Jose Soria

Committee Member

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An abstract of

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of Emory University in partial fulfillment

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Abstract

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“Liquid Liminality” examines the figure and space of the swimming pool in recent American teen films. By combining the cultural history of the swimming pool in the United States with close readings of its appearance in a series of films, I argue that the pool is a liminal space in which adolescent characters confront tensions without resolving them, particularly: their repressed and budding sexuality; the visibility of teen social hierarchies, cliques, and bodies through exhibitionism and voyeurism; and finally, the mystical lures and fatal threats of the pool itself. Oftentimes swimming pool sequences serve as a catalyst for future revelations and pivotal moments in teen films, which reflects its liquid duality: its ability to conceal and expose, its soothing comforts and potentially deadly nature (drowning and accidents), its domestic and class implications and its wild liberation. The cinematic pool functions as a womb, a place for possibility, while channeling a fantastical force to disrupt pre-existing frameworks that establish both individual identity and relationships between protagonists.

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks goes to my phenomenal committee chair, Dr. Timothy Holland, who spent many hours discussing the oddities surrounding the swimming pool with me and challenged me to push my thesis further than I imagined. In addition, my committee members Dr. Matthew Bernstein and Dr. Jose Soria were remarkably supportive and flexible throughout this project, for which I am appreciative. Of course, sufficient thanks must be awarded to Dr. Allison as she cultivated an uplifting community for the Film and Media Studies Honors students. Lastly, I want to thank my parents for their unwavering encouragement, my friends who got me through late night writing sessions with endless humor, and my sister who is always willing to watch a good (or bad) teen film with me.

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Introduction

‘Well, I would say that I’m just drifting. Here in the pool.’ -Benjamin Braddock, *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967)



Figure 1 Frame grab from *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967)

Coerced by middle-aged party guests, recent college graduate Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman) hesitantly waddles out of his parent’s kitchen, donning swim fins, and flops into the backyard. Wearing a full scuba wetsuit and mask, he gazes into the blue confines of the pool before making his descent. His perspective from within the scuba mask frames the subsequent shots, and the viewer becomes entrapped in the claustrophobic scuba suit as well. Benjamin goes on to escape the chaos and expectations of his parents’ party, as the sound of the pool’s calm lapping juxtaposes his breathing. When he eventually breaches the waterline, an older couple playfully grabs his mask and forces him under yet again. The pool consumes Benjamin. He drifts further below, assuming a place on the encompassing blue bottom. As the camera floats away and the scene concludes, an overwhelmed Benjamin stays submerged at the bottom of the pool’s “deep end” [Figure 1].

The Graduate (Mike Nichols, 1967) showcases many of the key traits that recur throughout cinematic depictions of young adults and teens within the mise-en-scene of the swimming pool. Throughout the diegesis, the Braddock’s swimming pool is utilized as a space to

show Benjamin's detached apathy towards his future. He often assumes a place relative to the pool that is neither completely within it, nor completely removed from it. Rather, viewers encounter him drifting on a raft, hovering in the liminal realm of the "in-between." This reflects the current location or place of his "life," which is at a critical junction, teetering on the fuzzy line separating adult from adolescent. Occasionally, as mentioned above, Benjamin abandons this liminal space and dives to the bottom of the pool, where he seeks escape from adults, their expectations, and constant questions about his future. For film scholar Sheri Biesen, the pool's depths reflect Benjamin's exploration of himself during this transitional moment of his life: "the gorgeous turquoise hue of the swimming pool is a stunning symbol of protagonist Benjamin Braddock's emotional inner life in *The Graduate* and his profound quest to understand his sexual identity."¹ Despite its tiled borders, this largely domestic space also disrupts its limits since it becomes a way for characters such as Benjamin to retreat from the world, a place where they can test the depths of the unknown (with proper diving attire).

While *The Graduate* utilizes the pool as a means for plot extension and contemplation, the appearance of swimming pools in film dates back much further. Lurking inconspicuously amidst the diegesis, swimming pool sequences are notably found in films such as *Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947) and *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950). Their presence in these films has garnered critical attention due to each director's revolutionary water aesthetics. For instance, in the horror film *Cat People*, the heroine treads in the open area of the pool amidst shots of the water's ominous shadows dancing on a background wall. Orchestrated by director Jacques Tourneur, this quickly cut sequence harnesses water's fluidity to generate an eerie

¹ Sheri Biesen, "Cinema Comedy and the Swimming Pool: Gender, Class, Coming of Age and Sexual Identity from *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) to *Legally Blonde* (2001)," in *The Cinema of the Swimming Pool*, ed. Pam Hirsch and Christopher Brown (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2014), 42.

atmosphere and highlight its threats that will be discussed later on. Film scholar Alex Naylor describes how Tourneur appropriates the setting of the swimming pool: “The basement swimming pool is a space used to generate effects of claustrophobia, suspense, and, most powerfully, a lurking and amorphous sense of the uncanny.”² Recognition of Tourneur’s ingenuity with photographing this space persists to this day. In his weekly film review article, critic Mike Clark asserts that “the centerpiece of 1942’s *Cat People* has been regarded as the horror genre’s gold standard of swimming-pool creepiness” while discussing *Let the Right One In* (Tomas Alfredson, 2008).³



Figure 2. Frame Grab from *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950)

The swimming pool also represents a challenge to filmmakers who desire to tackle its filming through the development of new technique and aquatic aesthetics. For instance, the legendary opening sequence of *Sunset Boulevard* features its slain protagonist Joe Gillis (William Holden) floating in the pool [Figure 2]. The shot’s dynamic perspective of his face-

²Alex Naylor, “The Anatomy of Atavision: American Urban Modernity, Gothic Trauma, and Haunted Spaces in *Cat People* (1942),” in *The Cinema of the Swimming Pool*, ed. Pam Hirsch and Christopher Brown (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2014), 53.

³Mike Clark, “This Weeks Platinum Picks,” *USA Today*, accessed December 14, 2019, <https://login.proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=J0E009093335609&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

down body arises from the bottom of the pool, which includes police officers examining the drifting corpse from the water's edge as if it were levitating. Film scholar Franziska Heller unpacks the imagery of this opening scene: "Combined with the outstretched posture, the corpse literally embodies the impression of being suspended in between worlds, detached from gravity."⁴ Achieving the floating corpse's transcendent qualities was no easy feat. Director Billy Wilder disclosed that this scene took immense planning and was finally executed by placing a large mirror in the bottom of the pool after numerous failures with waterproof boxes to house the camera.⁵ Here, the swimming pool signals an untamable space in spite of its domestic setting, as well as, following Heller, a liminal realm of suspension "in between worlds, detached from gravity." Its eccentricity demands distorted perspectives and novel approaches. Both films showcase a sincere fascination on the part of the filmmaker with incorporating the swimming pool into the visual design and narrative of their respective films. These aquatic areas drive plotlines while contributing to the complexities of diegetic symbolism.

Another key example is *The Swimmer* (Frank Perry, 1968), which depicts a deteriorating vision of America through its protagonist Ned's (Burt Lancaster) quest to traverse a route of backyard swimming pools. Ultimately, Ned's journey leads only to his physical and mental demise that reflects the United States at the end of the 1960s. With each swimming pool he encounters, Ned descends further into hallucinations that blur together the past and the present. Yet, each stop along the way also reveals Ned's life story to the audience, thus accurately divulging an account of his identity. At a certain point in the film, spectators are led to question

⁴ Franziska Heller, "Water and Film: Fluidity of Time and Space and Its Somatic Perception," *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Water* 5, no. 6 (2018): e1315, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1315>, 11.

⁵ "The Writer Speaks: Billy Wilder," YouTube video, 1:04:29, "Writers Guild Foundation," December 10, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOjDuaLB19c>.

whether Ned is truly swimming this route in a single afternoon, or if his enduring journey takes place over the course of a year. Many of the themes that arise in the film pertain to the degradation of upper-class, post-war American suburban culture, as each subsequent pool he enters becomes more dilapidated, just like his foggy memory and the idealistic dreams of the sixties. Audiences are left to question Ned's mental stability via the reflections of his psyche represented by the backyard pool.

Although this thesis examines the prevalence of highly stylized swimming pool scenes in more recent American teen films, many of my close readings recall these earlier, foundational examples. All of this leads one to ask: What is it about swimming pools that make them so aptly incorporated into films, especially teen films? Is it their uncanny ability to conjure or reflect new realms and discoveries? How do these sequences function within the diegesis and how do they impact the characters themselves?

I. The “Kiddie Pool”: Wading into the Fundamentals of the Swimming Pool

Swimming pool sequences demand and evoke complexity in both their technical production and narrative symbolism. Moreover, the swimming pool must be considered as an emblem of the American dream, which entails financial success, ostentatious private property, and the development of a cohesive familial unit. The backyard swimming pool is a luxury that successful American families can afford and take pride in owning. Rarely purchased with ambitious fitness goals in mind, their intended purpose speaks to private relaxation, the enjoyment of one's riches, and the realization of achieving the American dream, a form of conspicuous consumption. *The Wall Street Journal* writer June Fletcher explores these reasons

when discussing why families have opted for smaller pools in their backyard. She states, “They don’t really want to swim, but use pools for low-impact exercises or just to lounge...

Translation: Six inch deep areas where ‘swimmers’ of the future can plant a lounge chair and relax with their built in TVs, CD players, and floating remote controls.”⁶ Certainly, the article suggests that, for Americans, the swimming pool represents leisure and an escape from the hectic demands of life. In addition to Fletcher’s observation of this trend, these domestic oases resist physical homogenization since they take on many forms such as kidneys, rectangles, and ovals--the list goes on and on. What unites these designs is their goal to provide a calming, recreational water hub that is, ideally, sanitized, clear, safe, and orderly. Unlike natural bodies of water, distinct boundaries define the limits of pools. It is a space of clear edges and, in some cases, elaborated decorations made of tile and brick. Natural water settings, such as lakes, oceans, and rivers, do not feature these definitive borders with their strips of muddy sediment along their banks, not to mention the tide that overtakes and recedes around rocks and sand.⁷ In this way, it is conceptually challenging to determine the beginnings and ends of lake and shore. In contrast, the swimming pool’s human-built, synthetic qualities enable it to function as a manageable, cleaner version of a lake, pond, or other body of still water, devoid of creatures that lurk below the surface as well as water-borne diseases.

While accounting for these essential features of the swimming pool, “Liquid Liminality” reads these spaces as anything but pristine. Its cinematic depictions frequently illustrate its otherworldliness and crucial role as a domestic space of the in-between, as demonstrated by three

⁶ June Fletcher, “You Call That a Pool?,” *Wall Street Journal* (1923 - Current File); *New York, N.Y.*, May 31, 2002, sec. Weekend Journal.

⁷ While my thesis concerns the swimming pool, certain analysis in *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane* and *Jennifer’s Body* refers to pool scenes working alongside natural water sources like lakes, waterfalls and swimming holes to reveal underlying themes or tensions.

films mentioned earlier. Within the teen film genre these settings are perpetually framed through their liminality. It is important to note that “liminality” derives from the Latin noun *limen* meaning “threshold.”⁸ Its etymology suggests a suspended space or type of site lodged between known spaces or locations. Instead of a completed transition or an arrival at a destination, liminality implies the very act of traversing from one to another, a place where one encounters tensions and repressed thoughts, but does not resolve or necessarily act on them. A liminal space is one of possibility and potential, enabling the emergence of underlying tensions between groups of characters and the pool itself. In all of the films examined in my thesis, the swimming pool is understood through its liminal nature where reality and fantasy merge and magnify the shifting identities of the adolescent characters who encounter it. Special consideration must be taken to understand the implications of heading into this adolescent realm. Displaying adolescent identities on film has evolved over the years to capture cultural shifts and attitudes surrounding teenage sexuality and rebellion. The next section will delve into the teen film genre conventions, how swimming pools service these adolescent narratives, and the films “Liquid Liminality” will analyze.

II. Presentation of Thesis

Over the past few decades, film scholars have dissected the common archetypes present in teen films, ranging from typical character types to repeated plot lines. Yet, this scholarship neglects to acknowledge the recurring existence of a significant filmic space within many of these films, the swimming pool. Prior to unpacking the “Liquid Liminality” thesis, establishing

⁸ “Definition of LIMINAL,” accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liminal>.

the proper foundation for teen film conventions is crucial. Within his 2012 book entitled *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen*, film scholar Timothy Shary chronicles the evolution of the teen film from the birth of cinema up until the turn of the century. He acknowledges that the concept of the “teenager” particularly as a demographic did not exist until the 1950s. The 1960s marked the growing height of American International Pictures with their cheap, formulaic models for mass-producing sensationalized teen films. Typically, these films fell into newfound subgenres: the rock and roll film, teen beach movie, and teen horror flick that favored grotesque monsters. While the success of these teen film declined within the counterculture of the seventies, films generated for adolescents focused in on more daring topics like drugs, masculinity, and budding sexuality. Alongside MTV and the mall, the eighties witnessed a boom in the sex craze genre. These films had a tendency to equate rebellion to loss of virginity. But, attitudes about sexuality toward gender diverged, emphasizing that men could celebrate their newfound sexuality while women’s chastity would be rewarded in the end. In the late nineties, the teen sex comedy re-emerged, yet sought to depict more positive views of female sex like in *American Pie* (Paul Weitz & Chris Weitz, 1999).

Initially, the teen genre focused on characters ranging from twelve to twenty years old, essentially a genre omitting films based around collegiate settings. Major subgenres of the teen film include love/sex, horror, the school film, the delinquency film, and science fiction film.⁹ This thesis analyzes films that fall into the school, horror and love/sex subgenres. For Shary, teen horror films signify “the developing preadult population that threatens to express the repressed, in the form of sexuality, crime, hedonism, and basic resistance to social norms, [which] must be

⁹ Timothy Shary, “Course File for ‘Film Genres and the Image of Youth,’” *Journal of Film and Video* 55, no. 1 (2003): 39–57.

contained and controlled.”¹⁰ The teen horror scenes presented in “Liquid Liminality” utilize the swimming pool to showcase an untamable force, wrought with a lingering evil that can be capitalized on by its protagonists. When thinking about the love/sex genre, Shary highlights the dichotomy that exists between love and sex. He states, “youth sex films tend to focus on the arduous attainment of sex or the negative consequences of it; love films consistently portray youth trying to establish relationships that are nonetheless thwarted by outside forces or differences, such as parents, age, and class.”¹¹ This division between love and sex materializes in the first chapter as characters traverse the dicey space between friends and lovers. The swimming pool services this difficulty well by allowing the water to mirror its protagonist’s conflicted interior state. Lastly, analysis of the school film presents themes of social hierarchies as Shary affirms that “these films are rarely about education, but more about youth seeking identity in relation to their peers.”¹² The swimming pool functions to uphold this notion of identity-building by demonstrating that the pool can afford a semblance of visibility to its nerdy protagonists. In this way, teenage social constructs become more fluid, as the nerd gains confidence that they could not achieve at school. All in all, swimming pool sequences evoke an oscillation that is congruent with themes present in the teen film genre: understanding one’s sense of self, body and sexuality.

In these cinematic swimming pools, teen characters and viewers alike are suspended in a dimension where the fantastical blends with the plausible. These sequences often foreshadow pivotal moments in the narratives of teen films, setting up the revelation of plot twists. What was previously unseen becomes visible and displayed. Oftentimes swimming pool sequences serve as

¹⁰ Shary, “Course File for ‘Film Genres and the Image of Youth.’”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

a catalyst for future revelations, which reflects its liquid duality: its ability to conceal and expose, its soothing comforts and potentially deadly nature (drowning and accidents), its domestic and class implications and its wild liberation. More concretely, the swimming pool represents an unique social setting where teens are expected to flaunt their maturing bodies and confront their burgeoning sexuality. As seen in films such as *The Girl Next Door* (Luke Greenfield, 2004) and *Booksmart* (Olivia Wilde, 2019), the sanctioned and contained qualities of this human-built aquatic environment enables the discarding of oppressive societal morals for sexual experimentation. Explored in the historical overview below, the swimming pool has long functioned as both a symbol of social domestication that simultaneously tempts the liberation of inhibitions. The films examined in “Liquid Liminality” are *The Girl Next Door*, *Booksmart*, *Eighth Grade* (Bo Burnham, 2017), *Jennifer’s Body* (Karyn Kusama, 2009), and *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane* (Jonathan Levine, 2006). They were chosen for the ways in which they subvert expectations of the typical teen film, draw upon their swimming pool scenes to promote plot extension, and harbor underlying friction in their swimming pools.

This thesis interrogates the tensions conjured by the swimming in American teen films, which leads to a deeper contemplation of teenage identities in general. The first chapter investigates the liminality of the swimming pool as it pertains to teen sexuality and identity via analyses of scenes from *The Girl Next Door* and *Booksmart*. The chapter looks closely at how the pool awakens the sexual transformations and shifts of identity that take place later in the films for repressed adolescent characters. These characters experience the pool as a momentary suspension of their repression that allows them to encounter their libidinal urges.

The second chapter begins by taking up the films *Eighth Grade* and *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane* in order to showcase the liminal nature of the pool relative to questions visibility for

protagonists. My reading of these films attend to the display not only of teenage bodies, but also, more importantly, the rigid and fluid dynamics of teenage social hierarchies in which lowly outsiders are partitioned from the insiders at the top. The lure and threats of the pool's visibility introduced in *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane* leads to the final close-reading of the thesis on *Jennifer's Body*. This portion of the second chapter pays even more focus on the threats and lures of the swimming pool, both its sensual pleasures and menacing nature, for teen characters who enter into its domain. Taken together, these chapters demonstrate a series of dualities specific to the swimming pool that work to shake up an adolescent protagonist's identity, whether that entails achieving a newfound social transformation, sexual awakening, or reconsidering previous beliefs of invincibility. This aquatic space is defined by the tensions it produces and the encounters of characters with them. At once lure and threat, inclusion and exclusion, seen and unseen: liminality harnesses neither one opposition nor the other in black and white terms, but rather the power of both.

III. The History of the Swimming Pool

To further understand the murky waters that characterize the filmic swimming pool in recent teen films, one must unpack the provocative history of exclusion that constitutes the pool's recreational role in the United States. Many sources have noted the evolution of swimming pool architecture by tracking the popularity of distinctive shapes like that of the kidney-shaped pool in the 1950s and the various design trends decorating the pool's bottom. While my thesis will not go into depth about the structural aesthetics of the swimming pool, there is much more to discuss about them, namely the societal and cultural implications of

private swimming pool ownership, which have important resonances in the films I analyze. This history includes a significant shift in the United States from the prominence of public watering holes and baths to that of privately owned, domestic swimming pools. This historical transition speaks to contextual issues that extend far beyond the swimming preferences of Americans: in many ways, the history of the swimming pool in the United States reflects structural changes in society, particularly widening class distinctions that took hold throughout the twentieth century, as well as the emergence of suburbia as white enclaves.

Few books have chronicled the extensive history of the swimming pool. The most comprehensive text that traces the swimming pool's place in society is Jeff Wiltse's 2007 *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*, which explores 150 years of the swimming pool in the United States. Wiltse's historical overview supports an understanding of the shift from public to private as a consequence of broad societal issues, such as widening gulfs in income and leisure activities of Americans based on race and ethnicity.

The concept of a private, backyard oasis has not always been so commonplace in American culture; its origins can be sourced back to the latter half of the nineteenth century and the popularity of municipal pools at that time. Amidst the Second Industrial Revolution, cities were often plagued with poor sanitation, disease, and crime, and to confront these issues, public officials sought to instill middle class values within urban and largely immigrant communities. Promoting basic hygiene laid at the forefront of this movement, thus leading to the construction of public baths with the hope of morally sanitizing the lower-class. These efforts failed as municipal pools quickly transformed into recreational spaces for rough-housing: public nudity and chaos became the norm. Wiltse notes that public baths were male-dominated spaces where women could not partake in nudity and "immoral" behavior without sullyng their social

reputation.¹³ Public officials' plans for taming and cleansing the youth ultimately backfired because the public baths became spaces where working class families could send their children for play rather than bathing. In short, public officials assumed that these families would obey their doctrines, but they did not.

Early negative connotations of public baths as place for mischief receded as interest in physical fitness grew during the turn of the century. Magazines and newspapers lauded swimming as an exercise that could allow its readers to achieve physical perfection. For example, world-renown diver Annette Kellermann highlights why the everyday woman should take up swimming in a 1910 edition of *Ladies Home Journal*. She remarks, "The leg movement rounds out the hips and makes the ankles slender. It also strengthens the muscles of the stomach and membrane which surround and protect the vital organs."¹⁴ Influenced by this rhetoric, a handful of American cities opened up exclusive resorts that featured swimming pools for the upper class and private swimming clubs for middle class families who could afford it. Lower class citizens were obviously financially barred from enjoying these luxuries, so they flocked to local swimming holes and municipal pools that were replacing the former public baths as well as natural water spaces.¹⁵ These class divisions as it pertains to accessing swimming pools display its long standing association with exclusivity and luxury. The ability to take a vacation, as well as to afford to stay at a pricey resort or to join a private club, illustrate the structural classism of the United States.

¹³ Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), https://doi.org/10.5149/9780807888988_wiltse, 14.

¹⁴ Annette Kellermann, "WHY AND HOW GIRLS SHOULD SWIM: Don'ts for the Beginner," *Ladies' Home Journal; New York* (New York, United States, New York: Meredith Corporation, August 1910), 11.

¹⁵ Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*. 17.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, African Americans were unable to attend neighborhood pools in some areas due to racial segregation. Despite legal and social action, the inclusion of blacks in white pools was not realized for some time. Eventually, local NAACP chapters urged courts to dissolve social discrimination policies, which led to the construction of comparatively less impressive black-only swimming pools. In urban cities that did not actively enforce racial segregation, or offer exclusive swimming alternatives, the municipal pool remained divided along social class, yet markedly welcomed ethnic and racial diversity. Public pools allowed for mingling of both immigrant, white, and black populations as an aquatic melting pot. Unlike many other public spaces at the time, interactions between teen boys at the pool often involved physical contact and horseplay that crossed racial and ethnic lines. A consequence of this mixing of communities, in addition to the rough and hectic environment, was a hesitancy to participate on the part of many middle class families who viewed the public pools as too chaotic and immoral just like its attendees. Along these lines, scientific publications of the era observed that poor hygiene aided in the spread of communicable diseases, which supported views of the “impure” lower classes, as well as an implicit self-segregation provided the worries of families about acquiring diseases in such close confines.

During the 1920s, gender also contributed to the class, racial, and ethnic differences that marked public and private pools. Bodily exposure, gazing, and physical contact were woven into the fabric of both municipal swimming pool and public bath experiences, much to the dismay of religious leaders. In addition to fears and rumors of sexual mischief below the water’s surface, nervous public officials mandated gender segregation at pools. Here, one already notices how the pool stages a confrontation between the preservation of modesty and hygiene, as well as the

doctrines of the ruling social order with the sexual energies of adolescents bucking middle and upper class values.

Looking ahead to the 1930s and 1940s, the onset of the Depression led to significant New Deal efforts that impacted the role of public swimming pools. First, funding was available for the establishment of thousands of municipal swimming pools across the country. Additionally, some cities sought to redesign their pools as leisure resorts with man-made beaches, concession stands, and lounging areas. The variety of swimming pools appealed to a range of social classes and contributed to the vitalization of community spirit and patriotism. It is plausible that these community programs also enabled a semblance of social democratization to occur, one that had been hindered by previous policies. For instance, the gender divisions that had formerly segregated municipal pools vanished in the hopes that these spaces could become more inclusive and foster wholesome interactions between men and women.

To the dismay of some, these lofty ideals for the swimming pool as a place for nourishing familial gatherings were forgotten in practice as pools quickly became spaces for eroticism via the exhibitionist display of bodies and voyeurism. A key reason was the enormous shifts in bathing suit culture. Earlier trends that upheld modesty gave way to exhibitionism and the active presentation of one's body. For example, events like "bathing beauty contests" that occurred in the late 1930s encouraged young women to show off their figures at pools.¹⁶ Contestants exchanged their bygone prudent one-pieces for more provocative two-piece outfits that resembled lingerie of the period. It is important to note that this evolution of swimwear was not necessarily an outcome of progressive young women deciding what to wear on their own. Rather, collaborative efforts amongst advertising and film executives with swim suit

¹⁶ Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*. 89.

manufacturing companies pushed for more scantily clad designs, and these evolving standards influenced the ideas of American film-going and magazine-reading teenagers. Many of these designs aimed to celebrate the presentation of slim female physiques while also inverting the concept of public decency for women. The cumulative effect was that the American public gradually became less offended by the sight of certain female bodies, in particular those deemed desirable and attractive by advertising.¹⁷ The public swimming pool thus played a key part in revolutionizing the presentation of the female body, as well as the privileging of certain bodies over others in the absence of outdated notions of modesty. Skimpier bathing suits became the norm, if one did not have any bulk weight. The exposed flesh of women's bodies at the pool contributed to their role as visual objects for both desirous male onlookers and envious (or disgusted) females. A larger emphasis of the pool experience was placed on the dry outskirts surrounding it. Many celebrities who lived in Southern California embodied these lounging and exhibitionist activities through the construction of their own private swimming pools and the publicity that they received. In sum, the 1930s and 1940s reinvigorated the identity of the swimming pool, adding to it a contemporary air of sanctioned sensuality and hedonism.

As mentioned, the leisure of the swimming pool was recurrently only available to whites, thus the fight for racial integration persisted throughout the 1950s. Various social uprisings and legal suits concerning the effects of segregation also addressed the fight for mixed-race swimming pools, which could draw on the inherent visibility offered by the pool to showcase a meaningful win in the fight for national desegregation. Notable examples include protests initiated by the NAACP, the Young Progressives, and the American Youth for Democracy.¹⁸

¹⁷ Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*. 114.

¹⁸ Wiltse, 158.

Lawsuits deeming swimming pool segregation unconstitutional began to pop up in city after city. A *San Francisco Chronicle* article published in June of 1953 took up multiple lawsuits brought about by African American patrons happening across the country, stating “three negroes sued the city to win admission to Swope Park Pool and won a decision by the U.S. District Court in Kansas that the Negro pool was not substantially equal to that provided for whites.”¹⁹ Eventually, excluding people from swimming pools based on race was deemed unconstitutional prior to 1960, but this did not generate complete inclusion as implicit and structural racism persisted.

In many ways, these sweeping legal decisions produced white flight throughout many American communities during the 1960s.²⁰ The municipal swimming pool--a former emblem of community spirit and socialization-- experienced dwindling white crowds as a result of desegregation rulings and enforcement. With the post-war explosion of suburban life, middle class families often sought the refuge of exclusive spaces that could allow them to limit their contact with those of the same race and similar social class.²¹ Instead of attending mixed-race swimming pools, middle class whites with the financial means to do so, frequently opted to join private swimming clubs, where selective membership tacitly continued former exclusionary policies. In addition to an uptick in crime and gang violence in urban cities, these practices caused a significant decrease in municipal and public pool attendance while also reinforcing the further privatization of the swimming pool. Taken together, these shifts in culture represented a

¹⁹ Washington, “Decisions in Two Segregation Cases,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 14, 1953, 5.

²⁰ I want to acknowledge that my thesis focuses around middle-class white protagonists. Due to this, I do not want to chronicle the extensive history of de-segregating pools across America as it was not streamlined. Rather, the necessary takeaway from this section is my desire to reveal the inclusion and exclusion that the pool generates since it’s an intimate space. People seek to police and privatize this space.

²¹ Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*. 182.

transformation of the ideals of American collectivism, as many upwardly mobile families opted for a more selective, personal approach to social life. For many white families in the sixties, there was simply little to no interest in attending municipal pools any longer. Its previous allure had been replaced by perceived threats of integration. White neighborhoods recognized that by constructing private swimming clubs, citizens could mandate their own cultural norms, including exclusionary practices. While the middle and upper class benefited from an increase in private swimming pool culture, poor and urban communities were regularly dismissed, especially as state and local governments de-emphasized constructing new pools and maintaining older ones. Formerly thriving municipal pools transformed from spaces of youthful recreation to dilapidated structures. This social and institutional neglect left impoverished urban communities without the public luxuries they enjoyed during the 1920s and 1930s.

The rise of private swimming clubs in the United States in the 1960s was soon accompanied by an increase of in-ground, backyard swimming pools, showcasing that upper and middle class Americans were mimicking the Southern California homes they saw in magazines and at the movies. Possessing a private swimming pool represented social standing and economic prosperity, as well as changes in the dynamics of the upwardly mobile middle class. No longer were families expected to venture outside of the home to reap the benefits offered by swimming clubs, reflecting a broader decrease in participating in public life. Families could now sustain their preferred social relationships in their mini-backyard aquatic oases, signaling the swimming pool as a key symbol of a certain version of American domestic life in the suburbs.²² It would seem that, now, finally, the pool could be regulated by the moral and cultural codes of the family, who would replace the aforementioned “failures” of the officials overseeing the public

²² Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*. 199.

sphere. Families were no longer forced to splash around in shared chaotic and contaminated waters. Their pools could, at long last, cater to their codes of social behavior in an intimate, sanitized, and wholesome space belonging to none other than them. After all of the dangerous intermixing, increased eroticism, and structural failures of the public pool, the family takes it over and attempts to assume control over its waters.

The preceding historical overview illustrates that the changes in the perceptions and the symbolic meanings of the swimming pool has reflected broader shifts in American culture, particularly the issues concerning the public masses, as well as questions of wealth, privilege, race, and the exclusionary practices of public spaces. Initially, the construction of swimming pools responded to the concerns of public officials who judged the hygienic practices of urban workers. Pre-1900s municipal pools expressed a societal desire to sanitize the lower classes. In the early 1900s, municipal pools were divided according to social class, but eventually these distinctions faded as upper class citizens also sought out pools in response to advertising campaigns that lauded them as a way to obtain peak physical fitness. In some areas, upper class families took advantage of leisure clubs to maintain isolation from lower social classes. During the 1920s, municipal swimming pools constituted public spaces that signified the untamable, as well as eroticism, and the beginnings of a looking culture and an awareness of ideal body aesthetics. Young women were now encouraged to flaunt their physiques rather than conceal themselves in the interests of preserving their modesty. As the civil rights movement of the 1950s gained national traction and African Americans fought for desegregation, it became clear that many public swimming pools had come to represent crucial exclusionary spaces. Although judges upheld the Constitution and ruled in favor of eliminating the racial segregation of these spaces, these legal acts did not lead to swimming pools becoming beacons of racial harmony and

mixture. Instead, the 1950s marked the growing absence of white families at the formerly popular municipal swimming pools, in many ways, a direct result of Civil Rights era desegregation. Throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, one observes white middle class families increasingly withdrawing from the public life of urban cities and opting either to construct their own private swimming pools or join exclusive swimming clubs, both which implicitly maintained class and racial segregation. Overall, this historical background shows the public and the private encounters pertaining to swimming pools, its welcomed or dangerous mixtures, while also demonstrating the shifting role of these spaces, from the wildness of public display to the control of private property.

IV. An Overview of Scholarship

Recent scholarship extends further than historical and societal implications of swimming pools. Moreover, a handful of recent books and journal articles have sought to develop a filmic theory around the prevalence of water being photographed on-screen. Reviewing these established theories surrounding water has helped build a foundation for the subsequent case studies that take place at the pool.

Channeling similar themes of social mobility that were discussed in Wiltse's *Contested Waters*, the anthology *The Cinema Of The Swimming Pool*, edited by film scholars Christopher Brown and Pam Hirsch, collects essays that unpack the implications of modernity and social class through an exploration of a variety of swimming pool scenes. The book's introduction distinguishes the public swimming pools from private ones, noting that the communal swimming pool designates collectivism while the private swimming pool suggests elitism. Both kinds of pools are distinct from natural bodies of water and function as agents of clarity and artifice,

bolstering aesthetic value and reinforcing notions of domesticity. Additionally, the co-written introduction explores the notion of transformation in a figurative sense. It states that pools are “places in which sexual identity becomes fluid, like the water in which the protagonists swim; it is a space of bodily and sexual metamorphosis.”²³

Later on in the introduction, Brown and Hirsch contemplate the critique of wealth present in *The Swimmer*. In the film, pools signify civilization and, later, its deterioration within its wooded setting. As discussed, each swimming pool the protagonist encounters reveals the dilapidation of his mental and physical states. The swimming pool is no longer a site of home and comfort, but a prop for his delusions. Brown's contribution to the anthology suggests the privilege and elitism represented by swimming pools in *The Swimmer* given the film's depiction of them as tools to control nature, a power granted to the wealthy upper crust of American society. The second chapter in the anthology “Cinema Comedy and the Swimming Pool: Gender, Class, Coming of Age and Sexual Identity from *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) to *Legally Blonde* (2001)” by film scholar Sheri Biesen marvels at the newfound sexual awareness that the pool can bestow on its formidable protagonists. Additionally, Biesen considers the pool as a mirror that reflects the emotions of the adolescent. Her essay is critical to my first chapter since it deals with a sexually repressed and inexperienced teen in the film *The Girl Next Door*. Lastly, the ninth chapter of the anthology, entitled “Staging Embarrassment in *The Last Picture Show* (1971) and *Morven Callar* (2002),” by Rose Hepworth analyzes the embarrassment routinely faced by young, female characters at the water's edge. These observations support my second chapter's close reading of *Eighth Grade*.

²³ Christopher Brown and Pam Hirsch, *The Cinema Of The Swimming Pool* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014) 18.

One of the few other scholarships on swimming pools is *The Springboard in the Pool* by Thomas van Leeuwen. Far different from *Contested Waters*, van Leeuwen's book investigates the trope of the swimming pool while simultaneously tackling aspects of its history and architecture. The most relevant chapter for my thesis is "The Aquatic Ape and Hollywood: Love, Death, and the Swimming Pool" since it focuses on the duality of the pool through its life-giving ecstasy and tropes of death, as established in films like *Sunset Boulevard*. By considering gender dynamics of water, van Leeuwen notes that the setting of a tranquil pool evokes a consideration of death in this space as feminine, while masculine waters summon the liveliness of unruly seas. Van Leeuwen also points to the pool as a space that encourages the festering of carnal urges and pleasure through its association with nudity, exhibitionism, and voyeurism. This chapter thus contributes to my conceptualization of the pool through its pains and pleasures, as well as the deathly qualities of water, which informs my second chapter's attention to the swimming pool in teen films as both a lure and a threat.

The following chapter of van Leeuwen's *The Springboard in the Pool* "Perverse Hydrophobia: The Medusa Complex, or the Dark Side of the Pool" acknowledges the pool through its liminality and its simultaneous invisibility and visibility as it pertains to the act of submerging beneath the waterline, out of sight from "dry" perspectives. When one lays on a raft under the blistering sun, the lounge, like Hoffman's character mentioned earlier, is essentially balancing on the fine meniscus between life and death, seen and unseen, presenting their living body in an exhibitionist fashion for voyeuristic gazes.²⁴ The concept of life is understood to be "dry" and terrestrial, whereas death is "wet" and immersed in the water. Inflatable rafts allow the

²⁴ Thomas van Leeuwen, *The Springboard in the Pond* (The MIT Press, 1998), 247.

pool user to refrain from penetrating its surface, which retains their dry living status from the fatal threats of drowning.

An online journal article that traverses film theory and is relevant to my thesis is “Water and Film: Fluidity of Time and Space and its Somatic Perception” by Franziska Heller. This essay functions to connect the idea of the aesthetic presentation of fluidity of water (ex. waves in a pool) with that of the film viewing experience. It also introduces the idea that this fluidity evokes distorted mirror-like qualities, during which the image at hand morphs into something new and unfamiliar. Heller states, “Reflections on moving, liquid surfaces are often used to implement a discourse about differential modes of perceptions into the filmic image: the distinction of what is ‘real’ in the image, and what is a dream gets dissolved, the transition between reality and fantasy becomes literally fluid.”²⁵ Heller argues that the dissolution of reality when filmic images capture water allows for dream-like visions to take shape that are neither simply “real” nor “fantasy.” This observation makes Heller’s work incredibly applicable to my thesis as her descriptions capture the essence of liminality as a state of being in between, in addition to the coexistence, rather than the resolution, of tensions encountered both in *and* at the pool.

For Heller, the time and space of the swimming pool creates a blurring between realms: “the apparatus gives access to external body experiences as well as to illusionistic, fictional worlds.”²⁶ The apparatus refers to the strategic set up of the camera equipment in order to traverse underwater space, which often serves to merge the inner psychical and outer physical worlds of characters. Heller acknowledges this relationship between the inner-lives of humans

²⁵ Franziska Heller, “Water and Film: Fluidity of Time and Space and Its Somatic Perception,” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Water* 5, no. 6 (2018): e1315, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1315>, 6.

²⁶ Heller, 5.

and aquatic spaces they find themselves within, noting, “Water and its often uncontrollable movements have become a *medium* to characterize emotional processes within the human subject throughout the history of culture. Böhme explains that *modi operandi* of language, dreams, emotions, phantasies, and imaginations were often described in analogies to water (“stream of consciousness,” “floating anger,” “waves of emotions”).”²⁷ Additional existing commentary on the mirror-like qualities of water speak to the recognition and identification processes experienced by some characters, evoking Jacques Lacan’s well-known description of the “mirror stage,” in which infants do not identify with their real, fallible selves, but an ideal, imaginary reflection.²⁸

An additional essay that emphasizes water’s liminality and its role in guiding cinematic narratives is “Film in Depth: Water and Immersivity in the Contemporary Film Experience” by Adriano D’Aloia. In the essay, D’Aloia argues that the fluidity of water is utilized to exhibit moments of transition: “Water makes the screen a fluid and interconnecting threshold between two places, between here and there, between present and past, conscious and unconscious, waking and sleeping, life and death.”²⁹ Water is characterized by its generating of liminal spaces within the narrative, both between and within characters. The essay goes on to recognize that the fluidity of water allows for narrative temporal shifts in films like *A. I.* (Steven Spielberg, 2001), in which different times and spaces intersect through water as a sort of medium.³⁰ Water reflects not only temporal and spatial relations in the film for D’Aloia but also the delicate balance of

²⁷ Heller, 4.

²⁸ Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function,” in *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Finke, 1949.

²⁹ Adriano D’Aloia, “Film in Depth. Water and Immersivity in the Contemporary Film Experience,” *Acta Univ. Sapientiae*, no. 5 (2012): 20.

³⁰ D’Aloia, 100.

character relations. D'Aloia additionally discerns the pool as a prime setting for suspenseful climaxes, especially when characters face an enduring submersion.

Altogether, this body of scholarship supports the framework for my analysis in relation to presentation of water on film and the swimming pool trope in contemporary American teen film. With these key works in mind, "Liquid Liminality" attempts to bridge the research gap on the figure of swimming pools in American teen films while seeking to understand why they reoccur so frequently as well as the implications of their prevalence throughout cinema's history. On a grand scale, I hope that my thesis will instill in readers further admiration and respect for teen films as critically relevant. At first glance, the genre may seem to be one that is emblematic of static characters, shoddy, predictable plotlines, and low budget production. My thesis demonstrates that these films demand serious academic attention, both historical research and theory, which will further illuminate them beyond their conventional veneers. Hopefully, my work will contribute to scholars and critics unpacking the implications of swimming pools and their role in teen films and media, proving in the process that this genre is, in spite of appearances, rife with ingenuity, artistry, and even philosophy.

Chapter One:

Adolescent Identities on the Threshold, in and at the Pool

An intrinsic property of the swimming pool water, fluidity, heightens when presented via moving images. Toned bodies ebb in sync with the water's tides, giving viewers a kinesthetic feast. While the rhythmic nature of waves possess immense aesthetic appeal for audiences, the fluidity of water often generates a foreign space for characters to transverse, while also driving narratives forward through the anxieties and resolutions brought on by what occurs during swimming pool scenes. In some films, the pool's reflective quality serves to showcase a protagonist's inner psyche. All of this begs the question: what makes swimming pools such an uncertain, turbulent space for adolescent characters?

Returning to an early point from my historical survey, the swimming pool culture of the early 1900s gradually allowed scantily clad swimsuits to become the norm for teenage pool-goers. With this shift, leisure swimmers participated in a "looking culture" in which exhibitionism became more commonplace. To understand adolescent sexual turmoil from a scientific perspective, it's worth addressing the connection that human reproductive researchers Dr. Ananya Chowdhury, Dr. Abhishek Singh, and Dr. Sujita Kar have made between puberty and one's own sexual development: "Adolescence is the period during which an individual's thought perception, as well as response gets colored sexually. Adolescence is the age to explore and understand sexuality. Sexual curiosity in the adolescence led to exposure to pornography, indulgence in sexual activities."³¹ Of course, the act of perceiving your own body as a sexual entity demands a heightened level of self-awareness. This self-perception of adolescents is not

³¹ Sujita Kumar Kar, Ananya Choudhury, and Abhishek Pratap Singh, "Understanding Normal Development of Adolescent Sexuality: A Bumpy Ride," *Journal of Human Reproductive Sciences* 8, no. 2 (2015): 70–74, <https://doi.org/10.4103/0974-1208.158594>.

stable, rather it is constantly evolving as the teenager encounters new obstacles that refine their sense of self.

Two of the films that this chapter will discuss, *The Girl Next Door* and *Booksmart*, illustrate the phenomenon of fluctuating adolescent sexual identity via their captivating swimming pool sequences. Both teen comedies showcase hesitant protagonists following their respective romantic interests into the depths of this dizzying aquatic realm. In both films, the swimming pool becomes a prominent space in which these characters are forced to confront their emerging sexuality that had previously been held below the surface. Supporting this notion, film scholar Sheri Biesen describes how this filmic space operates in romantic comedies: “cinematic incarnations of the swimming pool...illustrate issues of gender, sexuality, and social class to reveal how its translucent aquatic expanse...enables an existential exploration of identity and personal rite of passage that moves from stifling sexual objectification to awareness, liberation and feminist critique.”³² The swimming pool pushes characters to seek out and even understand their repressed sexual desires. While *Booksmart* operates as a teen buddy film, the romantic themes that play out in the pool align with Biesen’s observations, giving her essay great relevance to my analysis.

At the same time, it is worth noting that many film scholars and critics may assert that scenes depicting these spaces are solely utilized to exploit young attractive characters, thereby giving audiences a visual treat. My thesis acknowledges these claims while demonstrating how the swimming pool generates a realm that is neither fantasy nor reality for its characters. Rather than simply scenes of sex and skin, swimming pools function to enable teenagers to recognize

³² Sheri Biesen, “Cinema Comedy and the Swimming Pool: Gender, Class, Coming of Age and Sexual Identity from *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) to *Legally Blonde* (2001),” in *The Cinema of the Swimming Pool*, ed. Pam Hirsch and Christopher Brown (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2014), 41.

their budding sexuality. Of course, these spaces are one of the only places where teenagers are allowed and encouraged to strip down to little, especially within the relatively private comforts of a backyard. Analyzing *The Girl Next Door* and *Booksmart* indicates that the swimming pool's attractive properties generate a liminal space for its characters in terms of their sexual development. I do not define liminality through an anthropological lens that holds it as an area of transition during a rite of passage.³³ Instead, this thesis perceives the pool as liminal because it routinely positions protagonists in a state of suspension and grants them an encounter with newfound possibilities. While the pool is not a space for the confirmation nor solidification of one's stable identity, its alluring yet safe blue waters constitute a place for one to confront their emerging sexuality and possibly escape the last elements of their lingering innocence. My definition of liminality accentuates the fragmentation and or oscillation of previously established social infrastructures, which encourages a state of blurring that merges fantasy and reality that may even take hold of viewers. The swimming pool's liminality does not mean that this site ushers the complete transition from youth to the arrival of adulthood, but provides the protagonist with a preview of their sexuality, an exposure that may either be seized upon or repressed later on in the plot.

I. Case Study: *The Girl Next Door*

The 2004 film *The Girl Next Door* followed its predecessors by utilizing a swimming pool sequence in order to breach the unexplored terrain of the protagonist's sexuality. Played by

³³ Sevasti-Melissa Nolas, "Exploring Young People's and Youth Workers' Experiences of Spaces for 'Youth Development': Creating Cultures of Participation," *Journal of Youth Studies* 17, no. 1 (February 2014): 26–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2013.793789>.

Emile Hirsch, protagonist Matthew Kidman embodies the typical adolescent overachiever. His high school career has been defined by gaining admission to a top university, earning perfect grades, and organizing charitable efforts. Yet, his world is remarkably dull as his strong focus on academics has left little room for any quintessential male rites of passage like partying or chasing girls. Matthew has refrained from engaging with his sexual desires until a beautiful, mysterious blonde named Danielle (Elisha Cuthbert) moves in next door, dismantling Matthew's safe and sanitized suburban world. After noticing Matthew peeking at her through her window, Danielle quickly sees his inability to enjoy the pleasures of youth and thus, goes on to coax him into joining her on spontaneous adventures. The two quickly develop a friendship as Matthew becomes increasingly smitten with Danielle's carefree grasp on life. Conflict emerges when it is revealed that Danielle's relocation centers around her desire to escape her previous job as a pornographic actress. Matthew cannot appropriately come to terms with her past and decides to take Danielle to a motel, treating her like an objectified porn star rather than the friend that she has become. Upset by Matthew's actions, Danielle returns to Las Vegas to resume her role in the adult film industry, feeling as if her only job prospects remain in sex work. Matthew soon realizes he loves Danielle in spite of her troubled past, so he flies to Las Vegas to convince her that they should start their relationship again with different terms. Luckily for him, Danielle agrees, and the two share a night of romance at Matthew's high school prom together. Their evening concludes with Danielle taking Matthew's virginity in the limo ride home.

This summary omits a considerable amount of the film's plot. At certain points, the film derails into a comedic quest to pay back a vengeful pornography director, leading Matthew and his nerdy friends to create a sexual education film. However, these subplots do not shed much

light on the dynamic between Danielle and Matthew. They fill up the bulk of the narrative in order to market the film to audiences as a raunchy teen comedy.

My focus seeks to understand how the swimming pool scene services the rest of their romantic relationship through the surfacing of Matthew's sexual identity. Early on in their friendship, Danielle brings Matthew to a picturesque backyard, featuring a swimming pool with steam rising from the water's surface. Anxiously following Danielle's lead, Matthew climbs the fence enclosing the private space. His overt discomfort with their trespassing dissipates when Danielle strips off her clothes. The camera takes on Matthew's point of view and zooms in on Danielle's exposed stomach and hips. Immediately after Danielle is left in her underwear, Matthew races to tear off his clothes. The next shot shows Danielle casually backstroking, while taking in Matthew's disrobing for her own personal enjoyment. Interestingly enough, viewers never see Danielle entirely breach the water's surface; her floating head appears in the middle of the pool after jumping in. In comparison, Matthew's descent into the pool is a hesitant one, marked by carefully gripping the pool ladder's handle. In this way, the pool reflects how each character embraces their respective sexual identification. Danielle, a pornstar, is fully immersed in the pool and holds no anxiety towards showcasing her body and placing her sexuality on full display; on the other hand, Matthew exhibits trepidation while entering this foreign space that forces him to confront his budding, repressed sexuality. The pool disrupts their platonic bond, rendering the stable unstable. It is a place for possibility that unleashes a fantastical force which dissolves the boundary keeping the two as *only* friends. In this particular case, there is no established filmic "underwater"; there are only two distinct spaces, in or out of the pool. The two characters straddle this environment, suggesting the changing nature of their relationship with high degree of suspense.

Danielle draws Matthew further into the water until the two meet at eye-level [Figure 3]. It's important to note that Matthew's gaze constantly shifts, and this disposition is exemplified via the subsequent point of view shots. He warily glances at the house's many windows, presumably terrified of soiling his perfect record of zero legal infractions. He is also tempted by the bombshell Danielle who floats in front of him. Audiences are thus granted access to Matthew's internal struggle: Should he opt for his predictable rule-following or venture into the lawless unknown with Danielle? This visible questioning displays that Matthew has entered into a liminal space. The pool's remarkable liberties slowly dismantle Matthew's pre-existing moral guidelines. One can discern that this scene will likely lead to Matthew abandoning his perfectionism that has withheld his sexual instincts and desires.



Figure 3. Frame Grab from The Girl Next Door (Luke Greenfield, 2004)

As Matthew wrestles with what is right to do, Danielle playfully circles around him, yet again his hesitancy is still palpable. Interestingly, this disorienting sequence recalls nature film and video that depict predators stalking and hunting their prey. With this in mind, both characters briefly take up primitive roles in the swimming spot. Previously in the film, little space is given

to capture Matthew's burgeoning sexuality or lack thereof, yet this scene functions as a sort of primal sexual awakening for him. This newness is confirmed by Danielle when she asks Matthew, "So, what's the craziest thing you've done lately?" Yet again, Matthew reveals his reluctance when he peers back at the windows of the house after being asked the question. Their private aquatic rendezvous has interrupted Matthew's type-A persona, and her appeal is too great to suppress. He glances back to Danielle and edges closer toward her. His darting eye-line signals Matthew's internal conflict of moral obedience versus sexual deviancy.

The two tread water in silence and drift closer towards one another, their eyes locked with a fervor. Before Matthew can cross the threshold into romantic terrain with Danielle, the previously vacant house illuminates with the arrival of its owners. Much to Matthew's dismay, his principal Mr. Salinger (Harris Laskawy) walks in, unaware of the delinquents in the pool. A distressed Matthew looks at Danielle, who lightheartedly giggles at the coincidence. She catches his glimpse and mutters, "Hey, just go with it." The scene cuts back to a confused Mr. Salinger who heads to the window and fails to identify the two. From his perspective, an empty cerulean pool takes up the frame. To juxtapose this stagnancy, in an act of youthful rebellion, the two sprint towards the fence, clutching their clothes. Interestingly, Matthew and Danielle are not seen leaving the pool's waters, similar to Danielle's unseen descent earlier in the scene. This suggests the pool's functioning as a momentary escape, a place that removes the two characters from the limitations of the real world into the potentials of fantasy and back again after Mr. Salinger's arrival.

Joined by Matthew's awkward friends, Danielle and Mathew's rebellious streak continues on into the last night as the group heads to crash popular classmate Hunter's house party. The troop of nerds is met by shameful glances by the partygoers, yet confusion arises

among the teens when they see Danielle comfortably resides within the clique of dorks. How could someone so beautiful be associating with these social rejects? This discrepancy leads to an attempt to restore the teenage social order. Hunter sends his friends to distract Danielle from Matthew and to pull her away from the geeks.

In an essay published in the *Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Melanie Ashe provides a strong and rare analysis of the teen party by drawing upon the American reboot of *Skins* (2011), reflecting the dearth of scholarship on the subject. Prominent teen genre scholars, like Timothy Shary, do note the trope of the teen party but regularly assign it to their readings of the “beach party” and the “rock and roll” films of the 1950s-60s.³⁴ Applying this past film scholarship to modern depictions of parties is challenging, so my research must draw on Ashe’s work, despite having published this essay during her undergraduate studies. Ashe describes the teen party as “an event of limitless potential, ecstatic possibility, and the rupture of social norms.”³⁵ Relating Ashe’s observation to the party scene in *The Girl Next Door*, one notices how Hunter’s eventual failure to separate Danielle and Matthew leads the protagonist to recognize that this social event can be his defining moment. In the midst of being kicked out of the party, Matthew pauses to allow for Danielle to come into his eyeline. Confidently shrugging off the football player at his side, he struts towards Danielle who is now occupied by Hunter. Via a close up tracking shot, the camera captures Matthew’s confident stride toward Danielle, building up a sense of anticipation for viewers. Then, a sleek cut to a medium-close shot captures the pivotal moment. Matthew boldly steps in between Danielle and Hunter and kisses her amidst the heartfelt ballad “This Year's Love” by David Gray. The camera revolves around the two’s

³⁴ Timothy Shary, *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen*, 1st ed. (New York, N.Y.: Wallflower Press, 2012), 18.

³⁵ Melanie Ashe, “Teen-Party-Machines: Representing and Consuming Teenage Rebellion in the ‘Skins Party’ Trailer,” *Reinvention: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research* 8, no. 1 (April 29, 2015): 1–1.

embrace, almost in an attempt to display this as a celestial, life-altering event. The previous pool scene builds sexual tension for this kiss, that's why it's so exquisite in its portrayal. The kiss solidifies Matthew and Danielle's romantic feelings for one another. Behind them, the party fades away and the kiss continues for about 35 seconds. This dramatic scene did not go unnoticed by viewers and critics at the time of its release. According to MTV writer Ben Cosgrove, the film received a nomination for Best Kiss at the 2005 MTV Movie Awards, but ultimately lost to the hit *The Notebook* (Nick Cassavetes 2004).³⁶

In *The Girl Next Door*, the transitional kiss scene at the party seems to take precedence over the earlier pool scene, so why examine the latter at all? The pool scene does not necessarily reset the status of the couple's relationship like the party does. Its presence does not constitute an area full of clarity where intentions are known and acted upon. Rather, the setting of the pool in the film disrupts the lines maintaining their non-romantic friendship, while opening up possibilities for this romance to take place in the future. In an essay entitled "Water and Film: Fluidity of Time and Space and its Somatic Perception," film scholar Franziska Heller examines the potential sexual nature at play in the swimming pool by heeding the prevalence of these aquatic scenes in racy music videos: "the aesthetical effect of the combination of moving images, liquid spaces, and corporal sensuality can especially be observed in current music videos where bodies in various stages of undress are shown floating underwater. The erotic movements of bodies immersed in liquid spaces often constitute the sensual climax of the synaesthetic experience of the video."³⁷ Certainly, Heller's image reflects the figure of the pool in *The Girl*

³⁶ Archive-Ben-Cosgrove, "Vicious Teens And Happy Drunk Lead 2005 MTV Movie Awards Nominees," MTV News, accessed February 2, 2020, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1501233/vicious-teens-and-happy-drunk-lead-2005-mtv-movie-awards-nominees/>.

³⁷ Franziska Heller, "Water and Film: Fluidity of Time and Space and Its Somatic Perception," *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Water* 5, no. 6 (2018): e1315, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1315>. 12.

Next Door and its role in building suspense and working towards a climax. The swimming pool, as a liminal space for the introduction of fantasy into the “real world,” conjures uncharted emotional territory for both Danielle and Matthew and pushes them towards a romantic conclusion. Years of Matthew’s sexual repression recede during his dip in the pool. The steamy circumstances of the pool positions both characters towards the climax of a kiss, yet the principal's return halts this build-up and extends the suspense, not to mention the relief of the climax. It is difficult not to compare the film’s back-and-forth, as well as long-awaited payoff, to an orgasm with the pool scene generating a semblance of foreplay. Thus, the pool scene is an integral component of the pleasure experienced by the audience when the couple finally kiss at the party. This kiss is a public display for partygoers and viewers alike, but its arrival was initially stimulated by the pool and its ability to disclose and reveal the couple’s interiority.

II. Case Study: *Booksmart*

Another film that features outcasts coming into their own via their experiences at the swimming pool is Olivia Wilde’s 2019 *Booksmart*. The film centers around high school seniors Molly (Beanie Feldstein) and Amy (Kaitlyn Dover), best friends who have opted for focusing on academics as opposed to partying like their classmates. Their hard work has paid off as the two hold acceptances to top colleges: Yale and Columbia. During the last day of school, Molly realizes that their scholastic efforts were worthless, as their uninhibited peers also earned admission to comparable colleges. The girls decide to savor the remains of their high school experience by embarking on a night of party hopping in hopes that Molly will act on her attraction to Co-Student Council President Nick (Mason Gooding) and Amy will finally make a

move on her sexually-ambiguous female crush Ryan (Victoria Ruesga). Molly's urgency to make up for lost time weighs on misfit Amy who has kept secret her plans to take a gap year in Botswana and defer her start date at Columbia. Similar to the 2007 film *Superbad* (Greg Mottola), the two fall into a series of comedic missteps that pave the way to finally arriving at the climatic graduation party. Each debacle unearths the fissures that exist in their co-dependent relationship, demonstrating the necessity of self-reliance that should occur with adulthood.

Booksmart showcases that the swimming pool's ethereal liminality can ultimately reward its protagonist with sensations of ecstasy and subsequent defeat. Unlike *The Girl Next Door*, *Booksmart* takes advantage of dynamic underwater shots that highlight the complexities of teenage sexuality. Molly and Amy's night commences with a slew of blunders that confirm their dorky, prudish disposition. The two escape a murder mystery party, accidentally consumed hallucinogenic drugs, and go to the library's archives to search for the party's address. Careless and desperate, they call on their teacher Ms. Fine (Jessica Williams) to drive them to the party. She obliges, but not before insisting that they trade in their nerdy but functional jumpsuits for more flashy party clothes. This makeover allows Amy and Molly to assimilate into the atmosphere of their peers, giving them the confidence to break former established social barriers. Upon their arrival, Molly spots her crush Nick and fantasizes an elaborate slow dance with him. Warmly greeted by stoners, Molly is roused from her daydream, and the two are offered drinks.

With the aid of liquid courage, Amy and Molly hype each other up as the two spot their crushes at the party. Amy heads toward Ryan. Their interaction is cringeworthy as Amy repeatedly affirms her lesbian status and subtly questions ditzy Ryan's ambiguous sexuality. Interrupted at a pivotal point in the conversation, Ryan grabs Amy by the shoulder, pulling her towards the karaoke room where the two watch a cathartic rendition of Alanis Morissette's "You

Oughta Know.” It’s important to recognize that this scene is edited in parallel with other characters engaging with their potential love interests. The karaoke room is crowded yet intimate, placing Amy and Ryan in close proximity. Briefly, Ryan rests her elbow on Amy’s lap and cozily leans against her. At a certain point, Amy is begrudgingly pulled up to the stage by Ryan and winds up serenading Ryan with the ending of “You Oughta Know, ” which breaks the awkward tension between the pair, giving Amy a new sense of confidence in her own skin.

After this liberating performance, Ryan takes Amy’s hand and guides her from the karaoke room back to the chaotic party around the pool. As the two venture into the backyard where partygoers boldly dance around the pool’s edge in the background, they are accompanied by the song “Slip Away” by Perfume Genius. The opening lyrics underscore a desire for liberation: “Don’t hold back, I want to break free/God is singing through your body/And I’m carried by the sound.”³⁸ The words reflect Amy’s effervescent hopefulness: it seems that, finally, her feelings for her longtime crush will culminate with the two kissing within the frenzied swimming pool. The scene cuts to Amy’s perspective as Ryan leads her to the pool and begins peeling off her shirt, showcasing her tattooed arms, much to Amy’s delight. Amy follows Ryan’s lead and shimmies out of her tight, navy dress. Giggling nervously, Amy adjusts her unkempt hair as Ryan leaps into the pool. A quick cut to an underwater shot shows Ryan’s submerging in a fetal position with her face obscured by bubbles. Oddly enough, in previous shots, the pool was congested with swimmers, yet only a single torso flashes across the frame during Ryan’s descent.

As the song’s bass notes become audible, the underwater scene cuts to Amy’s rapid pencil dive into the pool. At no point do viewers see Ryan nor Amy’s journey into the water from a perspective above the waterline; rather in both of these entrance shots the two teenagers

³⁸ Perfume Genius, *Slip Away*, 2017.

seem to materialize within the aquatic environment. This deliberate choice by Wilde suggests the absence of a concrete transition from land to water. Instead, there is a womb-like conjuring of bodies in liquid. This pool is fantastical and otherworldly, granting Amy the ability to pursue and seemingly realize her romantic interests without inhibition. Yet, this underwater threshold of the “in-between” is more dizzying than it is defining. This is a space where Amy loses herself, in the most liberating way possible. Amy turns her head and scours the blue bottom, acclimating to the new environment and searching for Ryan. An ominous light outlines the bare torsos and limbs of partygoers who swim around her. Their shadows are not distinctly projected onto the pool’s walls, which leaves viewers uncertain of the pool’s dimensions and depth. Intoxicated by the pool’s mystique, Amy plods through the water and marvels at the bodies surrounding her [Figure 4]. Throughout this sequence, Amy and these genderless bodies seem to be slowly drifting in the water. This pool is devoid of urgency. Why is time so slow underwater?



Figure 4 Frame grab from Booksmart (Olivia Wilde, 2019)

Unable to contain her excitement (and breath), Amy rises above water briefly. The shot tracks her ascent from fully to partially submerged. Her surfacing is met with the familiar sounds of the party: shrieking and cheering. Rejuvenated, Amy returns below the waterline. After a

quick cut, the scene strategically assumes Amy's point of view and the camera pans to a tattooed woman's legs wrapped around the body of a man. A series of reverse-shots showcase Amy's disillusionment in medium close-up. She studies the couple underwater as a topless swimmer drifts by and then surfaces for a clearer look. Once again, the camera tilts up, traversing from underwater space to above the waterline, to a shot of Amy looking; the reverse-shot reveals Nick and Ryan kissing and embracing. The hopeful music track fades to the sounds of lapping of water. Amy audibly sighs and descends again underwater for solace. Yet, the jarring reality cannot be remedied by the pool. The bodies that once seemed so friendly and welcoming are now clutter, obstacles for Amy to avoid. The camera again retains Amy's perspective, and a flurry of bubbles marks her ascension to the surface. Shown through a tracking overhead shot, Amy scrambles to rid herself from the events of the pool or its grasp. She climbs out of the water and pulls the party dress over her soaking figure. Heading inside, Amy finds Molly and pleads that they end their festivities and go home. This generates an emotionally tense argument between the two friends during which Amy confesses that she's withheld her gap year plans from Molly. The entire party witnesses their heated confrontation and Amy runs to the bathroom for solace.

Within this sequence, the pool begins as a place of wonder, possibility, and adventure for Amy. She momentarily abandons her conservative, hesitant demeanor just like she removes her clothes and opts to follow Ryan and swim in her underwear. Upon breaching the water, Amy's interiority is projected onto the pool. Initially, there is the thrill of exploration and liberation amid a mass of bodies and body parts. It's worth noting that Amy's odyssey feels detached from the overall diegesis. This filmic submersion is so pleasing to the viewer that we may forget why Amy lies beneath the surface in the first place. Applying aquatic scholarship to my analysis,

Heller notes the mysticism surrounding a cinematic immersion: “The space under water in its filmic presentation (movement, framing, montage, lighting) conveys the paradox of a search without actual progress in space or purpose. This atmosphere is built up to make the viewers feel the dissolution even more intensely.”³⁹ Placing Heller’s work alongside *Booksmart* suggests that Amy’s descent reflects an oscillation and suspension that show viewers her recess from pre-constructed norms.

All of this is bewildering to Amy given her sexual inexperience and insecurities. Earlier scenes depict Amy uncomfortably discussing topics such as sex and masturbation, yet, in the pool, her embrace of the sexuality around her is palatable. The pool distorts Amy’s “dry” reality: sex is no longer completely terrifying but intriguing, especially when guided by Ryan. Yet, Amy’s inability to seduce Ryan means that, for her, the mystery of sex still remains.

To afford Amy with the experience of losing herself, *Booksmart* creates two realms for Amy to traverse. The submerged, “wet” realm revitalizes Amy’s yearning for self-exploration, yet coddles her and keeps her safe from revelation. The above-water, “dry” reality is sobering and destructive, forcing Amy’s inhibitions and insecurities to return as she sees Ryan with Nick. This dichotomy suggests that the pool symbolizes a serene embryonic womb where inhibitions are temporarily set aside and characters are allowed to fantasize about their embrace of their sexual desires. The admission of Nick and Ryan’s attraction pushes Amy to escape to the “wet” underwater space for comfort in the aquatic womb. In the womb, all the dependent embryo’s needs are fulfilled. Just as a newborn is disrupted from this space via birth, it’s as if Amy breaches the water’s surface. Yet, pangs of insecurity draw Amy back to the “womb.” With a psychoanalytic lens, this metaphor highlights Sigmund Freud’s concept of the death drive: the

³⁹ Heller, “Water and Film”, 8.

innate desire to return to the quintessence of the womb that leads to a number of self-harming activities.⁴⁰ How does Amy's retreat to this liminal underwater realm depict destructive tendencies? Unlike the womb, the pool cannot provide Amy with a sufficient oxygen supply and nutrients. Staying underwater beyond one's physical limits can be fatal. The following chapter will unpack this duality of threat and lure evoked by the pool.

⁴⁰ Catherine Malabou, "Plasticity and Elasticity in Freud's 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle,'" *Parallax* 15, no. 2 (April 2009): 41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534640902793000>.

Chapter Two

Pool Parties and Death Dives: Seeing the Unseen at the Swimming Pool

Poolside mingling often grants teen characters the privilege to not only encounter their developing sexual identity, but also break with pre-existing social norms that define their social relationships. Returning to the public space of the swimming pool, the disruption to teenage social order is aided by the exhibitionism that frequently occurs there. In this space, swimmers and pool-goers engage in the spectacle of body presentation whether on a raft, on the side of the pool, or on the diving board. For many female protagonists, sexual liberation and body confidence is afforded to those with bodies that adhere to feminine beauty standards. This is especially true for female characters in films as their male onlookers and even viewers to attempt to escape their (castration) anxieties by deriving pleasure from looking at the female body as if it almost existed outside the narrative flow of the film. This of course refers to Laura Mulvey's definition of "fetishistic scopophilia," that she identified in Josef von Sternberg's films, namely those featuring the performances of his long time muse, Marlene Dietrich.⁴¹

In films such as *Wild Things* (John McNaughton, 1998) and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (Amy Heckerling, 1982),⁴² the swimming pool is used to feature highly erotic scenes involving female nudity. In a 1998 film critique, *New York Times* film critic Janet Maslin said that *Wild Things* is "predicated on two ideas -- that human nature is rife with perfidy and that it's important to get the cast into hot cars or bathing suits whenever possible."⁴³ At the same time,

⁴¹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 122.

⁴² Naomi Campbell and Denise Richards starred in the film.

⁴³ Janet Maslin, "Schoolgirls Make Alligators Look like Ingenuies," *New York Times* 147, no. 51102 (March 20, 1998): E9.

many adolescents experience the teenage years as a series of mortifying events, often a result from insecurity about one's physical appearance and changes. While these changes are normal and expected, swimming pools scenes rarely, if ever, glorify or sexualize these sorts of "unattractive" teen characters.

Discussing the pool's relation to the visibility and display of bodies recalls the earlier historical overview. The 1920s adoption of comparatively skimpy and sensual one-piece suits by the Hollywood film industry contributed the changes in broader swimming pool culture. Using the pool for swimming purposes gave way to poolside activities as attendees sought to lounge around the water, and show off one's suit and body. Due to these shifts in swimsuit fashion, swimming pools have long been associated with voyeurism and exhibitionism, much like Mulvey's observations of mainstream Hollywood cinema. Even local newspapers noted the prevalence of acts of "looking" amongst adolescents.⁴⁴ As municipal pools transitioned into exclusive leisure resorts, many patrons enjoyed the newfound activity of sunbathing by the pool's edge instead of swimming or diving. The pool was now less a site of physical activity than a space to "lay out" and flaunt one's skin under the sun. These aesthetic expectations resulted in widespread female anxiety over their body size and shape. Simply put, not all women could achieve the pressing body standards celebrated in the era's films and advertising campaigns. The attention and approval granted by the social display of the female body was dependent on the individual's body size. This meant that many women experienced humiliation and dejection when they did not meet certain cultural standards. The personal liberation symbolized by the new standards of bathing suit attire was consequently limited in the sense that women were not being

⁴⁴ Wiltse, 118.

recognized for their intellect nor their personality, rather they were idolized solely for their physique.

The historical phenomenon of poolside display combines visibility and invisibility, the seen and unseen. By opting to construct a backyard pool, a family not only exhibits their wealth and desire for leisure, but also a tendency to keep their aquatic activities private. The pool is, on one hand, alluring for a variety of reasons, including its symbolic relationship to social status, tranquility, wealth, physical benefits of exercise and being outdoors, as well as the eroticism that it puts into play within domestic spaces. On the other hand, the pool harbors a darker side, one that is dangerous and deadly due to well-documented accidents and drownings--particularly involving children--which explains its recurrence in horror films and thrillers. There is also the historical moral depravity associated with the public pool that privatization sought to cleanse. However, examining the role of the swimming pool in teen films makes it clear that this element endures despite all of the chlorine treatments and regularly scheduled cleaning services that strive to keep things orderly, balanced, and predictable. For each alluring, life-enhancing or -giving aspect the swimming pool evokes, there is a threat working in opposition.

This chapter acknowledges that the visibility of the pools reveals underlying social hierarchies and expectations, and, in horror films such as *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane*, astute protagonists can use the pool's visuality to lure fellow teens and the spectator into a false sense of security.

As stated in the introduction, swimming pools have generated a culture of inclusion and exclusion, favoring whites, elites, and those who meet ideal body standards. In addition, as noted by film scholar Rose Hepworth, teenagers face the harsh realities of the world when they enter such a vulnerable space: "the swimming pool is a setting rich in its potential to expose the inner self to the judgmental gaze of others, leading to numerous possibilities for embarrassing

incidents.”⁴⁵ Taking the vulnerability and exposure affiliated with the swimming pool into account, it is crucial to examine its relationship to social “outsiders.” The concept of an “outsider” is tricky to define, so perhaps the best way of doing so is to acknowledge what an outsider is not, namely a welcomed member of popular cliques rife with acne-free jocks and effortlessly cool and attractive girls. These teens embody a high level of social savvy, attractiveness, and frequently reflect wealth in the sense that they are able to keep up with clothing and technological trends. In essence, they are the royalty of high school, with everyone else at their mercy. In terms of the outsiders, those who tragically fall into this category may be considered the “geeks” or “nerds.” In his book *Generation Multiplex: The Image of American Youth in Cinema since 1980*, film historian Timothy Shay addresses how these high school rejects play a crucial role in the teen film as they can undergo vital transformations, in which their identity detaches from a focus on academics to gaining popularity and the respect of the social groups that previously banished them.⁴⁶ The “nerd” achieves a sort of liberation. John Hughes’s *The Breakfast Club* (1985) presents a classic example of an outsider earning acceptance into the ranks of high school society: during Saturday detention, social misfit Allison (Ally Sheedy) receives an impromptu makeover from high school royalty, Claire (Molly Ringwald), and, with the aid of mascara and a flowery headband, Allison transforms into a beautiful woman that even hunky jock Andrew (Emilio Estevez) desires. While Allison’s makeover was minimal, it requires the efforts of in-crowd Claire for it to become visible. Outsiders or nerds are typically characterized by lacking a sense of the social graces and values

⁴⁵ Rose Hepworth, “Staging Embarrassment in *The Last Picture Show* (1971) and *Morven Callar* (2002),” in *The Cinema of the Swimming Pool*, ed. Pam Hirsch and Christopher Brown (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2014), 136.

⁴⁶ Timothy Shay, *Generation Multiplex: The Image Of American Youth In Cinema Since 1980*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 99.

of the in-crowd, which keeps them excluded from the top. It's worth noting that the definition of "outsider" is conditional on the presence of "insiders" and whom they deem worthy enough to be a part of their group.

What do swimming pools have to do with the inclusion and exclusion of its protagonists? The answer resides in the liminal nature of the pool's visibility as well as the lures and threats that transpire around its edges. Returning to Melanie Ashe's analysis of the teenage party, it is an event that presents unique opportunities to its adolescent attendees. The social shackles that bind adolescents can be dispelled amidst a boozy atmosphere in exchange for wild pursuits:

As a screen event, the teenage party has always been a site for excess, transgression, deviance and experimentation. Anything can happen at a party. Your long-time flame can break your heart (*+1*, 2013); you might finally get the courage to say 'hi' to your crush (*Can't Hardly Wait*, 1998); you can partake in underage drinking (present in almost every teen film); jump off the roof of the pool house into the pool (*Almost Famous*, 2000); be invited to an orgy (*21 Jump Street*, 2012); get arrested (*Superbad*, 2007); or take drugs, to name only a few examples. The party is an event of limitless potential, ecstatic possibility, and the rupture of social norms.⁴⁷

Taking these party time activities a step further, the presence of the pool validates sexual liberation, as clothing is optional in this setting. The most significant attribute of Ashe's discussion of the teenage party is her comment on it being a place for "the rupture of social norms."⁴⁸ The rigidity of the social hierarchy existing within the cinderblock walls of high school dissipates when adolescents embark into the new context of a party, especially a pool party. One notices a certain fluidity of the formerly rigid social status that occurs due to the

⁴⁷ Melanie Ashe, "Teen-Party-Machines: Representing and Consuming Teenage Rebellion in the 'Skins Party' Trailer," *Reinvention: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research* 8, no. 1 (April 29, 2015): 1.

⁴⁸ Ashe, "Teen-Party-Machines", 1.

actions of “outsider” characters who are equipped with newfound confidence to act. As such, a type of encounter with social conversion occurs at a party that is not possible at school.

In order to interrogate the liminality of the pool’s visibility, as well as its enticing and dangerous elements, this chapter explores three films: *Eighth Grade*, *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane*, and *Jennifer’s Body*. All three revolve around the visibility of their respective protagonists via their bodies and social dynamics at pools. The first film to be discussed, *Eighth Grade*, resists the typical depiction of attractive females at the swimming pool and instead incorporates an unconventionally attractive protagonist into the social mix. In this sequence, the pool’s visibility affords its leading character the ability to be seen and confidently traverse the pool party despite her inability to do so in the hallways of middle school. The second film *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane* examines a deadly swimming pool sequence alongside a lake scene, in order to demonstrate how the film’s leading lady exhibits a sense of purity while concealing her malicious intentions via the water spaces she occupies. Lastly, *Jennifer’s Body* subverts the typical conventions of a lake and pool to heighten the main character’s lure and associate her with life-giving and life-taking powers of water.

I. Case Study: *Eighth Grade*

A close reading of Bo Burnham’s film *Eighth Grade* sheds light on the swimming pool party as a place of initial anxiety and alienation. The 2018 film centers around thirteen- year-old Kayla Day (Elsie Fisher) through her chronicling of her life and struggles via her YouTube channel. Overall, *Eighth Grade* constitutes a realistic, yet comedic take on the perils of emerging adolescence. The audience is able to venture into the awkward world of middle school, complete

with band practice, school active-shooter drills, and a mortifying school assembly. Throughout the plot, Kayla endures the challenges of middle school on her own, receiving little to no attention from her peers. In the beginning of the film, Kayla's social circle can be classified as minimal at best. Her only social interaction is limited to her father's endless questions about her day and her perusing of *Instagram* on a Friday night, where she comments on other student's pictures, hoping to gain their approval.

Early on in the film, Kayla is invited to popular girl Kennedy's (Catherine Oliviere) birthday pool party; unfortunately for Kayla, this invitation does not come from Kennedy herself but rather Kennedy's mother.⁴⁹ Disgusted by this "pity invitation," Kennedy apparently showcases her disdain for her mother's warm invitation both in person and over *Instagram*.⁵⁰ Kayla attends the party anyway and the resulting swimming pool sequence echoes her inner state of turmoil. Burnham strategically orchestrates this scene with a daunting anthem that emphasizes the overwhelming nature of the party and all the fun that she is not having. Additionally, a Steadicam shot forces the audience to follow Kayla's awkward walk through the party. The gruesome music subsides once Kayla sinks into the pool, emphasizing the soothing, therapeutic quality of the swimming pool since it can protect its protagonists from the chaos of the pool party.

The scene commences with Kayla heading into Kennedy's house alone. As Kayla navigates the house in search of the bathroom to change into her swimsuit, a voiceover from one of her YouTube videos lists the importance of getting outside of one's comfort zone. In the

⁴⁹ Upon giving Kayla an invitation, Kennedy's single mother seems to barely know who Kayla is as she fumbles in saying Kayla's name. Rather, one may speculate that Kennedy's mother is only inviting Kayla to the party in hopes that Kayla's father will show up as she continuously mentions how great Kayla's father is.

⁵⁰ Kennedy sends Kayla an invitation over Instagram messaging. It reads: "Hi, so my mom said to invite you to my thing tomorrow, so this is me doing that."

bathroom, Kayla paces and hyperventilates at the thought of putting on her swimsuit and heading outside to congregate with the other students. Her unsettling inhaling and exhaling dominates the soundtrack. Eventually, with the aid of uplifting non-diegetic music, Kayla leaves the bathroom in her bright green one piece, clutching her body as a means to hide it from the judging eyes of her peers. She briefly stands in front of the sliding glass door and looks out into the slow motion chaotic fun of the teen pool party. The camera transitions from Kayla's shocked face to set the scene for the pool party. The subsequent montage sequence displays the anarchy of adolescence with few adults (and order) in sight: teenagers lounging in the pool with Doritos, water gun fights, and back bending gymnasts set to a rhythmic, anxiety-inducing cacophony, giving the scene a circus-like feeling. The slow motion montage illustrates the social dynamics at play. Girls tossing beach balls back and forth while the boys engage in sneak attacks, surprising pool-goers with squirts from their water guns. These teens are not enjoying the pool by themselves. Each activity depends on an established friendship or relationship that one teen has with another. As established prior to this pool party, Kayla does not possess any stable friendships that would allow her to easily navigate such a volatile social situation.

Kayla is thus clearly designated as "the outsider" in this scenario. Her gaze into the pool space is not voyeuristic in nature as she is deriving little pleasure from her glances. Rather, her look exudes anxiety, and the painful aspects of this experience. She is not having fun like the others. Kayla's trepidation is two-fold. The first stems from the anarchy that she must confront when heading into the pool space. In order to break out of her comfort zone as announced in her YouTube monologue, Kayla must be willing to interact with the insiders and forge new connections at the risk of being rejected and humiliated. Secondly, Kayla is also rooted in her insecurities and her comparing herself to her peers. The rest of the adolescents are all scantily-

clad, confident, and each action in the montage seems to call attention to their developing bodies but not necessarily in a sensual way. For example, throughout the montage, Kayla's peers have opted for grown-up looking bikinis, while Kayla's green one piece seems to be a relic from childhood, preventing her from assimilating to the trends embraced by the group. Moreover, its bright, obtrusive material is distracting, calling undue attention to her physique. By eighth grade, swimsuits are no longer just for swimming; now the bikini presents the fashionable showcasing of one's body. Kayla's green one-piece clearly demonstrates her disconnection from her peers.

After the slow-motion montage concludes, Kayla attempts to slide the door open with little luck and is forced to shimmy through it ajar. This brief moment is played up for laughs, and only adds to her stress and embarrassment. Unlike her popular classmates who may be able to easily fit through the space, Kayla's plump stature impedes her. While she's had the courage to bring herself to enter the pool party, this entrance begins with a bad omen. Kayla's awkward fumble with the door recalls a few ideas from the introduction. At the onset of the 1960s, the construction of domestic, backyard swimming pools was becoming increasingly common as a means to privatize familial recreation and draw it further from the public sphere. This sequence complicates that idea by opening this inherently private space up to a select, invited public. Kayla strives to assimilate into the culture of the Kennedy's home by daring to join the party, yet she cannot even open the door properly and enter into it without obstacles. Here, a familiar space, the backyard pool, becomes unfamiliar. The home is often considered a comfortable space, as it is experienced by the other teens in and around the pool, yet Kayla is an outsider and, thus, encounters the strangeness of this place and its activities. In some ways, *Eighth Grade* speaks to Sigmund Freud's observations about the unhomeliness of the home, or when what is

most familiar becomes estranged and forever changed in his 1919 canonical essay, “The Uncanny.”⁵¹

This strangeness or unfamiliarity becomes even more tangible when Kayla walks out to the backyard. A Steadicam shot follows her hunched backside as she precariously makes her way to the pool. During her walk, she passes many classmates, but receives no attention despite her entrance; they are far more interested in boldly “flossing”⁵² at the pool’s edge than welcoming her. This sequence deviates from conventional swimming pool aesthetics because Kayla does not assume the role of being a spectacle for her classmates. Just like the rest of the film, she is ignored and overlooked, but that does not necessarily lessen her feelings of inadequacy. The camera stays focused on Kayla during the entirety of her walk to the pool and eventually enters into the water with her as she prepares to go underneath. Her anxiety does seem to subside when she quickly swims beneath the waterline. As Pam Hirsch and Christopher Brown observe, there are well-documented therapeutic elements of the pool and water therapy: “[Swimming pools] can also be depicted as spaces for therapy. In pools, our ability to perceive sound diminishes, and the meditative possibilities of swimming are further enhanced with the effect of the color blue.”⁵³ The calamity of the party dissolves into a comforting silence when she submerges below the waterline [Figure 5]. This scene is reminiscent of a sensory deprivation tank that strips its users of sight, smell, and hearing in an effort to achieve a meditative state.⁵⁴ When Kayla emerges

51 Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Uncanny*, trans. David Mcintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 124.

52 A culturally relevant dance move in which a person repeatedly swings their arms, with clenched fists, from the back of their body to the front, on each side. This dance was made popular in the late 2010s due to its appearance in the video game, *Fortnite*.

53 Pam Hirsch and Christopher Brown, “Introduction,” in *The Cinema of the Swimming Pool* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2014), 10.

54 Julie Turkewitz, “Climb In, Tune In: After Decades, Awash Again in Float Tanks,” *New York Times* 165, no. 57023 (October 18, 2015): 16.

from the water, her uneasiness also resurfaces as she watches her popular classmates flirt and confidently strut around the pool's edge. The pool is thus shown to cloak an unwanted guest and sustain their social marginalization.



Figure 5 Screen grab from *Eighth Grade* (Bo Burnham, 2018)

The pool is not a space that simply reproduces social hierarchies. However, the idea of the fantastical comes into play in the scene as the pool allows Kayla to partake in a sort of voyeuristic escape from reality. As she leans against the pool's edge, with her arms wrapped around her body, Kayla sees her crush Aiden (Luke Prael) from across the pool. The music intensifies to highlight Kayla's attraction to him and to emphasize her desire even as he cannonballs into the pool. *Eighth Grade* subverts many of the fantastical and erotic elements of filmed pool scenes since a female character is here objectifying her male crush. Burnham also adds an element of light-hearted comedy to the sequence given Aiden's childish, skinny frame that is anything but the ideal version of a well-developed masculine body. Kayla's fantasy comes to an end as Gabe (Jake Ryan) swims up to her.

Her interaction with Gabe hallmarks one of the first moments in the film when she is sought out by someone her own age and is truly made visible to her peers in person. While their

interaction is playful, Kayla is put at ease and is even reluctant to leave Gabe when Kennedy's mother calls all the girls up for a picture. In this scene, the pool space allows viewers the opportunity to watch Kayla interact with a fellow teenager and enjoy the pleasure of being noticed by the opposite sex. Of course, this pleasure is fleeting since she has to exit the pool and uncomfortably becomes the laughed-at spectacle when compared to her slender classmates donning bikinis.

Ultimately, this pool party sequence highlights the shifting visual dynamics of the in-crowd and the outsiders. Popular teenagers are granted the ability to be an attractive spectacle and flaunt their physiques. Outsiders like Kayla utilize the water as a space of momentary comfort from the embarrassing separation of the in-crowd. Beyond this reflection of social hierarchies, the pool ends up allowing her to be seen, but *seen differently* by Gabe, which finally allows her to feel like she has been noticed in an empowering way and for who she is. Like the other pool scenes already discussed, this moment is pivotal for Kayla. The visibility granted by pool gives her the confidence to sing karaoke later on during the party and to establish further relationships with her peers. Kayla will soon fully embrace the social aspects of the high-school experience and becomes close with Gabe while also feeling more at ease with herself. The fusion of the pool and party allow Kayla to move on from her insecurities and enter into a process of self-actualization in which she can blossom into a more mature and confident version of herself. She has not necessarily become an insider, but, thanks to the pool party, she is able to see herself differently and allow herself to be seen by others in new ways.

II. Case Study: *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane*

Taking into account the more subtle transformation of Kayla in *Eighth Grade* following her encounters at the pool, it is important to note that swimming pools can also catalyze the rearrangement of teen social hierarchies, in which an outsider becomes an insider. The 2006 film *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane* explores this phenomenon by consistently placing its protagonists around bodies of water, lakes, pools, and creeks. Framed as a generic teen slasher film, *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane* centers around the murders of a popular high school clique that take place over a weekend of lust and debauchery at a secluded farmhouse. But this film is anything but generic as it subverts genre conventions of “the final girl” and captures the action in a gritty, neorealist style that capitalizes on natural lighting and on-location shooting. Critic Christopher Kelly observes how the film’s aesthetics factor into its plot: “In scene after scene, [director] Levine photographs the performers with languid affection, lingering on every inch of exposed flesh. The naturalistic, mostly handheld camera allows the audience to feel as if it is part of the celebration.”⁵⁵ The film’s intricate camera work invites audiences to take part in the visual exploitation and voyeurism of the teenage protagonists. It is clear from the narrative that these characters are not innocent children, but closer to full-fledged adults, well-aware of their sexuality. This allows for their teenage sexuality to be put on full display, almost forcing the audience to reckon with the fact that these characters are underage despite certain visual and narrative clues-- such as introducing the characters in the high school setting --suggesting the contrary. By fetishizing their exposed stomachs and legs, the film blatantly emphasizes the

⁵⁵ Christopher Kelly, “Arousing Success,” *Texas Monthly* 35, no. 5 (May 2007): 54.

characters' bodies, but these moments are not simply gratuitous; they are essential for the progression of narrative.

The film opens up with the shy, recently physically developed or "blossomed" Mandy Lane (Amber Heard) trudging through a school hallway on the first day of school along to a non-diegetic ballad reminiscing summertime joys. Each stride is met with the wandering eyes of her classmates, who visually examine her "new" physique. In response, Mandy tries to look unbothered, while appearing displeased by her classmates' fascination with her--which nonetheless shows that she is aware of their gazes. After chatting with her best friend Emmet (Michael Welch), an archetypal outcast, the two head outside and are verbally ambushed by the quintessential popular crowd lounging in the flatbed of a pickup truck. The suntanned blonde leader Dylan (Adam Powell) chirps at her, "someone got fucking hot this summer," which is quickly met a sarcastic "thank you" from Emmet. All of the guys in the clique invite Mandy to their impromptu pool party at Dylan's house, despite the disagreement of the girls accompanying them. Though he lacks an invitation, Mandy immediately persuades Emmet to join her.

At the party, the two are clearly uncomfortable in this uncharted realm, as they glance around watching the festivities happen rather than partaking in them. A subsequent montage sequence magnifies the wild nature of this summertime pool party with teens drinking, smoking, and flirting. Just like the earlier example of *Eighth Grade*, the teens in this environment are eager to showcase their physiques and the camera hovers on their stomachs and chests in a voyeuristic manner. Regardless of their invitation to attend, Mandy and Emmet function as the party's outsiders. Unlike the other teens, neither of them are wearing swimsuits, and their respective statures reflect their misplacement: Mandy conceals her chest with her folded arms while Dylan crosses his over his stomach. With this image in mind, the party shown in *All the Boys Love*

Mandy Lane recalls the social divisions within many of David Lynch films, as observed by film scholar Timothy Holland, who reflects on how Lynch's depiction of fun demands exclusion from those having it and those outside of it: "Fun partitions and makes parts through the positions of those inside, those parties 'in on the joke'. As with [the] 'party,' 'fun' thus posits a certain spatiality and localization of those inside and outside; fun adjudicates the position and ranking of those at a particular party."⁵⁶ Despite Dylan's earlier observations of her body and desire for her, Mandy remains on the outside, external to the fun of the in-crowd. Other partygoers thus gain pleasure from her presence because she assumes the role of an unwilling object of their voyeuristic gaze.

Sitting on the water's edge, with her feet in the pool, Mandy is approached by ringleader Dylan who assumes a place next to her and pressures her into removing her skirt and top. She resists, unwilling to strip down to her underwear. Visibly upset by Dylan's demands, Emmet comes to the rescue, squirting Dylan with a water gun. An aggravated Dylan throws Emmet into the pool, and the two cease their roughhousing after Mandy pleads with Dylan to stop. Later on, Emmet is approached by Dylan while on the roof of the house overlooking the pool as Dylan attempts to reconcile to please and impress Mandy. Emmet quickly diagnoses Dylan's intentions, stating that his jock persona alone makes him undesirable to Mandy. Emmet claims that the best way for Dylan to win Mandy's affection is with an attention-seeking stunt--like jumping off the roof--to demonstrate his true interests in her. Emmet even pretends that he will jump alongside a drunken Dylan. While yelling "Mandy Lane!," Dylan rises to the challenge then stumbles off the roof. An ominous anthem stating that it is "Such a good day" orchestrates his fall. The camera follows Dylan's descent in slow motion, presumably in his point of view. Complete with a gut-

⁵⁶ Timothy Holland, "'Crazy Clown Time' and David Lynch's Parties," *Screen* 57, no. 4 (2016): 462.

wrenching *splash*, his neck misses the pool and crashes into the pavement, and his body recoils, submerging into the water. The camera surveys the dizzying death sequence from the roof's overhead viewpoint. Quickly, the water's aqua blue is polluted with Dylan's bloody body. The shot frames in close up Mandy sitting on the pool's edge. Rather than watch the flurry of teens attempting to resuscitate Dylan, she directs a disgusted look at Emmet above. Moreover, this overhead view persists as the party-goers pull Dylan's corpse from the pool and immediately yell up to Emmet on the roof, blaming him for Dylan's demise. This point in the film seems to announce the beginnings of a fissure between Emmet and Mandy, as she appears unable to grapple with Emmet's sadistic actions.

After the passage of nine months, viewers are introduced to the popular clique yet again. Mandy, now apparently estranged from Emmet, has been fully assimilated into its dynamics, but she still retains her previously held values of chastity. In this way, Mandy maintains the image of unspoiled, virginal purity through her constant rebuffing of the advances of her desirous classmates.

The group soon travels to the countryside for a weekend of carefree mischief at friend Red's (Aaron Himelstein) cattle ranch. To christen their vacation, the teens enjoy a swim in the lake. The camera rests at the water's surface, catching both the levity of teenage play and the rough nature of the waves. Jogging up to the water's edge, Mandy smiles at the sight of her peers and hesitantly agrees to join them. At this point, Mandy is on the outskirts of the water while the rest of the clique is at shoulders depth. This positioning reflects a crucial power dynamic in which Mandy assumes a place on higher ground where she looks down at the group while being admired by them as if she was onstage. Bobbing in the water, a drunken teen grasps his martini glass and mumbles "shit" as Mandy proceeds to slowly undress. Under a blazing Texan sun, she

strips down to reveal a white swimsuit while Beethoven’s “Piano Concerto No. 5 in E Flat Major” (also named Emperor Concerto) dominates the audio track. Notably, this musical piece was the last piano concerto Beethoven composed prior to his death. The combination of the concerto and the visuals suggests that there is something ominous about Mandy’s act of undressing; it marks a changing point in the diegesis, indicating a deeper revelation, the calm before the storm.

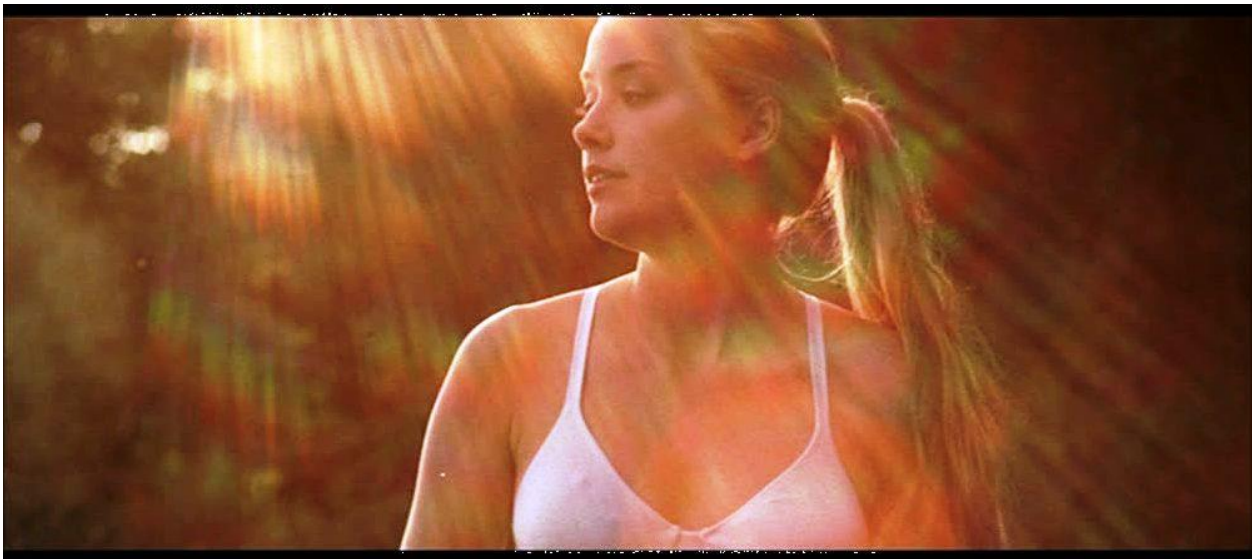


Figure 6. Screen grab from All the Boys Love Mandy Lane (Jonathan Levine, 2006)

By presenting this scene in slow motion, Levine further amplifies Mandy’s ethereal qualities along the water’s edge, as if she was on a pedestal and almost angelic. Her white underwear contrast those worn by the other females in the group. Yet again, viewers are reminded of Mandy’s virginal status in comparison to her peers, as the white color of her matching underwear set signals innocence and purity. The camera pans to allow the sun to outline Mandy’ platinum blonde hair, causing a halo-effect around her [Figure 6]. She is a chaste, pious, and beautiful teenager, far removed from the nefarious actions of her friend group.

Yet, the second Mandy pivots to breach the water's surface, this stylization of innocence ends. Once in the water, Mandy becomes one with the rest of the group and is warmly met with praise from her friends. Red yells, "Mandy, I love you. I love everything about you, your aunt, and your cousin Jenn." With the almost magical aid of the fluidity of water, a symbolic union conjoins Mandy and the clique. In contrast to the earlier pool scene discussed above, during which Mandy refused Dylan's proposal that she undress and abandon her valuing of modesty, this scene shows her now willing to strip in accordance with the group's expectations, much to the admiration of the lusty male members. This shift as it pertains to displaying her body around *bodies of water* seemingly illustrates that Mandy has conceded to the group's standards.

After Mandy joins the group in the lake, the camera returns to a similar setup as the opening of the sequence, when it rested on the water's surface. However, this time the former voyeuristic gaze it provides of the teenagers seems far more sinister, as if the group was being stalked by some unseen predator. Unlike the clarity and definition of the backyard swimming pool, the murky "natural" water exudes mystery and suspense. What danger lurks beneath the surface? The camera dives below the waterline to glimpse a poisonous water snake moving toward the unsuspecting bathers. A gunshot abruptly ends the group's reverie, and the slain snake sinks to the water's bottom. The sharpshooting ranch hand Garth (Anson Mount) nods at the group and gives them a warning: "Gotta throw rocks before you swim. Scatters the snakes, and lets the miners know you're friendly."⁵⁷ The lake conjures a multitude of threats, such as wild animals and corpses, yet the lure of flesh and the liberation from inhibitions is too appealing for the teenagers to resist.

⁵⁷ The miners that Garth mentioned refer to the fact that the swimming hole and ranch contain a collapsed mine shaft that caused the deaths of 80 miners. The teenagers briefly refer to this later on, incorrectly thinking that the killer may be a miner's ghost.

Contrary to the pool party of *Eighth Grade*, both water body sequences in *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane* position Mandy front and center. Although she inhabits the sidelines without fully breaching the surface of the water, this allows her to put her body on full display. In this way, Mandy Lane assumes the exhibitionist role of desirous spectacle for her peers, the camera, and ultimately the spectator. This display of the female body in classical Hollywood cinema for the voyeuristic enjoyment of onscreen characters and viewers alike is the central concern of feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." As she puts it, "The beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylized and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and direct recipient of the spectator's look."⁵⁸ Visual pleasure is afforded to both viewers and the partygoers who gaze at and desire Mandy, almost in unison. Yet, when Mandy does enter the water to join the clique, viewers are provided additional visual information to reinforce how water can also always obscure dangers and threats. As mentioned, this lake scene marks a critical transition in the film's narrative. The virginal girl next door Mandy Lane is not who she seems; soon she is revealed to be the ultimate killer at the film's violent climax. Gaining entry into the clique has been Mandy's plan all along, so her and Emmet could kill off the teenagers who had subjected both them to years of bullying and follow through on a suicide pact. Yet, in a last minute switch, Mandy kills Emmet, so that she is the final girl standing. The lake thus shrouds and subtly presents to the viewer the threat that Mandy actually is.

It is crucial to highlight the differences between the lake and swimming pool sequences in the film since they also serve to indicate Mandy's as both a lure and a threat. The initial

⁵⁸ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 22.

swimming pool scene uses the clarity of its visual scene to display both a break in friendship between Emmet and Mandy due to his misdeed, as well as the beginnings of Mandy's social ascent from outsider to member of the in crowd. The pool allows for one to distinguish right from wrong and the insiders from the outsiders. Unwilling to swim in her underwear, Mandy is portrayed as the epitome of an unspoiled purity, a target or lure within the hedonistic teenage wasteland of the pool party. On the other hand, the lake with its natural muddy water and imprecise boundaries opposes the clear distinctions of the swimming pool scene. In the lake, Mandy seems to become one with her peers, tearing off her clothes and abandoning her values, just as Dylan had wished of her before he died. While Mandy's behavior at the lake appears to indicate that she has fully embraced the debauchery and liberation of the in-crowd, the murkiness of the water actually allows Mandy to conceal her true murderous desires. She is only acting as if she is an insider; both the swimming pool and the lake function as her costumes. Positioning *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane*'s pool and lake sequence in tandem, this analysis highlights the deceptive nature of the swimming pool: drawing on its chemically-treated waters and well-defined edges, Mandy uses its tendency to present the clarity of things to camouflage her deadly intentions.

III. Case Study: *Jennifer's Body*

Touted by Executive Producer Diablo Cody as a film about “wanting every human being in the world to live in [your] stomach and be digested,” the 2009 black comedy-horror fusion

film *Jennifer's Body* explores the hellish experiences of hormonal teenage girls.⁵⁹ Its release amassed a lowly \$6.8 million dollars at the box office, and the film received criticism surrounding its marketing campaign's reliance on what some reviewers saw as its "raw sexuality."⁶⁰ Taking into account the recent #MeToo movement, some film critics have reassessed *Jennifer's Body*, lauding it for its feminist messages that empower its protagonist to come to terms with her trauma.⁶¹

The film centers around the friendship between teenage best friends Needy Lesnicki (Amanda Seyfried) and Jennifer Check (Megan Fox). Constructed in a flashback sequence, the narrative begins by showcasing an unstable Needy in a psychiatric facility where she shares the events that triggered her institutionalization. Awkward misfit Needy lives at the mercy of popular cheerleader Jennifer, and she is willing to follow Jennifer throughout all her adventures. One night, Jennifer persuades Needy to go to the local tavern with her to watch the indie band Low Shoulder play. Despite her boyfriend Chip's (Johnny Simmons) pleas that she should stay in, Needy listens to Jennifer, and the two head to the grungy venue full of shady men. Jennifer's affections fall on the Low Shoulder front man, and, when a fire abruptly breaks out in the bar, in a daze, she hops into the band's van without Needy. As the film progresses, Needy recognizes that post-fire Jennifer's demeanor has shifted to sinister, and midnight encounters with her showcase the teen drenched in blood and exhibiting carnal, predatory behaviors. Their community, appropriately named Devil's Kettle, copes with loss after loss as Jennifer feasts on

⁵⁹ "Jennifer's Body - The Dead Pool - YouTube," accessed February 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38nCPZEMNoQ>.

⁶⁰ Christine Spines, "Megan Fox's Scary Box Office Problem," *Entertainment Weekly*, no. 1069/1070 (October 9, 2009): 13.

⁶¹ Frederick Bilchert, "'Jennifer's Body' Would Kill If It Came Out Today - VICE," October 23, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qv99y3/jennifers-body-would-kill-if-it-came-out-today.

teenage classmates: a jock (Joshua Emerson), a nerd (Aman Johal), and a goth (Kyle Gallner). Jennifer confides in Needy that, during the night of the fire, the bandmates of Low Shoulder stabbed her in the heart at the Devil's Kettle Falls, but she survived with a newfound insatiable hunger for not just human, but male flesh. After researching the supernatural, Needy realizes that Jennifer has become a bloodthirsty succubus because she was not a virgin when the members of Low Shoulder made her the sacrifice of their pagan ritual. Needy fears that the school dance will be a feeding frenzy with so many teenage boys in sight. Later on, Jennifer coaxes Chip to join her at a local pool house and ditch his plans for the dance. He obliges, unknowingly being lured to his death by his physical attraction to Jennifer. Upon realizing Chip's absence at the dance, Needy rushes to his aid in a climactic showdown with Jennifer at the pool. Following Chip's death, Needy pierces the demon's heart with a knife in Jennifer's childhood bedroom.

Devil's Kettle Falls sets the stage for the diegesis, which accentuates the supernatural forces at play in the town. A shot of an ominous, natural whirlpool fills the frame as Needy recalls that the town's name stems from two natural waterfalls, "One of them is normal--it empties into a river basin. The other one goes into a hole. And it doesn't come out. The scientist guys can't explain it. They've dropped all kinds of things down there--bouncy balls, red dye, radioactive slime-- but nothing ever surfaces. Maybe it's another dimension." This description suggests the unknowability of murky and unpredictable natural water sources, as illustrated in *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane*. Science cannot explain this phenomenon, and so rational scientific explanations are traded in favor of mysticism. Notably, these falls are the backdrop for Jennifer's failed sacrifice by the band Low Shoulder in an attempt to gain fame for the band from the devil. Reading the film through a feminist lens, *Jennifer's Body* operates through both horror and revenge conventions. Jennifer exclusively kills men, as if destined to continue punishing those

who stand in for the male members of the band. Her incomplete sacrifice, due to her sexual history, traumatizes Jennifer rather than kills her, and this experience is juxtaposed with the crashing of the mystical waterfalls. Do aquatic spaces automatically represent a place of torture in the film? Yes and no. Throughout the film, Jennifer does not avoid water, rather she actively seeks it out, whether it's natural or human-made. To recall the previous discussion of Freud's death drive, Jennifer is essentially returning to the scene of her trauma, perhaps in an effort to finally exit the liminal state that she's now within--between life and death. Visiting these sites allows Jennifer to relive her trauma and sadistically impart her pain on others, slaughtering both Chip and Jonas (Joshua Emerson) in and near water.

Jennifer's Body foregrounds the tensions of the lures and threats of liquid. Water becomes a space of threat for her victims because it serves as Jennifer's aquatic killing ground, whereas the lure of these spaces--beyond what gets her victims there--is related to Jennifer's post-meal ecstasy that invigorates her, allowing her to "live." In short, lure culminates in life while threat denotes death. It's important to keep in mind that at the falls, Jennifer experiences simultaneous birth and death, putting the womb represented by water into conversation with the figure of a crypt. The sacrifice destroys her human soul and, in its place, a demon is born and takes possession of her. Jennifer's loss of her humanity transforms her into an almost invincible, energized being straight from Hell.

The first on-screen death occurs in the woods nearby a lakeside dock the day after the devastating fire at the club. Still grieving the fiery death of his teammate Craig, a distressed Jonas lingers on the football field alone. A death metal song plays, highlighting the intensity of his loss. From across the way, a bubbly Jennifer strides toward Jonas and startles him. Coaxing him out of his solitude, she shares that she was the last person to speak with Craig before he

died. She tells Jonas: “Well, we got to talking about you, actually. And do you know what he said? He said you were like a brother to him. Not a bro. An actual brother.” With the appeal of false emotional intimacy, Jennifer capitalizes on Jonas’s anguish and deems him as vulnerable prey. She clutches Jonas’s hand and settles it on her breast, muttering “Feel my heart, Jonas. I think it’s broken.” With that, Jonas has succumbed to Jennifer’s alluring seductive powers as she leads him deep into the secluded woods.⁶²

The scene cuts to show the two kissing in the forest, surrounded by lofty trees. From there, a series of cutaways depict Jennifer and Jonas’s embrace juxtaposed with a deer, a raven, a groundhog, and a plethora of woodland creatures that gather around them, watching in anticipation. Their exhibitionist make out session frightens Jonas, and he pleads for Jennifer to look at the oddity. Her animalistic carnal desires (for sex and feasting) are understood by the wild creatures surrounding them. Smiling, she gains a sense of pleasure from this scene of being looked at and furthers her seduction by unzipping her top. Referring to the animals, she coos at Jonas: “they’re waiting.” The shot tilts down to showcase her exposed chest and tilts up at her sultry visage. Confused by her demeanor, Jonas watches Jennifer as she removes her top and tears off his jersey. In the midst of fondling his crotch, Jennifer brings up Craig, asking Jonas if he misses his friend. Her tone is condescending, and Jonas recoils. After a final kiss, Jennifer informs Jonas that he’ll see his friend “real soon.” Angrily, he asks, “what, like in heaven?” With a sly smile, Jennifer nods her head “no” and approaches him. Briefly, viewers and Jonas gain a glimpse of Jennifer’s new demonic powers as her jaw unhinges and carnivorous teeth emerge. In an extreme wide out, Jonas’s screams can be heard from the nearby, empty football field.

⁶² The screenplay initially calls for the falls to be in the background of this shot.

For Jennifer, the thrill of sex and death are tied together. She likes to “play with her food,” in the sense that she lures her victims away, gaining their trust and taking advantage of their emotional vulnerability. Yet, Jennifer never has sex with her victims; on the contrary, any promises of sex are diverted by cannibalism. The ecstasy of the hunt is crystallized during a swim she takes in the lake. In a fixed overhead shot, we see a still navy blue lake amidst a blaring rock anthem. Unlike other natural bodies of water, it is immaculate, devoid of rubbish, trees and even stray leaves, yet it harbors a demon that lurks below its seeming tranquility. The lake’s placid waters stir as a black head breaches the surface, followed by a nude female physique. It is Jennifer. The scene cuts to show her breast stroking through the water as she remains partly cloaked by the dark waters. The lake simultaneously conceals and reveals her pale backside through the refractions of the water. An abrupt cut to a close-up of Jennifer’s face straight on reveals her lifeless eyes but her disposition exudes her seductive qualities and eroticism [Figure 7]. The water exposes her as the predator that she truly is, ready for her next kill. Her slender, pale feminine figure is misread by her prey, who assume she is weaker than them as well as naive. With this depiction, the film further establishes Jennifer’s relationship to water through the blending of lure and threat. Her charm is inherently fatal to any male who crosses her path.

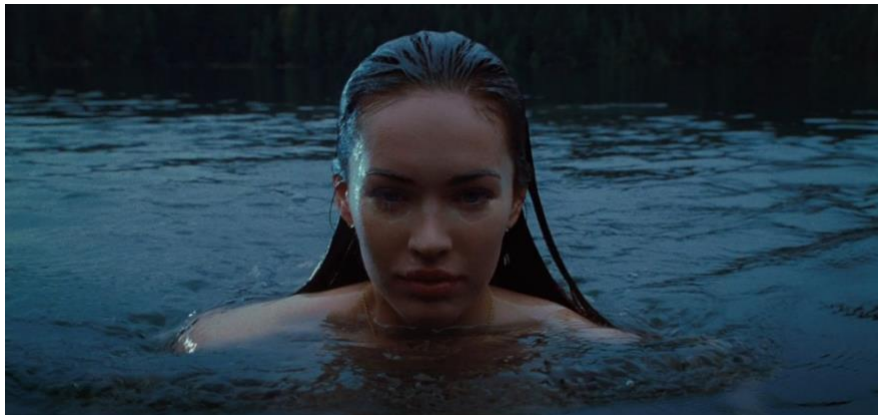


Figure 7 Frame grab from Jennifer's Body (Karyn Kusama, 2009)

Set at the affectionately named “Dead Pool”⁶³ by the crew, the film’s climax dismantles preconceived views of water. As mentioned above, Jennifer leads Chip to an enclosed community pool, which is the antithesis of the lake that exposes her. Paradoxically, the pool’s waters are a murky green and cluttered with overgrown vines and tree branches. Despite being indoors, this swimming pool contrasts its symbolic cleanliness and has become infested with filth, disease, and unknowable creatures hidden below the surface. This space can be seen to disclose the unruly, untamable, and ominous nature of the swimming pool that endures alongside its orderly manifestations as a sort of unconscious. Traversing its depths could prove lethal for a curious protagonist, as one encounters the threats of the swimming pool made tangible. Traditionally, a swimming pool exudes a deceptive purity. Crystal blue waters invite pool goers to jump in and release one’s inhibitions. Yet, this is a space always harbors an element of danger and death. Confirming this notion, Wiltse reflects on the public pools of the early 1900s and remarks on their safety (prior to chemical sterilization): “Wallace Manheimer, a bacteriologist at Columbia University, ...found that typhoid fever, ear and eye infections, dysentery, and gonorrhea were easily transmitted in pools.”⁶⁴ If this dead pool makes visible the threats of the pool, and therefore, revolts us, what happens to its lure?

An establishing shot at the waterline zooms in on Chip and Jennifer walking into the indoor pool. Donning a white prom dress, Jennifer stands out amidst the filth and decay. Like in *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane*, the film positions its evil protagonist in white on the pool’s sidelines, and like Mandy, Jennifer embodies the lure of the pool even if it is “dead.” The word “hopeless” is scrawled on the tiled edge of the pool, a nod to Chip’s grim future in this

⁶³ “Jennifer’s Body - The Dead Pool - YouTube.”

⁶⁴ Wiltse, 73.

abandoned space. Jennifer smiles playfully and heads toward the pool, and the camera zooms in to capture the trepidation on Chip's face. Teasing him, Jennifer chirps, "Come on, Chip. Show me your breaststroke." Meanwhile, via crosscutting, we see a concerned Needy sprinting to the pool in hopes of rescuing Chip from Jennifer's canines. The shot cuts to show Chip and Jennifer sitting at the side of the pool in front of a deteriorating coral reef backdrop [Figure 8]. Their legs dangle off the edge into the air, not water. In his chapter entitled "Perverse Hydrophobia" van Leeuwen notes this in-between space that the two now straddle: "In general the attitude toward water is two-sided- out or in, but *on* the water. This position is highly ambiguous. The water attracts and rejects at the same time."⁶⁵ The black water line lies a few feet below them. Will they or won't they embark into the muddy pool?



Figure 8 Frame grab from *Jennifer's Body* (Karyn Kusama, 2009)

While gazing into the seemingly shallow liquid below, Jennifer remarks, "I feel so empty." This statement suggests the thwarted reflection that Jennifer sees when she peers into

⁶⁵ van Leeuwen, *The Springboard in the Pond*, 233.

the dark puddles, as if Narcissus was unable to encounter his double and could not feel whole. In “Clear Waters, Springtime Waters and Running Waters: The Objective Conditions for Narcissism Amorous Waters,” philosopher Gaston Bachelard acknowledges that liquids function as natural mirrors that grant humans the ability to see their idealized self in their reflection, similar to Lacan’s discussion of the mirror phase.⁶⁶ Jennifer’s time spent looking at the murky waters expresses her desire to achieve fulfillment visually, but, like the pool’s low depth, Jennifer is vacant too, without a soul. Her void can only be filled with Chip’s bloody entrails as opposed to the symbolic fulfillment of seeing her reflection in water.

She attempts to pull Chip in for a kiss, but he rejects her advances. With a quick change of behavior, Jennifer thrusts Chip into the pool. An overhead shot depicts Jennifer diving in as Chip sinks into the pool’s depths. The once stagnant water now splashes about as Jennifer jumps up from the water and onto Chip’s body, drowning him. This scene briefly subverts the audience's expectations since the pool’s depth extends further than anticipated. In reality it’s half full, just enough to immerse the two of them. Juxtaposed with shots of Needy’s running to Chip’s rescue, subsequent cross-cuts demonstrate Jennifer’s otherworldly strength as she tosses Chip across the pool and pushes him against a broken ladder. There is no true escape from the pool or from Jennifer. According to Heller, this unruly environment embodies an “agitated fluid space in which we are completely immersed into the feeling of exposure to something uncontrollable.”⁶⁷ Although it is set within a clearly confined space, this scene shows that water cannot be domesticated by humans, which recalls water disasters such as floods and tsunamis. Jennifer’s ability to harness the water effectively to prey on Chip demonstrates that, in a way, she

⁶⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell, Fourth printing 2006, The Bachelard Translation Series (Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 2006).

⁶⁷ Heller, “Water and Film,” 13.

has become one with the pool with the incomplete loss of her humanity and existence as the walking dead. In this space, Jennifer is at her physical peak, exuding both sexual lure and dangerous threat just like the pool itself.

The sequence cuts to a close up of Chip writhing to emerge from the pool. Yet, Jennifer's prowess overtakes him back into the water. Upon hearing Chip's screams, Needy sneaks into the municipal pool via a window and spots Jennifer and Chip embracing in the water. Alarmed by Needy's entrance, a demonic Jennifer shrieks, revealing a bloodied Chip on the verge of death. Empowered to defeat Jennifer, Needy plunges in the water and joins Chip, as Jennifer disappears. The tranquil black water camouflages Jennifer beneath the surface. After a few uneasy moments, a tide surges toward the couple, revealing Jennifer. A dose of pepper spray from Needy does little to deter the carnivorous demon. Enraged, Jennifer vomits black bile back at them, reinforcing her embodying the dead pool since her "internal" fluid resembles the murky water. Jennifer soon levitates above Needy and Chip as they attempt to flee, further revealing her status as hellish demon.

The couple cowers beneath Jennifer and finally make their way out of the pool, where the fatal showdown between Needy and Jennifer occurs. Exposed by the lack of liquid cover, nothing is hidden, nor obscured like the black pool. This tiled space becomes a warzone as Needy verbally lists all the insecurities that plague Jennifer. For instance, Needy taunts her former friend by referring to her as no longer "socially relevant." Both girls' verbal jabs divulge the inherent pleasure extracted from projecting emotional pain. Suffice to say, their friendship has been far from perfect. Their fight concludes when a feeble Chip stabs a pool skimmer into Jennifer's chest, narrowly missing her heart. Enraged, Jennifer pulls out the rod and stumbles home, while Needy rushes to Chip's side. Right on the tiled floor, Needy and Chip exchange a

heartfelt goodbye as Chip dies. Seeking vengeance, Needy heads to Jennifer's house where she exterminates the demon by penetrating Jennifer's heart with a knife.

Analyzing the lake swim in conjunction with the dead pool scene reveals that director Kusama subverts expectations surrounding water spaces. With its typical unclear borders, the lake *should* be emblematic of wilderness: dangerous and untamed. Yet, Jennifer glides through this space with ease post-hunt. No debris, sticks, or animals are visible. It is as if her demonic wildness has merged her into the lake in such a way that, after assuming her perspective, we no longer see the debris and other markers of a natural body of water, only her complete fusion without excess. The water reinvigorates Jennifer's potency, and she emerges from the lake with a renewed sense of energy and vigor, ready to lure her prey and feast.

On the other hand, the traditional sense of a swimming pool is challenged with the film's "dead pool." Its waters suggest years of neglect and the overgrowth of microbes and fungi, rather than the sanitized cleanliness of private domestic order. In creating this juxtaposition, the film renders the threats of the pool visible. In placing Jennifer in both the lake and the dead pool, Kusama aligns her powers with the aquatic just like she is bound to Devil's Kettle Falls through her traumatic, failed sacrifice, which can easily be read as a replacement for gang rape. Her body carries this trauma like a vessel, replacing her soul. There is an intertwining of Jennifer's body, trauma, and bodies of water. The dead pool's waters accentuate her powers and thus the memory of her trauma, allowing her to levitate. Her trauma has the uncanny ability of transfiguring these bodies of water into their symbolic "other." For instance, after she kills Jonas, the lake Jennifer plunges into becomes pool-like, while the pool she takes Chip to is lake or lagoon-like. Her status as a succubus deems her "infected" by sexual trauma. This memory of the failed sacrifice builds until she's not feverish but ravenous. At this point, the temporary cure to her hunger is not

only reenacting the violence she experienced by tempting male stand-ins for her rapists. Her pleasure derives from luring them and then not having sex with them, effectively "teasing" them. She also must consume them, turning her victims into visions of "lasagna with teeth" as one of the victim's mothers describes. In this way, Jennifer is able to fill the "wound" of her trauma figuratively.

When removed from the water and exposed on the relative dryness of the poolside, Jennifer is vulnerable and ultimately pierced with a pool skimmer. It is notable to point out that a pool skimmer is a device used to remove pollutants and cleanse the pool's surface; Jennifer is assaulted by a tool that seeks to rid swimming pools of dirty, harmful elements. While much more than skimming and cleaning would be needed to restore the dead pool for use, the connection of Jennifer to the pool implies the weight and disruption of her trauma as that which possesses *her body* as the true evil in the film. That trauma can be seen to masquerade as an attractive, sexually active high school cheerleader, wearing Jennifer's body as a disguise.

Both water spaces work together to afford Jennifer with a greater appeal of lure via visibility. The dead pool allows the stunning Jennifer to stand out in such a deadly, vile space, while the lake scene puts Jennifer's body on full display, contributing to her erotic lure. Greater lure means that Jennifer becomes a stronger predator, holding more power over her unsuspecting victims.

Conclusion

A swimming pool not unlike any other pool. A structure built of tile and cement and money, a backyard toy for the affluent, wet entertainment for the well-to-do. But to Jeb and Sport Sharewood, this pool holds mysteries not dreamed of by the building contractor. Not guaranteed in any sales brochure. For this pool has a secret exit that leads to a never-never land, a place designed for junior citizens who need a long voyage away from reality into the bottomless regions of The Twilight Zone.

-Rod Serling (The Twilight Zone, 6/19/64)



Figure 9 Screen Grab from The Twilight Zone (Joseph Newman, 1964)

At the crux of their parents' toxic divorce, two siblings (Mary Badham and Jeffrey Byron) dive into the confines of their family's swimming pool only to never surface again, much to their parents' dismay [Figure 9]. Their watery descent delivers them to a countryside swimming hole that offers the two endless sweets, playmates, and an empathetic "Aunt T" (Georgia Simmons) as a substitute for their selfish, bickering parents (played by Dee Hartford and Tod Andrews). The choice to return to their former life and identity is not as attractive as remaining in their secret hideaway, thanks to the portal provided by their pool. Forever, the two are suspended in adolescence, trapped in the "Twilight Zone."

The last broadcast episode of *The Twilight Zone* entitled “The Bewitchin’ Pool” captures many of the mystical qualities of the swimming pool and Rod Serling’s preamble articulates the tensions explored throughout this thesis. In many ways, these Californian-inspired backyard oases function as portals for their users, temporarily suspending them in a more relaxing realm than the world beyond it. In “The Bewitchin’ Pool” the pool restores domestic order as it takes its adolescents far from their toxic familial unit to the tender arms of “Aunt T.” The children are thus able to escape the traumas that had defined their identities, while the plot presents that swimming pool as a liminal womb for the siblings, keeping them contained in an eternal calming environment. The pool’s magic extends further: concealing the siblings from their parents. Oddly enough, their invisibility offers them a newfound visibility as their parents frantically yearn to find and see the children they had previously looked past. Of course, the lure of the bewitchin’ pool is its production of a perfect world. What’s at risk for our protagonists if they stay in this carefree realm? A figurative death of the Sharewood family, at the very least. Forever, the Sharewood parents would harbor immense grief that news of their divorce drove the children to disappear. These two tensions occur simultaneously, but one must recognize that the benefits in this case outweighs the threat for the siblings as they choose to stay submerged in their aquatic fantasy.

If “The Bewitchin’ Pool” captures the essence of my thesis, it is because it illustrates the cinematic swimming pool through its suspensions, rather than a place for completed transition. Like waves, the fluid nature of the pool enables contradictory tensions to emerge and be sustained together for an encounter with its users. These dualities do not mix into a grey zone, nor do they separate into black and white; rather they co-exist, leading to revelations of an adolescent's identity in American teen films.

As discussed, the liquid liminality of the pool does not allow for the crystallization of a character's identity; they do not congeal into solids. Rather, the pool's fluidity is a site of oscillation. As seen in *The Girl Next Door*, protagonist Matthew questions his thought processes and morals while in the pool, allowing for the loosening of his repressed sexuality. Similarly, an analysis of *Booksmart* displays that dizzying underwater aesthetics parallel the shifting perspectives of teenagers as well as the fragments of their identity. Films like *Eighth Grade* and *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane* present the visual scene of the pool as it relates to teenage bodies and social dynamics. Initially, its ability to display and expose can be daunting or embarrassing for characters who prefer to remain concealed, yet this space can also afford misfits with new ways of seeing and being seen that do not conform to the expectations of teenage social hierarchies. *Jennifer's Body* depicts many enticing aspects and dangerous threats of the swimming pool through sex, uncontrollable carnal urges, death, and the enduring burdens of trauma. Despite its orderly appearances, and no matter how sanitized and regulated it may be, the pool harbors a lethal potential, an uncertain, uncanny element lingers in its waters.

My thesis interrogates the intersections between the cultural history of these aquatic spaces in the United States and its representation within recent films of the American teen genre. It contributes to a small but hopefully growing body of scholarship and will ideally open more avenues for further research that takes this space and these films seriously. Future research should draw on the studies of urban spaces, as well as environmental studies, to investigate the human-built world that the swimming pool emerges from as a controlled supplement to natural bodies of water. It would also be interesting to explore in greater detail the swimming pool through psychoanalytic, theoretical, and philosophical lenses. Ultimately, an interdisciplinary approach is needed since the cinematic American swimming pool in teen film also involves

sociology, film and media studies, literary studies, and even religious studies as well as the sciences.

The swimming pool's evolution in American society reveals that the pool remains provocative and its waters resist being tamed. Perhaps this is why filmmakers have consistently been drawn to capturing its depths: it is not a space that introduces ambiguity in a world that seeks to control it. Its powers absorb the characters who encounter it as well as the spectators who watch it. There is a contagious energy surrounding the swimming pool; it pulls its viewers in deeper to discover what lurks below a variety of surfaces beyond its own levels of chlorine and collection of worn-out Band-Aids.

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