

YOUTH IN AMERICAN FILM

Introduction

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In the post-war era, cinema in the United States sought to capitalise on the emerging teenage culture, and teenage films and other films dealing with adolescence soon appeared. Filmic representations of youth have become multiple and diverse, from their first explosion in the fifties, to the “generation gap” films of the American New Wave in the late sixties, through the “gross-out” comedies and teen horror films of the late seventies, to the various generic configurations of the teenpic since the mid-1990s. In recent times, discussions on youth in film have tended to concentrate on the teenpic genre. This issue has chosen a more general approach to youth in US cinema. Exploring the different angles in the representation of youth in both mainstream and independent film, it brings together a collection of articles dealing with the creation and perpetuation of film types and narratives concerning the representation of members of this age group. The articles in this issue consider the tension between rebellion and conformism in young people’s relationship with the status quo, the contrasts and links between youth and old age, the association of youthfulness with innocence, the representation of youth as an agency of renewal in “retro” nostalgia films and gender differences in teenage spectatorship, among others.

“We all were young once” goes the saying, and every cinemagoer or film critic can attest to his or her personal experience, their own “private Idaho”, which probably partly explains the cross-generational appeal of films dealing with adolescence. Thomas Byer’s article explores the different ways in which youth is viewed retrospectively and in a nostalgic light through the young doomed outlaws of both *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Public Enemies* (2009). Confronting two films of the eighties, the blockbuster *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and the independent cult film *Repo Man* (1984), Tomáš Pospíšil underlines the radically different ways in which they deal with the historical and social context in which they were made.

While this issue brings genre-related questions to the fore - youth genres or youth as the impetus for generic renewal -, films involving young people also tend to highlight iconography and recurring themes and motifs. In the transitional period of adolescence, with its existential questionings, the quest for “home” becomes all important, often underlined by a new alternative through the reinventing of new communities, in which the more mundane

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world of high-school or college becomes either an extension of family life or its seat of liberation. Escapism in the form of the road serves a similar purpose, as Carmen Indurain indicates in her discussion on the renewal of the road movie via its varied encounters with youth films. Andrea Grunert concentrates on a specific director, exploring the representation of adolescence in Todd Solondz's films and the way in which adolescent conflicts interact with the adult society in which his characters live. For Grunert, young characters in Solondz's films struggle to emerge in an adult-dominated world, as if the trials and tribulations of the sixties generation had done little to narrow the generation gap.

The opening and closing articles of the issue deal with spectatorship from different viewpoints. After an overview of youthful audiences since the beginnings of US film, Melvyn Stokes concludes that the seminal Hollywood New Wave films of 1967 – *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Graduate* – were not directly aimed at young people. A study of youth in film must take into account such extra-filmic factors as the increasing number of young spectators at specific moments in US history and the effects on film narratives. Nathalie Dupont discusses the different strategies used by the film industry to attract young spectators in the face of competition from other visual platforms. In an age when technological filters seem to take precedence over the human element, who are the gatekeepers – the young or the not so young or the aged, who still maintain the memory of what it was – in the words of Christian Metz - to “go to the cinema”. Spectatorship reveals, as do the ever-evolving narratives and cinematic techniques, that film is stimulated by continuous rejuvenatory processes.