



**Adolescence through the Looking-Glass: Ideology and the  
Represented Child in *Degrassi: The Next Generation***

—Benjamin Lefebvre

“I think if kids are talking about it in the schoolyard, we should be able to talk about it on *Degrassi*.”—Linda Schuyler (qtd. in Gatehouse 20)

Looking back on the reading materials I had access to as an adolescent, I am perplexed and disturbed by some of the ideological messages that I don't recall noticing at the age of sixteen. In addition to endless volumes of *The Hardy Boys Casefiles*, my shelf of (mostly American) young adult fiction included selected works by Judy Blume, Gordon Korman, Norma Klein, Norma Fox Mazer, Harry Mazer, Caroline B. Cooney, Christopher Pike, and Robert Cormier. At the time, books by these authors offered me an escape from the banality of reality, an alternative to what I perceived to be a monotonous routine of home and school life. Given my preference

for fictional representations of adolescence over my own experience, I suspect now that I learned more about what it could mean to be an adolescent from these novels than I did from my interaction with fellow adolescents around me—that these books somehow seemed more “real” than my own reality, more exciting, more varied, more carefully structured. Through such texts, I had access to voices and perspectives that differed from mine in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, language, and location. At least, if nothing else, the protagonists in these novels spent far less time than I did reading young adult fiction.

A few years ago, my own adolescence long over, I returned to young adult fiction for an extended period to escape from reality once again—this time from the madness of the comprehensive exams for my doctoral degree. My reading experience

was unexpectedly different due to my discovery of several ideologies about identity, agency, and power that I couldn't recall from my memories of my prior reading experiences. For example, while I readily remembered some of the details of Katherine and Michael's first relationship in Blume's *Forever . . .* (1975), and while I continued to identify with Jerry's anxiety about rebellion and belonging within the all-boys Catholic high school in Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974), I was surprised to discover a discourse of homophobia underlying both texts, as though to ensure the "normal," healthy heterosexuality of the protagonists—not to mention the continued sexualization of female objects of desire in the latter text. Such seemingly new discoveries made me want to understand better how ideology functions in young adult fiction, given that I had difficulty pinpointing how these messages and binary oppositions might have affected my beliefs and values as an adolescent reader. By reading the work of a range of critics in the field, I learned that the young adult problem novel, a sub-genre of adolescent realistic fiction, anticipates and strives to shape readers' responses to a social problem and its resolution. Perry Nodelman notes that such narratives "are really about how their readers will think and act after finishing the book" (200), a claim that continues to trouble me because I could not recall how I thought or acted after my adolescent readings of these favourite texts. Roberta Seelinger

Trites argues that the subversive potential of books within this genre is often overshadowed by didactic intrusions that tend to "manipulat[e] the adolescent reader" (x). In other words, regardless of character, plot, style, or even the specific social problem to be resolved (elements that I did remember, at least to an extent), adolescent fiction is about relationships of authority: "authority within the text and authority of the author over the reader" (xii).

Such claims do not presume that adult authors are manipulating their targeted readers in deliberately oppressive ways, but they are important reminders that texts such as the ones I once presumed offered real, "authentic" depictions of adolescent experiences are actually shaped and disseminated by adults. In other words, the young person represented in literary texts intended for adolescents becomes a vehicle through which cultural discourses about identity and morality are proffered to real young readers in specific geopolitical contexts. Whether such texts confirm or disrupt perceived normative assumptions about the possibilities of adolescent identity, the relationship between the child within the text and the child reading that text is presumed by many critics working in the field of children's literature and culture to be fairly straightforward: as the child within the text learns what it means to be an individual within a particular cultural and social context, so too must (should) the real child reading

that text. As John Stephens remarks,

Writing for children is usually purposeful, its intention being to foster in the child reader a positive apperception of some socio-cultural values which, it is assumed, are shared by author and audience. . . . Since a culture's future is, to put it crudely, invested in its children, children's writers often take upon themselves the task of trying to mould audience attitudes into "desirable" forms, which can mean either an attempt to perpetuate certain values or to resist socially dominant values which particular writers oppose. (3)

Although the young adult novels that I read as an adolescent are not necessarily as nostalgic or as optimistic as are many books for younger children, Stephens's remarks are largely applicable to the young adult problem novel, given the specific ways in which this genre of texts targets an implied reader who is believed to be in need of the text's moral and ideological guidance.

This paper concerns a popular text that draws on some of the didactic conventions of the young adult problem novel and adapts them for the visual medium of television: *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (CTV, 119 episodes to date from 2001), an adolescent soap opera in which topical issues are broached through

good storytelling, a diverse ensemble cast, and a catchy theme song that epitomizes the characters' struggle for survival ("Whatever it takes, I know I'm gonna make it through"). Week after week, the episodes in this series offer a multitude of narratives of that "transition stage between childhood and adulthood," to use Robyn McCallum's phrase (3), depicting a range of adolescents striving to negotiate the social and ideological pressures of high school culture, from substance abuse and parental abuse to peer pressure, eating disorders and body image, attention-deficit disorders and chemical imbalances, dating and popularity, sex and sexuality, date rape, and unplanned pregnancy. Mainstream television series featuring an ensemble adolescent cast are hardly unique, given their presence on such popular series as *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990–2000), *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003), and *The O.C.* (2003–2007) in the U.S., *Edgemont* (2001–2005) and *Falcon Beach* (from 2006) in Canada, and *Heartbreak High* (1994–1999) in Australia, not to mention critically acclaimed but ratings-challenged American series such as *My So-Called Life* (1994–1995) and *Freaks and Geeks* (1999–2000). In its weekly emphasis on the *problems* of adolescence, however, *Degrassi: The Next Generation* is particularly aligned with the constraints of adolescent problem fiction in terms of both its choice of subject matter and its discursive strategies: while most of the characters are complex

and dynamic, individual scripts use them to enact social debates and to encode and personify abstract concepts about agency, identity, and power. And yet, unlike Nodelman's warning that the structure of the adolescent problem novel leads to an isolation of the protagonist's viewpoint as a form of truth, which "allows characters absolute confirmation of their opinions and values" (201), the series negotiates this potential trap by refusing to limit the ongoing focus to a single protagonist. While specific episodes invite viewer identification with particular characters, thus replicating a major convention of adolescent problem fiction, the overall series explores the lives of a diverse ensemble cast that expands with each year of production. And so, a character who appears as the focus of one episode will be recast as the antagonist or a supporting player in a fellow character's storyline or disappear completely in the subsequent episode. There is the potential, then, for a wider range of perspectives, meanings, and responses than what Nodelman and Trites see in their studies of adolescent problem fiction, due both to the narrative structure of these episodes as well as to the form of television, particularly the soap opera, which offers ongoing storylines across extended periods of broadcasts. As Sonia Livingstone discovers in her study of the soap opera genre from the perspective of social psychology, "there is no simple message to be passively received, but a cacophony of voices,

of colluders and eavesdroppers, of bystanders and involved protagonists with their own histories and perspectives. Any 'message' . . . is inevitably made plural, open to misinterpretation" (3).

My specific focus in this paper is on the complexity that emerges between the "open," apparently cacophonous form of the soap opera—what scholars of television studies would call, drawing on the work of Roland Barthes, a polysemic text, "one in which the reader or audience is encouraged or able to construct a wide range of readings" (Casey, *et al.* 167)—and individual scripts that retain elements of didacticism and manipulation from the young adult problem novel. This distinction pertains specifically to what Jason Mittell identifies as "the ongoing long-form narrative structure of series television" (29), in terms of an ongoing story told in fragments across several weekly episodes by a team of writers. In other words, although there is always the possibility of multiple readings (a term I favour over the negative connotations of Livingstone's term "misinterpretation") of this series or any television text, many of the *Degrassi* storylines appear concerned with guiding their viewers toward clearly preferred readings of the resolution's ideological message, using the visual language of television—such as close-up shots, dialogue, pacing, and scene breaks—to replace the codes of adolescent problem fiction. In media interviews, series co-creator and executive producer

Linda Schuyler frequently cites her preference for storylines that both “entertain” and “enlighten”: responding specifically to negative feedback concerning a storyline depicting two gay teenagers on their first date, she noted, “I don’t mind people taking offense as long as I know we’ve done our research, the storytelling is solid, and our messaging is right” (qtd. in Gedeon 12; see also Deziel; Niehart 42; Shulgan). Although she does not specify what criteria are used to discern which messages are “right,” particularly important to her is to depict adolescent characters who solve their problems through interaction and discussion with their peers—usually with little adult involvement. (While the supporting cast includes teachers, principals, and guidance counselors who are peripherally involved throughout the series, the parents of most of the young characters appear rarely, if ever.) In her discussion of the commercial success of Canadian youth dramas, Julie Gedeon notes that, according to Schuyler, *Degrassi* “never features anything that doesn’t happen in reality” (12), meaning that all the “problems” depicted in the series are the problems of real adolescents discovered through the writers’ research.

Such is the conundrum of *Degrassi: The Next Generation*: if the series depicts young people struggling to survive their adolescent experiences independent of adult involvement, hidden beneath this appearance is the creative team of writers, directors,

producers, story editors, and network executives who decide what those experiences will be—all of whom, needless to say, are adults. On the one hand, the fact that the characters are played by actual adolescents appears to break down some of the unmitigated authority of adult author over adolescent reader found in adolescent fiction, given that the creative input of the young cast is taken into account by the writing staff, leading to what Geoff Pevere and Greig Dymond term “bullshit-free teen cred” (118; see also Cole 202–06; Ellis 96–97). On the other hand, because the “authentic” reality depicted in the series is nevertheless shaped by how adults interpret what adolescent culture is or should be, using real adolescent actors to play out these scripts in some ways masks that power relationship between adult author, adolescent performer, and adolescent viewer. This does not mean that any attempt by an adult to co-opt adolescent experience must be oppressive or detrimental, but it is worth emphasizing the extent to which *Degrassi*’s supposedly “real,” supposedly authentic depiction of adolescent life is shaped and driven by the series’ political agenda (to enlighten while entertaining) and by the form of episodic television: after all, this “reality” is locked within the constraints of a visual narrative of twenty-one-minute episodes, each of which comprises a teaser, two acts, and a tag, with a Plot A and a Plot B developing toward a thematically linked resolution.

In his contribution to *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997), Stuart Hall differentiates among three approaches to the study of representation: the reflective/mimetic approach, which presumes that a system of representation works “like a mirror, to *reflect* the true meaning as it already exists in the world” (24); the intentional approach, which presumes that language can only mean what the speaker or creator intended; and the constructionist approach, which considers meaning to be created through systems of representation such as language, art, and text. In both the extensive media coverage and the minimal amount of scholarly response that the *Degrassi* franchise has received, all three approaches have been invoked, sometimes interchangeably. The multiple incarnations of the overall series have received consistent praise for their commitment to depicting struggles and realities that some real adolescents do face and that most television series intended for this audience tend to ignore (see Byers, “Revisiting Teenage Truths”). As revealed in the epigraph that opens this paper, Schuyler sees the series as *reflecting* adolescent realities that already exist—at least for some adolescents. However, both the reflective and the intentional approach are limiting, particularly given a key example of actual viewers who interpreted one storyline in ways that could not have been predicted by the writing staff: “Whisper to

a Scream” (3.8), which depicts a recurring character, Ellie, cutting herself with her protractor in an attempt to offset a panic attack, is ostensibly concerned with *reflecting* a real health issue that concerns actual adolescents and using the episode’s resolution, which shows the character at the guidance counsellor’s office after she is confronted by a classmate about her problem, as a means to urge adolescent viewers who self-mutilate to seek help. While the episode’s resolution appears designed to steer viewers toward this message, however, a 2004 article in the *Winnipeg Free Press* showed what can happen despite apparently “closed” resolutions: the article reported that a group of students at an elementary school in Québec started cutting themselves with protractors *after* watching this episode of *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, in imitation of a popular character (“Show blamed”; see also Niehart 45). In other words, although the episode seemed designed to dramatize a debilitating trend that already existed for some adolescents (a reflective reading), in this particular case the episode actually *created* such a fad for this group of particular viewers.

Due to this possible contradiction between the intentions of the producers and the responses of actual viewers, I view this television series as a form of cultural mediation between the adult producers, who insert in these storylines specific ideological messages, and the implied adolescent viewers who

apparently need this guidance but who may or may not decode those ideological messages in accordance with the adult producers' intentions. In this sense, at least, the adolescence staged in *Degrassi: The Next Generation* is anything but "real." This particular image of adolescence exists instead within a system of representation, a concept that Hall defines as "the production of meaning through language" (16). In addition to pondering what meanings these storylines offer adolescents, I am interested in how the young people represented in the series function as signs of these ideological messages created and propagated by adults. Much like the novels I mentioned above, which use language and the constraints of the young adult problem novel to create plausible or implausible characters and situations, *Degrassi: The Next Generation* uses images of real children to create the appearance of reality. I focus on two extended storylines from the third season of the series, involving abortion and gay male sexuality, which received an unusual amount and range of responses during the initial network broadcast of the season in Canada and in the United States during the 2002–2003 television season. A reflective approach to these storylines would focus on the fact that unwanted pregnancy and the pangs of coming out are issues that some actual adolescents face, a stance that I do not necessarily oppose; I prefer, however, to consider how the series produces meaning

through these controversial storylines—in other words, instead of focusing on how the series reflects adolescent problems that already exist, I will look at what messages the series reflects back. Using a constructionist approach to these episodes does not suppose that the television series is encouraging real teenagers to come out of the closet or to see abortion as a "simple" solution to an unwanted pregnancy, even though some commentators have voiced those concerns (see Aurthur; Gedeon 12). Instead, given the relative rarity of these two adolescent realities in either adolescent television or even adolescent problem fiction (see Rowe; "10th Grade Outing"), I want to consider what messages the young people represented in this visual narrative offer about identity and power, and what the implications are of having the hidden adult creators lurking behind the hallways of the soundstage on which the school set is built.

### **Adolescence and the Two-Way Mirror**

Created by Linda Schuyler and Yan Moore and produced by Epitome Pictures of Toronto, *Degrassi: The Next Generation* is a thematic follow-up to two preceding series, *Degrassi Junior High* (CBC, forty-two episodes, 1987–1989) and *Degrassi High* (CBC, twenty-eight episodes, 1989–1991), both enduring popular cultural phenomena in Canada and internationally. The shift from a public (CBC) to a

commercial broadcaster (CTV) indicates some of the changes in values and perceived viewer needs in the decade between the two “generations,” in terms of its cast members (professional instead of amateur child and adult actors), its budget and production values, its choices of story topics, and its filming style; the change in U.S. broadcasters (PBS for the first two series; The N, a teen specialty channel affiliated with Nickelodeon, for the third) likewise reflects such changes. In other words, while the CBC has as its primary agenda to deliver Canadian content to Canadian viewers, the CTV imports most of its programming from the U.S. and is decidedly more ratings- and profit-driven. The two-part opening episode, “Mother and Daughter Reunion” (1.1–2), links the new incarnation to its predecessors with its focus on twelve-year-old Emma Nelson, whose mother, Christine “Spike” Nelson, gave birth to her at age fourteen in the second season of *Degrassi Junior High*. In order to update the *Degrassi* form of storytelling for the digital age (as well as for the needs and values of the new broadcasters), the episode depicts Emma, a budding political activist, fawning over e-mail correspondence from a cute sixteen-year-old boy named Jordan, who supports her crusade to save the rain forest. When she agrees to meet him in person for the first time despite the disapproval of her friends, she discovers that “Jordan” is in fact an adult cyberstalker who attempts to assault her

sexually. Meanwhile, Spike is anticipating her ten-year high-school reunion, which brings back several key characters from the original series. Among them are Joey and Caitlin, who dated sporadically throughout the preceding two series and whose relationship exploded in *School’s Out!* (1992), a post-series telefilm in which Joey has an affair with another girl. Although they have not seen each other in the intervening time, they strive to negotiate a new friendship as adults. In blending the two generations of characters together, the premiere episode attempts to draw two generations of viewers.

Subsequent episodes in this initial season shift the focus toward the new cast of seventh- and eighth-grade students at Degrassi Community School. Because the recurring characters are fairly young, many of the initial storylines deal with pressures to grow up prematurely. For example, in “The Mating Game” (1.6), Ashley becomes jealous when her boyfriend, Jimmy, is chosen to play the lead in *Romeo and Juliet* alongside her friend/nemesis Paige. After a guest lecture by sex therapist “Dr. Sally” (played by Dr. Sue Johansen) that demonstrates proper condom use, Ashley considers becoming sexually active in an attempt to maintain Jimmy’s interest in her. On the one hand, the episode risks confirming the concern of some parents that discussions of sex (even safe sex) in school settings or on television will prompt real adolescents to decide to have sex, which is what



Ashley considers. On the other hand, a sequence of follow-up scenes indicates that Dr. Sally's lecture about the necessary responsibilities that accompany the decision to become sexually active has affected them all, in spite of their giggles at the sight of a no-nonsense woman rolling a condom down a banana. Immediately after Ashley hints at what she has planned for their upcoming anniversary, Jimmy's friend Spinner advises him to buy condoms. Ashley also shops for condoms over the Internet because, as she cheerfully reminds her friend Terri, safe sex is "the guy's and the girl's responsibility." In the end, Ashley and Jimmy both decide that, even though they are physically able to and have taken all necessary precautions, they just aren't ready for sex, nor is sex a requirement for their romance. The final message is twofold, then: the episode states explicitly that there is no hurry for them to become sexually active, but they will have the resources to stay safe once they are ready.

In many ways, "The Mating Game" confirms Trites's observation that "for many characters in YA novels, experiencing sexuality marks a rite of passage that helps them define themselves as having left childhood behind" (84). Ashley does not want to have sex, but she contemplates doing so because of external pressures to become more grown-up (although none of this pressure comes from Jimmy himself). In the context of young adult

fiction, specifically the power of adult author over the adolescent readers their texts target, Trites notes that "adolescent literature is as often an ideological tool to curb teenagers' libido as it is some sort of depiction of what adolescents' sexuality actually is" (85). This episode of *Degrassi: The Next Generation* in many ways corroborates Trites's remark, given that the authority of the adult screenwriters over both the characters and the implied viewers is hidden behind the depiction of adolescent characters making this decision on their own, free from outside influence. Although it is certainly possible to interpret the discussion of safe sex as an invitation to contemplate becoming sexually active, the episode's resolution seems to be more concerned with providing viewers with the imaginative capacity to resist pressure than it is with vindicating the desire of two thirteen-year-olds to have sex.

The resolution of this particular episode appears fairly closed: its narrative structure suggests that these characters (or character types) are used to enact the apparent ideological agenda of the writers and producers, which creates adolescent subject positions that viewers are invited to adopt in order to accept these ideological messages about the importance of delaying sexual activity even after learning about what constitutes safe sex. Future storylines become more complex and polysemic, particularly when spread out over multiple episodes.



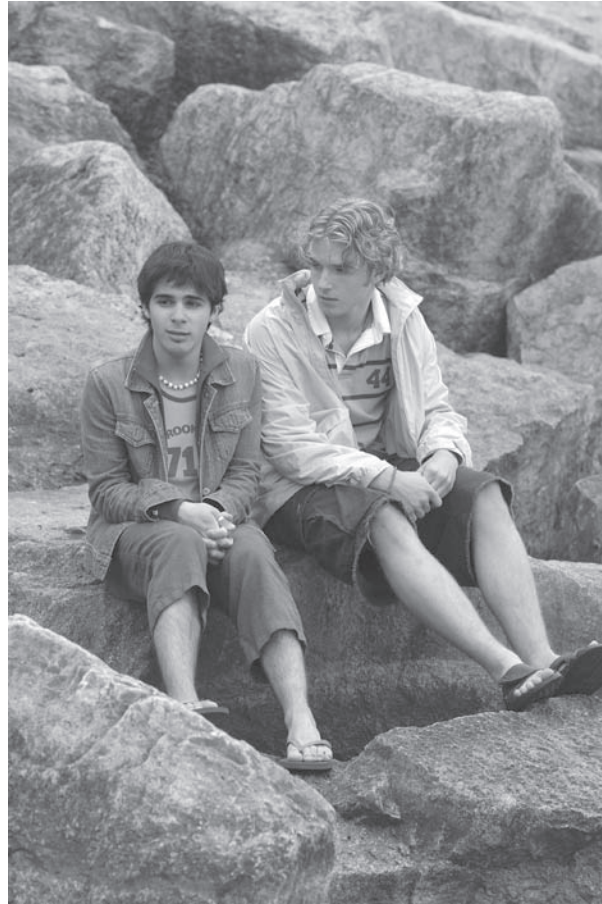
After Manny's (Cassie Steele, right) pregnancy test proves positive, she and Spike (Amanda Stepto, left) discuss her options.  
Photographer: Stephen Scott.

For instance, when the series returns to the question of sex education in a related storyline two years later in which fourteen-year-old Manny chooses to terminate an unplanned pregnancy, multiple readings become possible in addition to the closed, liberal,

pro-choice stance that individual episodes apparently endorse. First, though, I turn to an extended storyline that depicts a male character striving to accept his gay sexuality, in order to explore the ways that supporting characters are used to respond to a central

character's dilemma and the ways in which narrative continuity is sometimes sacrificed to the depiction of appropriate—and opposed—character types.

In “Careless Whisper” (2.14), Ellie looks for clues as to whether her friendship with Marco will ever develop into a relationship. Although unsure of his feelings for Ellie or for girls in general, Marco gives it his best shot in an attempt to counter Spinner's constant homophobic teasing. When Marco admits to Ellie that he is still confused about his sexuality, she unhesitatingly offers friendship and support, even proposing to accompany him to a gay teen support group. In a later episode, “How Soon is Now?” (2.20), Ellie presses him for a final answer, pointing out that his ambivalence—which she understands he needs—is nevertheless unfair to her. In “Pride” (3.4–5), a two-part episode early the following season, Marco and his friends spend a day at the beach, joined by Paige's gay older brother, Dylan. Spinner encourages Marco to act more like a boyfriend to Ellie, not knowing they have broken up due to her exasperation with her role as his “safety girlfriend.” Spinner, who now considers Marco to be his best friend, expresses his surprise that Marco never told him about their break-up. Dylan wonders to Paige and Hazel whether Marco might be gay, but when Paige mentions this theory to Spinner he vehemently denies it. Ironically, it is once Spinner notices Marco interacting freely and comfortably with a crowd



Dylan (John Bregar, right) tries to befriend Marco (Adamo Ruggiero, left) at the end of a troublesome day at the beach.

Photographer: Stephen Scott.

of female extras that his suspicions build, and the camera focuses on facial expressions that signify Spinner's confusion. He pressures Marco to date Hazel, but when that backfires, Spinner demands to know why. When Marco admits that he's gay, Spinner storms off as the words "To be continued" flash across the screen below a freeze-frame of Marco looking distraught and alone.

As with "The Mating Game," the ideological message appears fairly closed. In stark contrast with Canadian young adult problem novels that privilege a heterosexual protagonist's negative reaction to the discovery that his best friend is gay—such as Diana Wiener's *Bad Boy* (1989) and Brian Payton's *Hail Mary Corner* (2001), which I have discussed elsewhere (see Lefebvre)—this episode privileges Marco's perspective, offering close-ups of his face when he feels uncomfortable, a camera technique that works to strengthen viewer sympathy. Any internal contemplation, of course, cannot be reproduced visually within the conventional codes of television. In both parts of this episode, supporting characters are positioned at two opposite extremes, with Spinner declaring unconditional rejection and paranoia and Jimmy and Paige declaring unconditional friendship and acceptance. No other voices are heard. While Spinner's initial reaction may reflect the homophobia that some real adolescents feel, the narrative goes to great lengths to demonstrate that Spinner, not Marco,

is the one who needs to change. Unlike Wiener's and Payton's texts, which depict straight protagonists rejecting their gay friends, this episode of *Degrassi: The Next Generation* clearly offers the message that it is homophobia—not the gay friend—that should be rejected.

The narrative offers this message in two specific ways: one, by having fellow characters (Paige and Jimmy) openly challenge and denounce Spinner's attitude; and two, by introducing external characters who serve to give Spinner an indication of what *real* homophobia can look like. In the resolution to this episode, Marco is assaulted by four grown men while walking through Toronto's gay village on his way to meet his friends. The episode makes an explicit contrast between Jimmy's expression of reassurance to Marco with Spinner's total lack of sympathy. Immediately after a traumatized Marco pledges to forget Dylan and to refuse to commit to any sexual label, Spinner attempts to ignore his own homophobia by trying to persuade Marco to "stop being gay," implying that their friendship could easily resume if this happened (a promise that is also made in Wiener's and Payton's texts). When Marco compares Spinner's homophobia to the violence that was done to him the night before, the point hits home, despite Spinner's protest. By ending on this note, giving Marco the last word, and freezing on Spinner's reaction, the episode arguably anticipates

the response of viewers who may share Spinner's homophobia and explicitly exposes the damage caused by homophobic discourse. This storyline offers a consistent message for multiple categories of viewers. For adolescent viewers struggling to define or accept a non-normative sexuality, the episode provides a strong role model who will "make it through," as the theme song promises. For heterosexual viewers, the storyline's depiction of numerous friends who unhesitatingly embrace Marco as their friend gives them a model for the imaginative capacity to do the same. And for viewers who may identify with Spinner's homophobic rejection, the episode acknowledges the reality of homophobia only long enough to challenge it openly. The episode invites viewers who wouldn't otherwise consider having a gay friend to confront their own internalized homophobia, since the narrative makes it clear that Jimmy and Paige are absolutely right to be unconditionally supportive and that Spinner is absolutely wrong to be uncomfortable, threatened, and hateful. The episode makes this contrast even more explicit by rewriting the characters' back stories, so that Spinner and Marco begin as best friends, forgetting Spinner's homophobic teasing of Marco the previous season. While the resolution of this particular episode is somewhat open-ended, given that Marco remains too traumatized to begin a relationship with Dylan and given that Spinner has

only begun to recognize his homophobia, follow-up episodes later in the season return to reinforce these consistent messages. In "Against All Odds" (3.9), despite claiming to have dealt with Marco's "gayosity," Spinner becomes comically paranoid that Marco is desperately in love with him until his fears are once and for all put to rest. By the end of the season, in "It's Raining Men" (3.19), any residue of Spinner's homophobia has vanished as he helps Marco prepare for his first date with Dylan (which is a disaster, as are all first dates in this series). While the messages across this narrative arc are consistent with the ideology of anti-homophobia espoused in "Pride," extended storylines across multiple episodes can also end up offering a multiplicity of messages that may be more challenging to keep track of.

### **Whatever It Takes: Staging the Bad Girl**

My discussion so far has centred on the storytelling techniques used in *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. In terms of both the subject matter and the discursive strategies used to offer dominant meanings to an implied audience of adolescent viewers through closed resolutions, the series blends the generic constraints of the soap opera—whose focus on an extended cast of characters provides multiple avenues of identification for viewers and whose "continuous serial form," according to Christine Gledhill, "requires that the ending of one episode is the beginning of the

next, so the meaning of events is never easily pinned down" (343)—and those of the adolescent problem novel, with closed meanings and resolutions, which are the exact opposite. While the larger story told in the series is ongoing, both the show's narrative structure and the agenda of the producers require that the problem broached in any particular episode be resolved within the twenty-one-minute frame. Certainly, it is always possible to interpret a storyline in ways that go against the narrative's dominant meaning—or "messaging," to use Linda Schuyler's term—which was made apparent in my earlier discussion of viewers who read a storyline depicting a character who self-mutilates as an invitation to imitate this action, apparently ignoring the resolution that shows Ellie seeking help for her problem. By focusing on how the series *constructs* instead of *reflects* reality, I have demonstrated some of the ways in which individual episodes adapt characters and the overall continuity to fit particular problems or messages. The occasional disruption of continuity can be an added complication for some viewers: given the show's reception as an "international cult-hit TV show for teenagers," to use Ben Neihart's phrase (24), and given the availability of episodes in reruns, on DVD, or for download over the Internet, viewers have the opportunity to watch and re-watch favourite moments in any particular order. As shown as well by the range of fan-owned websites and

message boards and by the strong audience response during publicity tours, part of the audience consists of expert viewers who can place a particular episode's "messaging" within the context of the overall series or season arc—in other words, viewers who would notice and wonder why Spinner taunts Marco with homophobic slurs one season and then refuses to believe that Marco could actually be gay the next, an incongruity that would be missed by viewers who watch one of these episodes in isolation. In this sense, meaning becomes potentially multiple or open for viewers who notice such connections across episodes, despite the apparently closed resolution in the episode "Pride." My concern in this next section is with an ongoing storyline that offers multiple messages at once, depending on whether episodes are studied in isolation or as part of a larger narrative arc.

In her discussion of girl power and third-wave feminism in the larger *Degrassi* oeuvre, Michele Byers discusses storylines involving unplanned pregnancy in all three series, claiming that "[t]he story arcs about teenagers and sex are produced in a feminist framework that sees sexual knowledge as central to female empowerment, that recognizes self-determination about one's own body as an inherent right, and that places the question of 'choice' in the foreground" ("Have Times Changed?" 197). Throughout the three incarnations, five unplanned

pregnancies prompt adolescent women to choose a range of options—one keeps her baby, three terminate the pregnancy, and most recently a fifth carries her baby to term with plans to give him up for adoption—in all cases advocating a liberal, pro-choice stance. Although many viewers were uncomfortable with fourteen-year-old Manny's decision to have an abortion, anxious that this depiction would encourage young people to become sexually irresponsible and see abortion as a "simple" solution to an unplanned pregnancy, Schuyler defended the decision to write this storyline, pointing out that the series is reflecting a statistical reality in Canada (see Aurthur; Gedeon 12). While the series was applauded in Canada for its pro-choice stance, The N refused to broadcast this two-part episode, despite the gap in the larger story arc that this form of censorship created (see Byers, "Revisiting Teenage Truths" 31–32, 38; Panarese 67–70; Shulgan).

In a *New York Times* article discussing the history of the depiction of unplanned pregnancy in American network television, Kate Aurthur notes that, while many female characters who unexpectedly become pregnant contemplate all their choices, implying a pro-life stance, very few women characters ultimately end up choosing to terminate their pregnancy, making abortion "television's most persistent taboo" (27). The second season of *Degrassi: The Next Generation* contains this very storyline in "White

Wedding" (2.12–13), an episode that depicts Spike discovering she is pregnant for a second time on the eve of her wedding and contemplating all her options, including abortion. In this episode, a furious Emma counters Spike's pro-choice argument with her own anti-abortion stance, and Spike ends up choosing to keep her baby. The following season, this range of options is offered again, but both the circumstances and the outcome differ significantly from the pattern of narratives that Aurthur discusses.

In "Accidents Will Happen" (3.14–15), Manny suspects she is pregnant and turns to Spike for advice. Not only does Manny find herself in precisely the same situation Spike did fifteen years earlier—pregnant at age fourteen as a result of a single sexual encounter, apparently without the kind of sex education that Jimmy and Ashley were provided in the first season of *The Next Generation*—but Manny's best friend is Emma, who is the direct result of Spike's decision to keep her baby. In other words, had Spike chosen to terminate her pregnancy fifteen years ago, not only would Emma not exist, but neither would this series. The parallel between Spike's and Manny's experiences indicates that the lack of sex education offered to adolescents has hardly changed from one generation to the next, given that Manny cannot recall whether her partner used a condom. As well, Manny approaches Spike in search of someone who will not judge her for becoming pregnant so young

and also as evidence of what a teenage mother's existence can resemble. Initially contemplating keeping her baby after the pregnancy test proves positive, Manny returns to Spike's house to discuss her options. The dominant message in this scene and in the rest of the episode is that Manny must face the consequences of a mistake, but that ultimately it is her right to choose what those consequences will be. Spike refuses to tell her what to do but reminds her that responsibility and choice go together; only when Manny contemplates sacrificing her wishes for Craig's does Spike intervene by pointing out that his involvement may not be permanent, but hers will be. In a later scene, Manny reveals to Emma that she has told her mother about her pregnancy and that, much to her surprise and relief, her mother has proven much more supportive than she could ever have expected:

MANNY. And you know what? She's even driving me.

*Cut to Emma; camera slowly moves toward her.*

EMMA. Where?

MANNY. (hesitates) She's driving me to the clinic—I'm getting an abortion.

*Cut to close-up of Emma.*

EMMA. You can't.

*Cut to close-up of Manny.*

MANNY. Look, I know you think it's wrong—

EMMA. And your child would too!

*Emma crosses the room. Manny follows her.*

MANNY. I'm just trying to do the right thing here—for me—you know, for everyone, I guess. I wouldn't want to give a baby some crappy life with a mom who isn't ready.

EMMA. Yeah, well, at least it would have a life. What about adoption? There are agencies with great counselors.

MANNY. I know, but I can't go through giving birth! It's so terrifying. And then going to school huge and everyone knows about it?

EMMA. You can get through all that.

MANNY. I can't—I swear. I'm fourteen. Emma, please—please, you have to understand.

Byers sees Manny's decision as "unremorseful[]" ("Revisiting" 31), and in light of the way that her abortion is rarely referred to throughout the rest of the series, I would support such a stance. In the context of this particular scene. It is clear, however, that Manny agonizes over her decision. The dialogue with Emma, who is liberal in most respects but is staunchly anti-abortion due to the fact that her mother's pregnancy was unplanned, reveals that Manny has considered all her options but has chosen the termination of the pregnancy as the best one for her. Emma initially refuses to support Manny's decision, but she reconfigures her response in a later



scene in which Craig attempts to counter Manny's right to choose, where she aligns herself with her mother and acknowledges that the choice must be Manny's even if she opposes it. As in "The Mating Game" and "Pride," the resolution of this particular episode is fairly closed: the dominant message seems to be that this choice must be made solely by Manny. When examining the overall circumstances under which Manny became pregnant, however, a wider range of meanings become possible, some of which undercut the apparent dominant meaning of "Accidents May Happen."

In season two of *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, Manny falls in love with Craig, but after one disastrous date he decides that their one-year age difference is insurmountable and starts dating Ashley. In "U Got the Look" (3.3), Manny decides to change her look from "cute" to "hot" in an attempt to attract an older guy. Such a look involves wearing "crop tops," low-cut jeans, and thongs; when this violates the *Degrassi* dress code, she wears low-cut jeans with no underwear at all. Low camera shots following her behind as she struts down the hallway (sometimes in slow motion) indicate that viewers are invited to follow this emphasis on Manny's scantily clad body. Confirming Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, which posits that the camera's "eye" sexualizes the female body for both male and female viewers, these scenes replicate the libidinous gaze of the

(heterosexual) male crowd. Manny feels vindicated in her new choice of costume after Sully reconsiders his disinterest in her and after a scene that shows a group of boys flocked around her, not in support of the environmental demonstration she and Emma are running, but because of her body on display. Her enthusiasm is undercut by disapproving comments from both Emma and their classmate Liberty that explicitly link her outfits with a poor attitude and low self-esteem, as well as by the rift that has occurred in Emma and Manny's friendship. However, the outfits remain in subsequent episodes—as does the attitude.

Unlike a great many episodes of this series that appear concerned with guiding viewers toward a closed ideological message, this episode's resolution remains open. Moreover, the larger story arc is not resumed immediately, given that Manny appears only peripherally in the subplot of "Pride" (3.4–5) and not at all in episode 3.6. Once the narrative returns to Manny in "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" (3.7), it is to contrast Manny's crumbling relationship with Sully with the roadblock in Ashley and Craig's relationship: Ashley agrees to have sex with Craig after he finally admits that he loves her (something he found "difficult"), but when she discovers that he has told Spinner about their plans, she breaks up with him. Craig and Manny, both on the rebound, end up making out; there is the suggestion that their

encounter progressed beyond that point, but Manny refuses to tell Emma (their rift apparently mended) what happened except to say that it was “the best night of my life.” The episode concludes with Craig and Ashley reconciling before Manny can talk to him, once again leaving the resolution open and ongoing. (It is worth noting, as well, that even Marco remarks in this episode that “Manny’s just putting it all out there.”) Next, in “Against All Odds” (3.9), Manny changes her strategy when Ashley and Ellie spend a weekend together in Montréal. Although Craig claims to be uninterested in reprising their earlier encounter, Manny invites him to a rave and coaxes Emma to go with her, pointing out that a boy Emma likes, Chris, is scheduled to guest-DJ there. Manny also persuades Emma to wear a revealing outfit, pointing out that “you gotta do whatever it takes.” When Emma discovers that Chris has a girlfriend and that their relationship is on the rocks, she and Manny interpret this development quite differently:

MANNY You wait for the fight to end. Chris is hurt—he needs a shoulder to cry on—there you are.

EMMA OK—that’s totally evil.

MANNY It may be evil, but it’s effective.

EMMA I can’t do that! It’s not right.

MANNY Yes it is, and yes you can.

*Emma considers it.*

EMMA Whatever it takes, right?

By directly alluding to the series’ theme song lyrics (“Whatever it takes, I know I’m gonna make it through”), Manny and Emma’s discussion reveals the ways that they are negotiating a male-centred culture that requires them to empower themselves through their ability to attract and manipulate men. In a scene that has the camera alternating between Emma and Chris talking in a quieter room and Manny and Craig on the dance floor, the narrative depicts Emma unable to apply Manny’s directive: although she and Chris kiss tentatively, she cannot handle capitalizing on his vulnerability, nor can she ignore the existence of the girl he is dating. (The fact that Emma is white whereas Chris and his girlfriend are black is never referred to as a factor.) Meanwhile, when Craig attempts to resist Manny’s advances by reminding her that he has a girlfriend, she is very reassuring: “It’s OK—I can keep a secret.”

In case the contrast between Emma and Manny were not obvious enough in this scene, the resolution goes to great lengths to make the two characters conform to a binary opposition between good girl and bad girl, both in terms of their respective decisions at the rave and in terms of the derogatory names they call each other: “stuck-up prude princess” and “school slut.” Emma and Manny do not compete for the attentions of the same boy but find tension in

their differing interpretations of what role they need to create for themselves in a sex-obsessed, male-centred culture, given that neither of them brings up Craig's and Chris's responsibility in their decision to cheat on their girlfriends, in Craig's case, more than once. In the earlier scene at the rave, Craig is shown to be simply too sexually excited to remember his commitment to Ashley or his resolve to leave. While the episode's final moment—a freeze-frame of Manny and Emma staring at each other, both hurt and angry—offers a dominant message about femininity that is not resolved in this episode, the focus on Manny and Emma overlooks a participant who is not depicted in this scene. Craig's absence in this discussion of responsible choices, as well as his apparent powerlessness to resist Manny, ends up subtly reinscribing his power. But because he is absent, his male power is hidden beneath the dominant message of this episode's resolution.

This discrepancy between male and female attitudes about fidelity and responsibility continues in "Holiday" (3.11–12), a two-part episode that depicts the cast preparing for the holiday season. The narrative makes direct parallels between Craig's actions and Joey's from a decade earlier (Craig is the son of Joey's late wife and now lives with Joey and his daughter), but these explicit links remain incomplete. Craig and Manny have continued to see each other without Ashley's knowledge. When

Spinner catches Craig and Manny together, Craig worries that Spinner will disapprove of his actions, but Spinner is envious instead and supports Craig's apparent inability to choose between them. Ashley and Manny eventually realize he has been lying to both of them and they both dump him. Meanwhile, Caitlin struggles with the discovery that she still has feelings for Joey, although she refuses to express them when Joey's present girlfriend, Sydney, advises her to back off. Upon finding out what Craig has done, Joey reminisces about his past relationship with Caitlin: "I was young and stupid and I cheated on her with a girl named Tessa Campanelli. Caitlin found out and it was one of the biggest regrets of my life." When Joey assures Craig that he'll "get over it," Craig retorts that neither Joey nor Caitlin has succeeded in moving on since the events depicted in *School's Out!* Realizing his true feelings, Joey ends the relationship with Sydney, and he and Craig chase after Caitlin, who has boarded a plane for Montréal. In the episode's final moments—in a scene meant to depict the resolution of a romance that began fifteen years earlier—Joey makes a romantic declaration: "Caitlin, when I broke your heart all those years ago, I was sure I'd lost you forever. . . . I moved on, but I never really left." Caitlin does not confess in turn, but smiles at him and moves to get her luggage from the plane, at which point Joey draws her close for a kiss.

According to Gledhill, a heterosexual kiss at

the end of a self-contained narrative signals the resolution from “disequilibrium” to “equilibrium restored” (368). Given that the overall *Degrassi* franchise has delayed this resolution for fifteen years, there is much at stake in this particular episode, which depicts the ending of obstacles in favour of an apparently “satisfying” romantic resolution. In order to maintain the emphasis on this dominant meaning, however, viewers are required to overlook elements that might call this “closed” resolution into question, particularly the fact that Joey—the one who was unfaithful to Caitlin in *School’s Out!*—has recovered from his “regret”: regular viewers may recall that Joey has dated several women since his wife’s death, which contradicts his claim that he “never really left.” Enjoying the satisfaction of this resolution likewise requires viewers to overlook Caitlin’s silence in this scene and her view of herself in the rest of the episode. In light of the fact that Caitlin considers herself to be a failure because her investment in her career has caused her to remain single, her silence in this final scene has a number of complex implications that seem to be overshadowed by the dominant meaning of the resolution: her silence is perhaps evidence of the fact that she has learned, as have Emma and Manny, to sacrifice herself to gain love. Joey’s reference to Tessa Campanelli in his discussion with Craig would likewise prompt further meanings for viewers who recall the events depicted in *School’s Out!*: in this

film Tessa actively pursues Joey, knowing he and Caitlin are in a serious relationship. Eventually, after discovering that Joey has lied to her about breaking up with Caitlin, Tessa goes to a health clinic to have an abortion—without telling Joey. Until Caitlin finds out about Joey’s infidelity, she decides to sacrifice her university plans in order to stay with him, meaning that his betrayal is directly responsible for her pursuit of higher education and her career success—and so, as a result, the fact that she is still single and therefore a failure in “Holiday.”

What this means is that another interpretation becomes possible, beneath the apparent closure of “Holiday,” for viewers who have the film *School’s Out!* as part of their viewing repertoire, given that those viewers would know about Tessa’s abortion, which none of the characters depicted on screen appear aware of. And so, Joey unknowingly makes another connection between his past and Craig’s present circumstances: although Manny does not realize it for another two episodes, she has been pregnant since the end of 3.8. In other words, the liberal, pro-choice discourse stated explicitly in individual episodes in this series—one that appears to empower young women with sexual agency and self-knowledge—is thus undercut by the presence of further messages that become apparent only when tracing the pattern of unplanned pregnancies beyond the internal logic of each episode: while “good” girls

who accidentally get pregnant within monogamous relationships keep their babies (as Spike does as an adolescent and again as an adult), it is the “bad” girls—the ones who are shown as aggressive in their pursuit of men whose hormones interrupt their conscience or responsibility—who terminate their pregnancy (see Panarese for a discussion of Erica’s abortion in *Degrassi High*).

### **Conclusion**

In terms of the series’ narrative structure and the way that it invites viewer identification with particular focal characters as a way of replicating some of the generic conventions of young adult fiction, it is difficult to predict how these particular episodes court sympathy from viewers from one episode to the next. In both the Craig/Ashley/Manny triangle and the Joey/Caitlin/Tessa triangle, the focus is on three clear character-types: the perpetually aroused, deceitful male; the “good” girl who refuses to have sex; and the “bad” girl who is only too willing to become sexually active, so that their choices to have abortions seem like a value judgment against them, in direct contradiction to the apparently liberal, pro-choice stance. The episode “Accidents Can Happen” clearly invites viewers to sympathize with Manny, but the fact that she has already been branded as the “bad” girl for much of the season might make that invitation difficult for regular viewers, even though

at this point in the storyline the past sexualization of Manny’s body and the circumstances under which she got pregnant have been swept away. Caitlin’s implied forgiveness of Joey’s past infidelity (in “Holiday”) is likewise prophetic of future storylines. The following season, Ashley forgives Craig for his past betrayal and they resume their relationship; after Ashley leaves the series at the end of the fourth season, Craig and Manny get back together in season five (at which point Craig himself leaves the series). Caitlin likewise leaves the series the following season, ending her relationship with Joey when a career opportunity requires her to return to Los Angeles.

And so, while individual episodes appear to invite viewers to accept a dominant message or meaning, the incongruity between episodes or even between incarnations of the series can complicate this invitation. Such a complication, then, allows for more meanings than seem to be intended by an individual episode’s discursive strategies and internal logic: after all, as a medium of mass production and mass consumption, the series is courting an audience of regular viewers who have the freedom to watch many or all the episodes, in any order, at any time. In this sense, the series overall is not only polysemic, but what Barthes would call an “ideal (plural) text”:

the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest;

this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach* . . . ; the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language. (5–6)

Given the ways that individual storylines can be reframed in the context of new ones, then, the *Degrassi* franchise is far more complex than the careful “messaging” that is imposed on every episode. In this sense, *Degrassi: The Next Generation* both conforms to the structures of the young adult problem novel and explodes them. Even the Marco storyline has implicit undertones when Plots A and B of specific episodes are compared for their thematic cohesion. In “Careless Whisper,” as Marco struggles to come to terms with his sexuality, Spinner’s younger sister Kendra grows exasperated with her boyfriend, Toby, who smothers her with excessive attention and who has a tendency to decide what she is thinking. In “How Soon is Now?,” at the same time that Marco

admits to Ellie that he is gay, Paige confronts a soccer player who raped her earlier in the season. And the two-part episode “Pride” contains a subplot in which Snake discovers he has leukemia. Similar to the Manny storyline, the seemingly liberal, pro-gay message found in these episodes is thematically linked to dysfunctional dating, sexual assault, and disease. In terms of narrative organization, then, the series includes subtler messages that seem to contradict the right “messaging” that the writers strive to insert into their narratives. Although such contradictions make it more difficult to ascertain what possible reading positions these popular storylines offer viewers, they contribute to the polysemous potential of this “ideal” text by allowing for a range of possible readings that are significant to any number of individual viewers. Given that the narrative allows for gaps and inconsistencies of which the characters do not appear aware, the presence of such open discursive spaces undercuts the structure of storylines that appear to steer viewers toward a preferred reading of an ideological message. For better or for worse, then, the series is both open and closed, both polysemic and didactic, and offers subject positions that are both clear and ambiguous to adolescent viewers.

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