

Frontier Mythology in the American Teen Film

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Abstract

This thesis examines representations of youth in the American “teen film”. As a critical category, the teen film is still developing, but it has been defined by a number of critics as being—ostensibly— *about* and *for* youth.¹ This thesis engages with teen film literature to test the meaning of these terms. As a genre that is precariously positioned between parent culture and youth audiences, teen film’s narratives are always negotiated and the degree to which it is about and for youth is debatable. I argue that rather than being about and for youth in simple terms, the teen film deploys narratives about a certain idea of youth that is distinctly American and historically contingent; in other words, while certainly consumed by youth and depicting narratives that feature youthful characters and themes, the teen film genre contributes to discourses that are *about* and *for* the idea of America.

My argument contributes to the critical literature on teen film by exploring the ways the teen film functions as a representation of American ideology. It outlines how, in America, the category of “youth” has historically functioned as an important site of ideological inscription in which to construct an idealised future. In the early 20th century (via the discourse of adolescence), youth was specifically idealised as a frontier space, a site in which to symbolically reconcile troubling anxieties and contradictions left unresolved at the closure of the American frontier. Up to the end of World War II, Hollywood cinema functioned similarly, as a site in which the troubling contradiction between the national ideals of individualism and community might be mobilised and contained, via the “reconciliatory” narrative.² The teen film emerged in the period immediately after World War II, when Hollywood’s efforts to resolve the tensions inherent in frontier mythology were foundering. The teen film might have represented a convergence of the potential reconciliatory powers of cinema *and* youth, but rather than assisting in the resolution of American ideological crises, the teen film problematised them. Screening youth as an inherently rebellious space, a “frontier” space, facilitated the breakdown of the reconciliatory pattern. In the teen films of the 1950s, the conflict between the ideals of individualism and community proved irreconcilable. Subsequent teen film cycles stage and re-stage the conflict between individual and community, offering repeated takes on what those fundamentally “American” ideals mean in each generation.

This thesis traces developments in the representation of the conflict between individual and community through four of the teen film’s dominant cycles—delinquency films from the 1950s, slasher films and animal comedies from the 1970s-to-mid-1980s, and makeover films from the late-1990s-to-early-2000s. Proceeding from the initial deliberation over the terms *about* and *for* youth, I include discussions

¹ This definition is supported by the work of Catherine Driscoll and Stephen Tropiano.

² This thesis works from Robert B. Ray’s discussion of the “reconciliatory” narrative.

of films like *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Porky's* (1982) while excluding films like *River's Edge* (1986) and *Kids* (1995), which certainly represent youth, but are typically not viewed by them.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Signed

Rowena Harper

18 December 2008

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