

TEEN FILM

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION
CATHERINE DRISCOLL



Teen Film
A Critical Introduction

Catherine Driscoll



Oxford • New York

English edition
First published in 2011 by

Berg

Editorial offices:

First Floor, Angel Court, 81 St Clements Street, Oxford OX4 1AW, UK
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

© Catherine Driscoll 2011

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form
or by any means without the written permission of
Berg.

Berg is the imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84788 687 3 (Cloth)
978 1 84788 686 6 (Paper)
e-ISBN 978 1 84788 845 7 (Institutional)
978 1 84788 844 0 (Individual)

Typeset by JS Typesetting Ltd, Porthcawl, Mid Glamorgan
Printed in the UK by the MPG Books Group

www.bergpublishers.com

Teen Film

Documentary film
A young man's
life in a
small town

Open

Berg **Film Genres** series

Edited by Mark Jancovich and Charles Acland

ISSN: 1757-6431

The *Film Genres* series presents accessible books on popular genres for students, scholars and fans alike. Each volume addresses key films, movements and periods by synthesizing existing literature and proposing new assessments.

Published:

Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction

Forthcoming:

Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction

Historical Film: A Critical Introduction

Anime: A Critical Introduction

Documentary Film: A Critical Introduction

This book is for Sean, with love.

Acknowledgements

This book was made possible by the editors of Berg's Film Genres series, Mark Jancovich and Charles Acland, and by Tristan Palmer, our editor at Berg. But it would have been more difficult without the exciting and supportive research environment in which I work. Thanks, as always, to my colleagues in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. I wrote most of this book while on sabbatical at Columbia University in the Institute for Research into Women and Gender. In the course of this research not only many colleagues but friends and family members enthusiastically shared with me their understandings of teen film and favourite or despised examples of the genre. For more personal support and advice I am grateful to Jane Glauberman, Morgan Howard, Meaghan Morris, Jane Park, Ruth Talbot-Stokes and, especially, my son Sean, who vehemently disagreed with most of my ideas about teen film and without whom this would be a very different book. Finally, this is the first book I have written with undergraduate students particularly in mind. It began as a set of lectures on youth culture, adolescence, and teen film, and I want to sincerely thank my students (at the universities of Melbourne, Adelaide, and Sydney) for everything they've taught me.

Differently directed and heavily supplemented articles based on Chapters 1 and 7, and an essay drawing heavily on this research but focused on girl sexuality in teen film, are all forthcoming at the time of publication.

Catherine Driscoll

Contents

List of Illustrations	viii
Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction – The Adolescent Industry: ‘Teen’ and ‘Film’	1
Part I Histories	
1 Modernism, Cinema, Adolescence	9
2 The Teenager and Teenage Film	27
3 Inventing ‘Teen Film’	45
Part II Film Teens	
4 Rites of Passage	65
5 Teen Types and Stereotypes	83
6 Teenage Wasteland	101
Part III Liminal Teen Film	
7 Classification	121
8 Adaptability	135
9 Which Teen/Film?	149
Notes	163
Annotated Guide to Further Reading	175
Filmography	177
Bibliography	183
Index	193

Illustrations

1.1	Andy (Mickey Rooney) and Betsy (Judy Garland). <i>Love Finds Andy Hardy</i> (1938). Director, George B. Seitz.	18
1.2	Promotional poster for theatre lobbies, featuring Clara Bow. <i>The Wild Party</i> (1929). Director, Dorothy Arzner.	21
2.1	'Daddy-O' (Glenn Ford) strives to manage his class. <i>Blackboard Jungle</i> (1955). Director, Richard Brooks.	35
2.2	The Sharks, led by Bernardo (George Chakiris). <i>West Side Story</i> (1961). Director, Robert Wise; choreographer, Jerome Robbins.	43
3.1	Promotional photograph for media coverage featuring Bender (Judd Nelson), Allison (Ally Sheedy), Andrew (Emilio Estevez), Claire (Molly Ringwald), and Brian (Anthony Michael Hall). <i>The Breakfast Club</i> (1985). Director, John Hughes.	47
4.1	Hoover (James Widdoes) and Otter (Tim Matheson) at the toga party. <i>National Lampoon's Animal House</i> (1978). Director, John Landis.	77
5.1	Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar) venturing underground into the vampire's lair. 'Prophecy Girl', <i>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</i> (1997). Creator, Joss Whedon.	99
7.1	Hit-Girl (Chloe Moretz) takes revenge. <i>Kick-Ass</i> (2010). Director, Matthew Vaughn.	122
8.1	Promotional poster used for theatre lobbies, also adapted to promote DVDs, videos, CDs and other merchandise. <i>William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet</i> (1996). Director, Baz Luhrman.	141
9.1	Lalita (Aishwarya Rai) and her sisters and friend. <i>Bride and Prejudice</i> (2004). Director, Gurinder Chadha.	156

Introduction – The Adolescent Industry: 'Teen' and 'Film'

As a teenager in rural Australia I saw many films that now appear in studies of teen film. I remember seeing *Grease* (1978), *Friday the Thirteenth* (1980), *Little Darlings* (1980), *WarGames* (1983) and many more that are included in some histories of teen film and surveys of the genre but excluded from others – *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *The Warriors* (1979), *Blue Lagoon* (1980), and *An American Werewolf in London* (1981). Whether or not I liked these films, I understood them to represent an experience of youth with which I vaguely identified – an adolescence that was unsettled, uncertain and transitional. The social positions and experiences associated with being a teenager in these films didn't really describe my life, and probably few people have ever felt their adolescence was accurately portrayed by teen film. But these films seemed to be addressed to me, which often meant I felt especially equipped to reject them. And they sketched for me a broadly shared terrain on which young people negotiated social transitions that were as simultaneously constrained and volatile as my own.

To this point my experience conforms to most discussions of teen film. But I felt this way about teen film at the movies with my family before I went to high school, at the drive-in with my boyfriend in my mid-teens, at home on video with adult friends in my late teens and across many formats with a wide variety of friends and family (including my son) through my twenties and thirties. At none of these points did the transitions of adolescence on film stop being somehow both relevant and alien to me. In recent years I regularly teach courses on youth culture for which I set teen film texts and my students' responses now contribute to my sense of consistencies and shifts in the field of teen film. My students approach teen film with very varied attitudes and experiences but overwhelmingly recognize two dominant ideas about teen film (although sometimes they disagree with them). First, that teen film is defined most of all by its audience and, second, that whether comic, angst-ridden or violent, the appeal of teen film is as transient as adolescence itself.

David Considine credits the inspiration for his book *The Cinema of Adolescence* to the discovery, while teaching in Australia in the 1970s, that 'Humphrey Bogart and the Dead End Kids' (*Dead End*, 1937) and Jim Stark in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) were just as relevant to his students as they had been decades earlier. His surprise is based on apparent historical and cultural differences. But teen film, Considine found, offered ways of understanding the experience of 'Lebanese

students who spoke almost no English' but could nevertheless watch American teen films of an earlier generation as 'images of themselves' (Considine 1985: v). For Roz Kaveney (2006: 85), writing about the lack of fit between images of American high school and English experiences of adolescence, this would be a colonizing imposition of Hollywood film on the imaginary of youth in other cultures, but I think the question of where teen film comes from, what it represents and for whom, is far more complicated.

My approach to teen film is predominantly discursive rather than aesthetic. That is, I am not going to attempt to define teen film by directorial or editing styles. But an emphasis on adolescence itself, rather than on questions of film style, and a more sociological than formalist approach to generic conventions, is common in studies of teen film. Teen film is generally thought more interesting for what it says about youth than for any aesthetic innovations, and is represented as closely tied to the historically changing experience of adolescence. There are certainly narrative conventions that help define teen film: the youthfulness of central characters; content usually centred on young heterosexuality, frequently with a romance plot; intense age-based peer relationships and conflict either within those relationships or with an older generation; the institutional management of adolescence by families, schools, and other institutions; and coming-of-age plots focused on motifs like virginity, graduation, and the makeover. Engaging with teen film as a genre means thinking about the certainties and questions concerning adolescence represented in these conventions. As Adrian Martin (1994: 66–7) argues, 'the teen in teen movie is itself a very elastic, bill-of-fare word; it refers not to biological age, but a type, a mode of behaviour, a way of being ... The teen in teen movie means something more like youth.' Martin finds useful in this sense Robert Benayoun's list of 'normal qualities of youth: naïveté, idealism, humour, hatred of tradition, erotomania, and a sense of injustice' (Martin 1994: 67). In addition to typical narrative conventions, character types, and formal elements, like the incorporation of contemporary popular culture, there is a sensibility to teen film which Benayoun's list goes some way towards capturing. And this sensibility also explains why neither its subject matter nor its appeal is confined to teenagers.

Not every film with this range of conventional content about teenagers is a teen film (not documentaries, for example) and some films not literally about teenagers are (including most 'college' films, for example). Both 'youth' and 'adolescence' might be more appropriate names for what centres teen film than 'teen'. While 'teen' names a set of tendencies and expectations rather than an identity mapping onto the years thirteen to nineteen, the concept 'teenager' is too narrow to define a genre that is preoccupied with the difficulty as well as the importance of borders. The fact that we label this genre of films 'teen film' is nevertheless significant. 'Teen' describes an historical extension of, and limit on, a period of social dependence after puberty. The contradiction between maturity and immaturity that 'teen' thus describes is central to teen film. But if the genre label is useful, teen film is not defined by

representing teenagers. It is actually as difficult to establish the boundaries of 'teen film' as it is to specify when 'adolescence' begins or ends, and this difficulty is entirely appropriate. I have nevertheless given priority in this book to those films most widely recognized as teen film – that is, I have given priority to mainstream popular anglophone films that predominantly address a youthful audience for stories about adolescence. I do want to ask questions about this prioritization, one which unites other available texts on teen film, but for the first half of the book I am concerned, first of all, with what constitutes this received category of teen film. This means that my discussion of Japanese, Indian, or even Australian teen film, will finally be less extensive than that of much-discussed American standards but this is a necessary sacrifice when striving for a balance between exploring what else can be known about the apparently transparent genre of teen film and questioning the limits of the genre itself.

One apparently central and transparent fact about teen film is that it is *for* adolescents. Previously, when writing about popular film as girl culture, I have distinguished between 'youth film', packed with rebellious subcultural cachet, and 'teen film', centred on the institutional life of adolescents at home and school – the former being generally identified with boys and the latter with girls (Driscoll 2002: 203–34). Other critics make similar claims and Kaveney's (2006) definition of teen film in particular is remarkably similar. This definition differs strikingly from that proposed by historians of the genre like David Considine, Timothy Shary and Thomas Doherty, for whom youth problem films like *Rebel Without a Cause* are paradigmatic examples. For myself, researching this book has brought me to the conclusion that separating 'teen' and 'youth' film obscures the importance of their shared discourse on adolescence. Some films emphasize the institutionally framed world of dependent adolescence, and others the refusal or struggle with that framing, but a vast number of films explore their interdependence.

In this context, defining teen film is also not a matter of assessing which films 'teens' watch, even if my emphasis on the teen films of John Hughes rather than those of François Truffaut could be explained that way. As Emma French argues, a consideration of marketing is useful for defining teen film; distinguishing some films as 'for' as well as 'about' adolescents (French 2006: 102ff). But this does not mean the teen-film audience is a specific demographic. Referring to a range of studies of youth audiences, including a 2000 survey by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), French notes that even the category 'teen audience' is not confined to teenagers. The MPAA study, for example, encompassed viewers from twelve to twenty-four (French 2006: 104–5). The relation between teen film and its audience is 'a complex one which cannot be adequately explained in empirical terms, according to how many teens attend certain films' (French 2006: 107) or even by 'a theory of the ideal spectator inscribed in the text' (French 2006: 107, quoting Morley). But the idea that teen film is made to be watched by the ideal teenager of a particular time and place is taken for granted by most scholarship on teen film.

If my approach to teen film focuses on content rather than style it does not isolate films from their context. It begins with history, although it does not produce a single historical account in which teen film mirrors teenage lives. I agree with Georganne Scheiner (2000: 2) in thinking 'it is productive to use film to understand history, history to understand film, and both to understand adolescence.' As Benton, Dolan and Zisch (1997: 88) argue, introducing a useful bibliography of scholarly work on teen film, 'Studying the films is an important way of understanding an era's common beliefs about its teenaged population within a broader pattern of general cultural preoccupations.' Their bibliography also points to the wide array of available commentary on teen film, including in film magazines and other periodicals, that precedes and surrounds the emergence of Anglophone books on teen film in the 1980s. For this study I have principally drawn on and responded to the more extended discussion of monographs and edited collections, but film reviews in particular offer an appropriately diverse and shifting picture of the genre somewhat lost in scholarly books, including mine.

Shary's short book *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen* (2005) includes a more comprehensive history of teen film than most on the subject. Listing many key films, Shary presents a chronological narrative which stresses how teen film represents a changing American adolescent experience. This restriction of the idea that teen film represents teenagers to American teenagers is very common in scholarship on teen film. Most of the films I have named thus far were produced in the United States (US), and the genre has been strongly identified with a range of specifically US motifs, like cheerleaders and 'the prom'. But the idea that teen film is especially American is also one this book questions, and not only by referring to films that in every way seem to be teen films but are made in Australia, Canada, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, the United Kingdom (UK), or elsewhere. The more significant question is whether the idea of adolescence on which I argue teen film is based is an intrinsically American one exported to these other contexts.

Scholarly texts on teen film as a genre, including those by Considine, Kaveney, and Shary, are often critical of its unrealistic portrayal of adolescent experience. They also tend to judge films in the genre as good or bad in terms of a responsibility to represent adolescence in ways that would be *good for* adolescents. This tendency to moral judgement reflects a tendency in the genre itself to take a moral tone that understands adolescence as both object of training and subject of crisis. In teen film, adolescents are routinely set apart from, and often in conflict with, the 'parent culture' of families, schools and so on. Reference to generational difference threads through the stories, audiovisual styles, and marketing of teen film. While the genre's image of adolescent experience maintains a remarkable consistency – as Considine's anecdote about 1970s teenagers watching *Dead End* implies – it is consistently contradictory. Teen film suggests that adolescent experience consists of both passionate consumption and rejection of conformity, both peer identification and anomie (aimlessness), both emotional intensity and fashion-consciousness,

both rebellion and gullibility. Can these all be unchanging psychosocial facts of development and, at the same, clearly mark out generational difference? Such ideas about adolescence and generation are clearly popularized by teen film, but it is also teen film that over and over again frames these ideas as new to each new generation when it has not produced these ideas in the first place. This presents a problem for any *mimetic* understanding of teen film as a reflection of adolescent lives.

Overall, then, three claims about representation dominate scholarship on teen film: that it is American, that it represents teenage life and concerns, and that it fails to represent teenagers accurately. But does teen film actually represent teenagers at all and, if it does, how and for whom does such representation appear and in what ways does this question of representativeness matter? In order to offer a history of teen film, outline its central conventions, and also ask such questions, I have elected not to write this book as a survey of teen films. Instead, clusters of film examples have been arranged around key questions for defining the genre and for considering its relation to broader ideas about adolescence. Thus I want to conclude my introduction by stressing that film and modern adolescence emerged at the same time and have consistently influenced each other.

In May 1924, film producer B. P. Schulberg published a short opinion piece in the US magazine *Photoplay* entitled 'Meet the Adolescent Industry: Being an Answer to Some Popular Fallacies.' This was one of many defences of cinema published in the popular press in the 1920s. Schulberg associates film with a mesh of promise and vitality, vulnerability and development that we still associate with adolescence. He further claims the contemporary film industry is, like an adolescent, still maturing and not yet predictable although it has developed unique characteristics. But more is at stake in this claim than it might first seem. As I have argued at length elsewhere, the modern idea of adolescence is quite different from the markers of majority and ideas about education of earlier periods (Driscoll 2002: 47–77; 2009: 21–65). Adolescence as an identity crisis bound to both emerging sexuality and training in citizenship was 'discovered' in the nineteenth century by new social sciences and new modes of cultural criticism at the same time as experiments with cameras and film were tending towards cinema. Adolescence and cinema were in many respects new industries for the twentieth century. Two years after Schulberg's (1926: xi) essay, film producer, historian, and film magazine editor, Terry Ramsaye would claim that 'Like all great arts the motion picture has grown up by appeal to the interests of childhood and youth.' In fact film is probably the first artistic medium of which this could be said.

Schulberg and Ramsaye suggest the importance of ideas about the film audience to early associations between adolescence and film. Discussion of cinema's new ways of speaking to its audience sometimes focused on the impressionable audience for expanding mass culture industries, for which youth formed a pivotal example – in, for example, the Weimar essays of Siegfried Kracauer. Sometimes the focus was on the dangerously indiscriminating consumption of irresponsible youth – see, for

example, the essays by Wilton Barrett and Donald Young in a 1926 issue of *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Barrett 1926; Young 1926). In the mass media and in expert books on film, on youth, and on modern life, whether they celebrated or condemned film, youth at the movies was the pivotal test case for the promise and danger of cinema. Concern about what youth sees at the movies might seem like a contemporary issue to readers of today's newspapers, magazines, and blogs, but modern adolescence has always been a sign for and site of cultural change.

Teen Film is divided into three parts, the first discussing histories of teen film, the second generic conventions centred on the characterization of adolescence, and the third the limitations of defining teen film by those conventions. In Part I three chapters deal with three distinct histories of teen film: the pre-World War Two origins of youthful stars and youth-centred film narratives; the institutionalization of the teenager across multiple subgenres in the 1950s; and the apparent renaissance of teen film in the 1980s. Part II explores key themes cohering teen film adolescence: the rite of passage to social independence; the bodily and social trauma of developing a coherent individual identity; and the interplay between developing agency and social alienation. Finally, Part III approaches the ongoing significance of teen film by asking if the genre can be defined in other ways. It considers 'teen film' as part of what studies of youth and youth culture understand as the 'liminal' form of adolescence. These chapters approach teen film as a product of film censorship and classification systems; as a hub for transmedia adaptation; and as a cross-cultural commodity that helps produce cross-cultural ideas about adolescence.

Modern Histories

