

A certain sensitivity and depth

All the Real Girls, directed by David Gordon Green

David Walsh
9 April 2003

All the Real Girls, directed by David Gordon Green, written by Green and Paul Schneider

David Gordon Green is a young American filmmaker (born 1975). Like his first film, *George Washington* (2000), *All the Real Girls* takes place in a North Carolina mill town.

There is a group of young people, including Paul (Paul Schneider, also the co-screenwriter) and Noel (Zoëy Deschanel). He has a reputation as a “womanizer,” while she is emotionally and sexually inexperienced, recently returned home from six years in an all-girls boarding school. Paul wants this attachment to be different from previous ones, all of which he has ended rather callously. When Noel expresses a sexual interest, he hesitates. She sleeps with someone else during a weekend at a friend’s lakeside party, devastating him. He decides to change his life, but perhaps he’s lost the girl.

There are interesting and less interesting aspects to this film, both credits and debits.

Green strives (sometimes too hard) to make his works distinct and unpredictable. It is a strength that the filmmaker has chosen to organize his material according to what he perceives to be the artistic and dramatic needs of the piece, not the requirements of a particular genre. He films the people, objects and natural settings in a manner (and with a rhythm) he believes will advance his aims—to reveal the inner lives of a number of people and indicate something about their world—and not in any other manner. There is a principled quality to this, even if the material is not always earth-shattering.

All the Real Girls is composed of a series of generally short sequences, often conversations about this and that, in a number of locations. These have an episodic, dissonant character, with no “natural” progression from one to the next. There is an overall movement forward, but it is an open-ended, often interrupted and dislocated progress.

In an interview in 2000 at the Toronto film festival, Green commented about *George Washington*: “Ideally it’s a film I designed so that you could take a long walk afterward and think about what you’ve seen, and it would feel like a dream. One of those dreams that make perfect sense when you’re dreaming, but you wake up and try to explain it to a friend and you can’t quite figure out the order of things, but you know the mood you’re in. I wanted it to have that quality, of complicated emotions.”

How literally Green intended to be taken on this point is open to question, but *All the Real Girls* has this quality of dreams: people and circumstances change imperceptibly, but dramatically. The dreamer may find himself by a riverbed at one moment and sitting in a hotel lobby at the next, talking to a close friend at one instant and to a dead or entirely imaginary relative immediately afterward. The transitions make complete sense to the sleeper, although they seem absurd on waking. The strength of Green’s film lies in the progression from one emotional state to another, not so they cohere in a naturalistic sense, but that they correspond at their best to a larger human reality. And some images and emotions endure as a result of this depth. One feels, above all, the intense sadness of the most sensitive members of the younger generation faced with the world that they have inherited, and their resilience.

All the Real Girls is on to certain truths. Paul has a fantasy about women, about Noel in particular. To him she is the long-haired, young innocent, someone he can mold, and at the same time, his savior. When she goes beyond that, by sleeping with a stranger (and, incidentally, by cutting her hair, which makes her look years older), he is shattered. It turns out he has the most ridiculous conceptions about nearly everything. The two characters change places emotionally in that same dreamlike fashion referred to above. Suddenly Noel reveals herself to be an actively independent adult, whether she is right in her choices or not, something that

one could not have predicted at the beginning of the film. This aspect of the film is well done.

Green's film reveals a certain sensitivity to human beings. If the dialogue, particularly at its most oblique and would-be poetical, occasionally strains and even makes one wince, a genuine sympathy for people is always operating here. The scene in which Paul obliges his mother (the consistently remarkable Patricia Clarkson), who makes her living as a clown, by donning a costume and wig and helping her entertain at a children's ward in a hospital stays in the memory. There are recognizable faces, gestures, feelings in this work. No small thing.

Credits *and* debits.

All the Real Girls takes place in a mill town in North Carolina. Green, however, apparently insists on the "timelessness" of the piece. The film's weaknesses are bound up with this. Green's work could not, of course, be less timeless. The rusting machinery, decaying town and alienated, stagnant lives fix the historical moment with pinpoint accuracy. This can only be America at the start of the twenty-first century.

Serious art achieves "universality" and hence a certain "timelessness" precisely to the degree that it grasps the particular and immediate in all its fleeting sensuousness. Significant work brings out what is common in human existence, but it does so in a roundabout fashion, through grasping the particular (a particular expression of a universal) in the richest and deepest fashion. The universal is literally flushed out, forced out of the particular by the fullness of the representation.

The self-consciously "timeless" work generally deals in abstract universals, which only palely grasp at reality. Green's artistic intuitions are solid enough to take him half-way. He plants his film solidly in contemporary reality, but wishes to transcend it, without working through its most profound contradictions, which are inevitably *social and historical* in character. So the film has conflicting impulses, and suffers as a result.

The biggest difficulty is that the filmmaker holds emotions and social life apart. He wants to use the social setting merely as a skeleton onto which he hangs his truths. But people are not simply vessels for the working out of eternal human dilemmas, they do this working out under definite historical circumstances, as members of specific classes, all of which impart to these "eternal dilemmas" a quite distinct coloring and character, qualitatively so. The inner lives of Green's characters are inextricably tied to their "outer" lives, as inhabitants of a decaying industrial town, with diminished prospects, at a

particular juncture in history. But the director seems reluctant thus far to work this through.

This "holding apart" weakens both the representation of the emotional states, rendering them at times amorphous and even trivial, and the social existence, which comes in and out of focus, and opens the door for implausibilities. How is it that Noel has been attending a boarding school, which presumably requires money, when her brother seems a typical (perhaps stereotypical) small-town, working class type? Nor for that matter does Paul make a convincing "Casanova"; he's too sensitive by half, more like a Rousseau who complained that his want of success with women proceeded from his having loved them too well. (Schneider is very affecting.) His love for Noel strikes a chord, but his history and circumstances do not.

As a result of its failure to treat society and history as active elements in emotional life, *All the Real Girls* comes dangerously close to arguing for "individual responsibility" as the solution to all problems, even as it *shows* a world deteriorating (and failing) before its characters' and our eyes.

Like a number of other sincere American filmmakers at present, Green relies too heavily at present on intensity and seriousness as things in themselves. [See *The Pledge*, directed by Sean Penn] In the end, one has to be serious and intense—or rebellious—about something of substance, and that inevitably involves a critique of the present social order, even if only in relation to creating the conditions for genuine love relations and fulfilling sexuality.

Nonetheless, it is a rare "independent" American film even worth talking about, and *All the Real Girls* merits considerably more than that. How will Green and his collaborators evolve? One hopes for the best.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact