

Girl, Interrupted

Dir: James Mangold, 1999

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Girl, Interrupted (1999, released on VHS and DVD in 2000) is James Mangold's adaptation and embellishment of Susanna Kaysen's 1993 memoir of the same name. Starring Winona Ryder (Susanna), Angelina Jolie (Lisa), Clea DuVall (Georgina), Whoopi Goldberg (Valerie) and Vanessa Redgrave (Dr. Wick), the film boasts an ensemble cast whose Little Orphan Annie-like antics vacillate between pointedly and tritely rendering inpatient psychiatric traumas lived during a time of social and political upheaval and friction.

Ryder is often given the task of portraying outsiders, and here does her finest job since *Beetlejuice* (1988), despite the fact that *Girl Interrupted*'s audience cannot be expected to consistently believe that she is supposed to be eighteen years old. Veteran Redgrave and flexible Goldberg give the film its spine, lending a firm backdrop for Jolie and Brittany Murphy, who are the film's star and best kept secret, respectively. Murphy splendidly portrays impudent and depressed hoarder Daisy, adding to her list of "madwomen" roles, since she played Lisa in Oprah Winfrey's 1998 television remake of Frank and Eleanor Perry's 1962 classic, *David and Lisa*. Jolie's portrait of sociopathy won her a deserved Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, upping the ante from a comparable but far less developed role as Legs in *Foxfire* (1996).

Kaysen's story of psychiatric institutionalization during the tumultuous late 1960s was a bestseller and quickly joined the ranks of American mental health classics like *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (adapted for film in 1977), *The Bell Jar* (adapted for film in 1979). Like the memoir, the film wrestles with many critical mental health issues, including: what it means to be mad in a mad and maddening world; whether or not diagnoses are reliable or even real; how gender, class, ethnicity, and psychiatric labeling practices act in relationship to each other; and how recovery often occurs outside of (and sometimes despite) the arenas of medication and monitoring. Notwithstanding its success at summoning pivotal questions about psychiatry, the movie is more romanticizing of madness than the memoir. The film's sentimentality hinges upon sexual and racial devices that engage the audience, and that are completely distinct from the book's storyline.

Looking at the film's sexuality messages proves both distressing and exciting. Redgrave's Dr. Wick is scathingly referred to by Lisa as "Dr. Dyke." This label plays upon the audience's recognition of Redgrave in *Julia* (1977). When a secondary character, Cynthia, asserts that she, like Lisa, is a sociopath, Lisa meanly chimes in, "No, you're a dyke." The book in no way alludes to the existence of eroticism between intimate friends Susanna and Lisa. In contrast, Ryder and Jolie's heightening on-screen sexual tensions culminate in a less-than-naive kiss on the mouth, achieved while smoking marijuana during an escape-from-the-asylum scene. No aspects of this scene exist in the memoir (no running away, no pot, no kiss).

The kiss scene is a hot topic for audiences wondering about Hollywood's ongoing fascination with lesbian chic, and the mainstream film industry's appropriation of queer sexuality to sell images. Jolie's reputed bisexuality adds to the steaminess and irony of her portrayal of a flirtatious woman who enjoys verbally bashing "dykes." Jolie's Lisa has been potently received by audiences of various likes and persuasions, including those viewers who celebrate her as Jon Voight's daughter, given that Voight's role in *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) has gay cult movie status. It is important to emphasize that Susanna's kissing of Lisa is only permitted with the use of an illicit drug, thereby disclosing the film's apparently phobic reaction to consenting homosexuality. *Girl, Interrupted* simultaneously downplays and invokes (or markets) lesbianism.

The film's racial messages are even more problematic than its charged opinions about sexuality. The memoir's black characters include the father of Lisa's post-hospital life child, absent from the film's attention, since only Daisy and later Susanna's discharges are highlighted. Notably, Daisy's horrific end (witnessed by the film's Susanna and Lisa, who after running away stay in Daisy's apartment) bears no resemblance to the memoir's story, in which her death is calmly reported to her former inmates by the staff. Perhaps melodramatic plotlines that feature suicide augment the rewards filmmakers reap beyond those abetted by homophobic titillation. If this is the case, it is an understatement to say that highlighting a suicide is perilous in a movie of this type. While the memoir includes multiple African-American presences (albeit secondary to the story's nucleus), the film has only one: Valerie/Goldberg, also invented for Hollywood consumers - head nurse Valerie in Kaysen's memoir is white.

In *Playing in the Dark* (1993), Toni Morrison asserts that Blackness as a sign indexes Whiteness within myriad European and Anglo-American literary and non-fictional spaces. According to Morrison, white people symbolically and tangibly rely on black individuals to define themselves; whites cannot know their true selves in the absence of comparison to what many scholars call "the Other." Morrison's logic is prominent in the translation of *Girl, Interrupted* from page to screen. Valerie is inscribed throughout the film as a character who is time-bound and historically trapped. She wears a tacky poncho and has a huge afro, while Susanna/Ryder looks like she could step off the screen at any moment into a scene from *Reality Bites* (1994). Goldberg as Valerie is a coalescence of all the black women staff members mentioned in the memoir. An essentialized, primary caretaker for the large number of upper middle class, young white women around her, Valerie is the film's concocted black stereotype who literally tells Susanna who she is and who she can be. After Susanna refuses to get out of bed, Valerie carries her to the washroom and throws her in the tub in an act of tough love. Susanna protests, calling the asylum "fascistic," and Valerie quips, "I've worked in state hospitals and this is a five star hotel." Susanna racially mocks Valerie, who says, "You are not crazy. You are a lazy, self-indulgent, little girl who is driving herself crazy." Valerie is then met with Susanna's racist speech: "Did you learn that at night school for welfare mothers? You pretend to be a doctor, you just a nursemaid." Valerie retorts, "You are just throwing it all away."

In a later scene, Susanna confides in Valerie, "I know what it's like to want to die, to hurt yourself on the outside to kill the thing on the inside." Valerie replies, "It's fine to tell this to me, but you need to say this to your doctor." Susanna continues, "I don't understand what's wrong with me - how can I get better if I don't even know what's wrong with me?" and Valerie responds, "You do understand your disease...you were just very clear about it...get it out of yourself, get it away, so you can't curl up with it any more." Susanna takes these

comments as inspiration to write, and apologizes for having racially attacked Valerie ("Sorry I was such a bitch"), her emblem of sanity in a crazy place. While she is not tragic like Delilah in *Imitation of Life* (1934), Valerie can be interpreted as a 1990s version of a Hollywood "mammy," who tells Susanna "Don't drop anchor here, understand?"

Goldberg's Valerie is exceedingly sensitive, ultra-mothering, and hyper-real. Her strong portrait is aided by viewers' familiarity with her roles as Guinan, the empathic hostess who intermittently appeared during five seasons of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, as healer/medium Oda Mae Brown in *Ghost* (1990), and as compassionate political helper Terry Doolittle in *Jumpin' Jack Flash* (1986). Her recent role as The Grand Banshee, the fairies' shapeshifting bird leader in the television production *Leprechauns* (1999) is parallel to her character in *Girl, Interrupted*: as *Leprechauns*' sole black character, who is surrounded by and oversees white juniors, Goldberg's head changeling responsibilities are unquestionably central to the tale.

Susanna and Lisa's shared ethnicity (Jewish) is altogether absent from the film, and therefore cannot be easily read as one reason among many for their fervid bond. Valerie's influence vis-a-vis Susanna, despite what is depicted as her utter difference from her, makes it possible for Lisa's power over Susanna to be incomplete. Valerie/Goldberg as the catalyst for Susanna's recovery is therefore the film's driving force.

References

Kaysen, Susanna (1993) *Girl, Interrupted*. New York: Turtle Bay Books.

Morrison, Toni (1993) *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books.