One | INTRODUCTION

The Cinematic Image of Youth

The 2012 film 21 Jump Street depicts two rookie cops posing as high school students to break up a drug ring. Much to their surprise and chagrin, popularity among teenagers has changed radically since they graduated in the previous decade: traits that had made students seem square and unattractive—studying for classes, caring for the environment, being politically sensitive—now make them appealing and cool. Such is the nature of adolescence, fluctuating on a continual basis with the various whims of time, which vividly illustrates how difficult understanding youth culture can be because it is so mercurial and fleeting.

These aspects of youth have led American cinema into a curious and often inconsistent fascination with stories about and images of young people, a fascination that became abundantly manifest in the last decades of the twentieth century. Various film trends catering to young audiences had emerged over past generations, but movies since the 1980s have appeared almost fixated on capturing certain youth styles and promoting certain perspectives on the celebration, and survival, of adolescence. Many arguments persist as to why teenagers have been targeted by both Hollywood studios and the American independent movie market: youth have disposable incomes that they like spending on entertainment; today’s children are inculcated by media to be the consumptive parents of tomorrow; filmmakers engage in the vicarious experiences of their own lost youth; and young people make up the largest percentage of the movie-viewing audience. All of these points are valid, yet this book argues not as much for the reasons behind youth representation as for the issues and trends that representation engenders. Evident from the contemporary outpouring of American movies about youth, and the parallel production of teen-oriented television shows, magazines, and multimedia outlets, as well as the cultural attention paid to youth attitudes and behaviors in the wake of
various scandals, crimes, and accomplishments, the imaging of youth has become indicative of our deepest social and personal concerns.

Consider, for instance, the most successful recent young adult phenomenon, the *Twilight* books and subsequent movies, which covered the years 2005–2012. The revenue generated from just these two media—not including subsequent products such as clothing, music, and ancillary texts—has been in excess of $5 billion, and while their number of readers and viewers is impossible to determine, their audience is unmistakably enormous. The stories about and images of the teenage characters in *Twilight* spoke to fantasies of the supernatural as well as romantic destiny, sexual development, and family politics, utilizing native and ancient mythologies, exotic regional locations, brutal violence, and myriad other dramatic elements within an otherwise conventional struggle between right and wrong. Further, the sensation spread beyond teens to adults, and beyond the target demographic of American youth to a global scale that extremely few stories have enjoyed with such speed and success. Through this universalization, the tormented love triangle of a girl with a vampire and a werewolf presented an incredibly satisfying journey that revealed our cultural appreciation of youth itself.

All dramas thrive on conflict, and the process of maturing is a natural conflict familiar to everyone by their teenage years. While many filmgoers freely participate in screen fantasies about the possibilities of life as a secret agent or of saving a loved one from the clutches of death, most of our lives are filled with less spectacular phenomena, such as how we come to be accepted by society, discover romance, have sex, gain employment, make moral decisions, and learn about the world and who we are in it. Most of us first encounter these phenomena in our adolescence, and how we handle them largely determines how we live the rest of our lives. The gravity of adolescence thus makes for compelling drama, even if many of us would rather forget those trying years. Understanding how we learn and grow in our youth is integral to understanding who we become as adults.

Since the 1950s the American movie box office, with varying interests, has been relying on people under thirty to pay for movies about their daily dramas and fantasies. Of course, one of the telling dilemmas of youth films since cinema began is that while they address young people they are not produced by young people, for children and teens are effectively restricted from the filmmaking process. Thus, screen images of youth have always been traditionally filtered through adult perspectives. As a result of these commercial and political conditions, teen films have evolved into a visible and often coherent genre that has thrived for over half a century.
That genre has generated films as complex and sophisticated as many adult dramas, and in recent decades its patrons are no longer content with the rebellious posturing of 1950s hot rod races, the trite frivolity of 1960s beach parties, or the cheap tricks of 1970s drive-in dreck.

Since the 1980s a number of distinct subgenres and character types within this genre—call it youth, teen, and/or young adult—have emerged and have offered richly provocative images that question the changing concepts of youth in the United States. The specific number of these categories is arguable, and surely too large to detail in one volume, so I offer here an analysis of four subgenres—containing seventeen of the most significant youth film styles and movie roles—to demonstrate the changing nature of teen representation in American media since 1980.2

Young people have always been a concern in American film history, both in terms of their images on screen and their reception of films as an audience. In the earliest days of cinema there did not exist a distinct youth genre, nor for that matter much of an agreed social sense for what constituted youth. Children in the early twentieth century often left school by the age of fourteen to begin jobs (only 6.4 percent of young Americans completed high school in 1900) and many were married and having children by eighteen, a condition that kept the state of “youth” limited to just a few years between childhood and adulthood.3 Government had just begun to formally distinguish youth from adults through legislation involving delinquency, when Illinois became the first state to do so with the Juvenile Court Act of 1899, which gave the court jurisdiction of children under the age of sixteen.4 The reception of movies at that time was also affected by social fears about their corruptive potential, especially regarding their influence on children. Many moral guardians of the early 1900s preached about the dangers of exposing children to typically adult-oriented dramas, and rather than make films that specifically catered to a young audience, the fledgling movie industry tended to side with concerns over propriety.5

By the 1920s, Hollywood formed the Hays Office and began formal evaluations and restrictions on the moral content of American films, and despite a choice few popular films that featured young characters of the time—Lillian Gish in Broken Blossoms (1919), Mary Pickford in Pollyanna (1920), Jackie Coogan in The Kid (1921), Baby Peggy in Captain January (1924)—the industry took a steady position on youth films by the ’30s: children were either pre-adolescent (such as Shirley Temple or the kids in Our Gang) or were stunted in their early adulthood (as in the musical films of Deanna Durbin or in the delinquency franchise that began with the Dead End Kids). In either case, young people did not routinely have on-
screen discussions about otherwise typical developmental issues like sexuality, drug or alcohol use, or family dysfunction.

The notable youth films that followed in the years after the Great Depression tended to be optimistic and endearing fables starring the likes of Elizabeth Taylor, Judy Garland, and/or Mickey Rooney (who played the enduring teenager Andy Hardy for a decade), but these films were directed at and most often seen by an adult audience, or by a family audience consisting of both parents and children. Hollywood studios promoted these small troupes of young stars (also including Frankie Darro, Bonita Granville, Freddie Bartholomew, Dickie Moore, and Joyce Reynolds) who came to represent the contemporary ideals, if not the realistic conditions, of youth.

With the resolution of World War II, however, a distinct population in the United States began to emerge: teenagers. Gradually the age between childhood and adulthood came to be codified, debated, commemorated, and perhaps most significantly, elongated. More young people stayed in and graduated from secondary school, and with the arrival of postwar prosperity, more began attending college. Other factors contributed to the burgeoning presence of the teenager in the 1950s: the greater availability of automobiles which allowed youth to travel and thus achieve a certain independence; the recovering economy that gave many teens extra money for entertainment outside the home; the popular reception of rock and roll music, which clearly flew in the face of previous standards; and the permeation of television, which, while giving all Americans a new common entertainment medium, also kept more adults at home.

In terms of the U.S. film industry, two landmark legal cases set the stage for the eventual proliferation of young adult fare. The “Paramount Case” was adjudicated by the Supreme Court in 1948; soon thereafter began the process by which major movie studios divested their holdings in theaters, giving rise to more small independent studios that would take advantage of their increased theatrical access by catering to niche audiences like teenagers. Then the important “Miracle Decision” by the Court in 1952 ensured selected First Amendment protections for films, thereby opening the door for a wider range of moral issues on screen; this development attracted young people to theaters where they could engage in mature topics and view more “adult” dramas than were available on television.

However, Hollywood studios did not suddenly bank on hedonistic teen roles in the 1950s: the process of introducing the postwar teenager was careful if not apprehensive, as they gradually exploited the ephebiphobia—fear of teenagers—that was seeping into popular culture and politics. After
Introduction: The Cinematic Image of Youth

a few notable “clean teen” performances in the 1940s by Jimmy Lydon (the Henry Aldrich series, 1941–1944), Jeanne Crain (Margie, 1946), and Jane Powell (A Date with Judy, 1948), the archetypal ’50s teen performer did not appear until mid-decade. That would be James Dean, whose performance in Rebel Without a Cause (1955) is probably the most influential demonstration of pure teen angst in American cinema. Marlon Brando had already showcased the young rebel image in The Wild One (1953), but Dean’s affected demeanor was more penetrating, and his legend only grew due to his eerie real-life death mere weeks before Rebel opened. Hollywood then continued to mold other performers into troubled youth, as in the milder but still afflicted roles of Natalie Wood (in Rebel Without a Cause, Marjorie Morningstar [1958], and West Side Story [1961]), John Saxon (in Rock, Pretty Baby [1956], The Unguarded Moment [1956], and The Restless Years [1958]), and Brandon De Wilde (in Blue Denim [1959], All Fall Down [1962], and Hud [1963]).

Perhaps a more notable trend than the emergence of these new young performers was the film industry’s fresh confrontation with the condi-

Jim (James Dean, center) is literally surrounded by peer pressure as he deals with his archetypal teen angst in Rebel Without a Cause (1955).
tions of youth. Rebel showcased the high school outcast who couldn’t fit in (while also considering alcoholism, family dynamics, juvenile crime, and in more concealed terms, homosexuality); Blackboard Jungle (1955) dramatized the potentially violent conditions of urban high schools and tangentially introduced rock music to American cinema, giving rise to the teen “rock movie” that would become common thereafter; and Peyton Place (1957) and Splendor in the Grass (1961) demonstrated the supposed dangers of teenage sexuality.9 Each of these films dealt with issues important to young adults, but now that Hollywood was finally making films about the difficulty of being young, a reactionary movement began, as usual in the film industry, in binary form: films were made that avoided or toned down the dilemmas of youth for the sake of celebrating its carefree aspects, or films were made to further exploit and enflame the dangers of teen delinquency and decadence. In other words, good kids were divided from bad kids.

Thus appeared a wave of inane beach films in the ’60s (many featuring Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello after their well-attended Beach Party in 1963) as well as the popular Gidget series (starting in 1959), alongside a lesser-seen but nonetheless visible output of youth exploitation films, a style that emerged as early as 1936 with Reefer Madness and was carried on by City Across the River in 1949 and sustained in such productions as Teenage Devil Dolls (1952), Teenage Crime Wave (1955), High School Confidential! (1958), This Rebel Breed (1960), Teenage Strangler (1964), and The Wild Angels (1966).10 As my study shows, this reactive and divisive pattern of the movie industry is a trend that remains in effect to this day.

By the early ’70s, after the implementation of the Motion Picture Association of America’s ratings system (in 1968) and the national suffrage of eighteen-year-olds (in 1971), not to mention the young ages at which boys were being enlisted to fight in Vietnam, American youth began to have a different sense of their identity than that which had been provided for them in so many of the happier, hipper ’60s films. The dark and more rebellious aspects of youth that had emerged in the ’50s teen films continued in counterculture productions like Wild in the Streets (1968), Easy Rider (1969), R.P.M., and The Strawberry Statement (both 1970). As was the case with films of the previous generation, most of these films were not about adolescents but rather young adults, just leaving high school or in college. In fact, Hollywood abandoned its practice of promoting teenage performers in the ’60s and certainly had very few to account for in the ’70s (the three prominent exceptions being Jodie Foster, Tatum O’Neal, and Robby Benson).11 After the dearth of teen stars and films in the 1970s, Hollywood could have maintained its lower output of youth films in the 1980s, but instead
the industry concentrated more on young adult dramas than ever before. The most likely factor contributing to this was the emergence of another icon of youth independence, the shopping mall. The mall became a scene of teen congregation where arcades and food courts replaced the pool halls and soda fountains of the past. Further, since the '70s, following the dramatic decline of American movie theaters, Hollywood had come to rely on the centralization of multiple theaters in large retail centers to increase the number of screen venues and to offer moviegoers greater variety and convenience. Thus the multiplex was born. With the relocation of most movie theaters into or near shopping malls in the 1980s, the need to cater to the young audiences who frequented those malls became apparent to Hollywood, and those audiences formed the first generation of multiplex moviegoers.

The clearest result of the multiplex movement was a voluminous outpouring of films directed to and featuring teens, but in order to avoid a stagnating homogenization of the teen genre, Hollywood revised its '50s formula by intensifying the narrative range of youth films through placing teenage characters in previously established genres with more dramatic impact (gory horror, dance musicals, sex comedies), and as a result, a new variety of character types grew out of this generic expansion. Given the categorical choices offered by the multiplex theater, teens in the '80s were then able to go to the mall and select the particular youth movie experience that most appealed to them, and Hollywood tried to keep up with changing teen interests and styles to ensure ongoing profits. This led to constantly evolving efforts by the film industry to sustain the youth market through further generic expansions and revisions; more significantly for the audience, teens were then exposed to a wider range of characters and situations that directly addressed their current social conditions, even if many of the films that did so clearly had puerile provocation as their motive. Unlike the '50s when screen teens were steered down relatively rigid, righteous paths, the '80s teens encountered a complexity of moral choices and personal options on which the multiplex movies thrived. This gave teenage movie audiences at the end of the twentieth century a greater sense of presence in popular media, a deeper potential to be influenced by the films they saw, and a wider range of options from which they could construct and compare their sense of self.

The late '70s suggested the teen trends to come, as the popularity of such films as *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and *Grease* (1978) with John Travolta—both of which combined music, dance, and sex (or its repression)—created a segue to the more dynamic stories that young audiences would soon de-
mand. A handful of other films truly inaugurated new cycles: two 1978 American films, the low-budget horror sensation *Halloween* and the college farce *Animal House*, as well as two unassuming Canadian films, *Meatballs* (1979) and *Porky’s* (1982). These were the starting guns of the new youth subgenres of the ‘80s, leading to an era of teen cinema that came to be appreciated by future critics more than any time before or since, as confirmed by the numerous studies that followed. *Halloween* was a simplistic but effective thriller about an apparently indestructible killer who stalks horny teenagers, although the purest of the group is spared. *Animal House, Meatballs,* and *Porky’s* were raucous comedies featuring goofy and/or hormonal youth pursuing pleasure at college, summer camp, and a ’50s-era high school, respectively, and their successes spawned numerous imitations over the next few years that featured desperate variations on this story line (with such suggestive titles as *Goin’ All the Way!* and *The Last American Virgin* [both 1982], *Losin’ It, Getting It On,* and *The First Turn On!* [all 1983], and *Gimme an F!, Hot Moves,* and *Joy of Sex* [all 1984]).

The new abundance of teen sexuality on screen also coincided with an increasing social awareness that the age of first intercourse was dropping for American youth, and the few earlier films that solemnly featured teens losing their virginity—such as *Rich Kids* (1979), *The Blue Lagoon* (1980), *Endless Love* (1981)—faded into the new appeal of carnal comedies about the plight of sexual pursuits. At the same time, *Halloween* and similar films like *Friday the 13th* (1980) and *Slumber Party Massacre* (1982) were capitalizing on the moralistic aspect of teen sexuality, slaughtering wholesale those youth who deigned to cross the threshold of sexual awareness, even though these films usually hinged on a major suspension of realism. The early ’80s then witnessed a remarkable intensification in American youth movie production with the appearance of numerous popular teen horror films in 1981 and the release of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* in 1982, the first commercially successful hybrid of the contemporary sex, school, and delinquency elements.

Between 1980 and 1986, there were six major approaches to youth cinema offered by Hollywood, most revised from past trends in the genre: the science saga, the horror thriller, the romantic melodrama, the sex comedy, the juvenile delinquent film, and the school picture that often borrowed generic elements from the rest. The one approach to not endure past 1986 was the science film, which had its experimental trials during the moon exploration years with sporadic examples like *The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes* (1969) and *Escape to Witch Mountain* (1975). These movies and those that followed tried to simultaneously stimulate youthful excitement about
technology and agitate cultural fears of invasion or corruptive intelligence. Such a strategy suited the Reagan '80s, the era of sci-fi blockbusters like *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and *Back to the Future* (1985), when the nascent subgenre found its most formal coherence, with films like *WarGames* (1983), *Real Genius* (1985), and *The Manhattan Project* (1986) essentially inspiring and warning young people about the possibilities inherent to their explorations.

This omen became real when *SpaceCamp* appeared just months after the Space Shuttle disaster in 1986, retroactively confirming that children should avoid ambitions beyond the realm of adult approval lest catastrophe ensue. Thereafter, the subgenre dwindled as relatively few films about youth and science were made aside from weak exploitation attempts featuring teens playing corruptive video games (e.g., *Brainscan* [1994], *Stay Alive* [2006]); even recent efforts at capitalizing on social networks failed with *Afterschool* (2008), *@urFRENZ* (2010), and *LOL* (2012). Today almost all concepts of youth and science are subsumed in unrealistic fantasies, like the planetary parable *Another Earth* (2011), or doomed by attempts to revive past generations’ interests, as in the *Space Camp* cover *Space Warriors* (2013), while most realistic stories quite conspicuously minimize the presence of technology in teens’ daily lives. Thus, while this subgenre was the subject of a full chapter in the first edition of this book, it is omitted here.

The horror film tended to offer the biggest grosses (literally and figuratively) and often showed the least knowledge of true youth conditions. Unlike infrequent teen horror hits in earlier decades such as *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957) and *Carrie* (1976), these films were a runaway success in the early ’80s and may in many ways be responsible for bringing a new image of youth to American cinema, however incomplete that image was. Within the new youth horror subgenre, teenage nudity and brutal violence had come to be expected, showing teens not only as sexually active but as morally culpable for their adultery, then paying with their lives for these transgressions. The youth horror film—especially in the “slasher” category so easily parodied by 1981 in *Student Bodies*—thereby brought attention to teen sexuality and responsibility, and other issues, by the most dramatic means possible.

While the subgenre apparently lost its prominence at the multiplex by the end of the ’80s, its popularity was elevated through the home video market for much of the next decade, in cheap sequels to previous hits, and in less brutal supernatural stories like *Christine* (1983) and *Night of the Demons* (1987). Following this trajectory, teen horror found rejuvenating attention in self-conscious postmodern productions of the late ’90s such as *Scream*
(1996) and *The Faculty* (1998). And a more certain sign that the previous appeal of simplistic teen homicide was waning in favor of scary cerebral schemes emerged with the flourishing trend of youth fantasy films in the ’00s, which often relied on respected literary pedigrees and enticed wider audiences through tepid violence and virtually subconscious sexual tension. Primary influences were the British series of *Harry Potter* (2001–2011) and *The Chronicles of Narnia* starting in 2005, leading to *The Twilight Saga* (2008–2012) and *The Hunger Games* trilogy starting in 2012.

The sex comedy and romantic melodrama are companions, for despite the often gratuitous content of many of these films, they all consider the trial by fire that is the discovery of young lust and love, usually in that connected order. Youth romances, unlike sexual exploits, have a timeless quality, going back for centuries and arguably reaching their pinnacle with Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, which is built on the most common device of family conflict. In fact, all young love stories can be categorized by identifying the obstacle to the protagonists’ romance: class, race, age, distance, and so forth. Youth cinema in the post-WWII era moved beyond chaste tales of innocent romantic struggle toward more mature consequences of love gone wrong, resulting in pregnancy (*Blue Denim*, 1959), date rape (*Where the Boys Are*, 1960), and mental illness (*Splendor in the Grass*, 1961). By the ’70s, Hollywood viewed young love through a nostalgic lens and avoided these grave tensions in films such as *Summer of ’42* (1971) and *American Graffiti* (1973), and that avoidance worked again for the ’80s audience in cheery contemporary stories like *Valley Girl* (1983), *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *Secret Admirer*, *Seven Minutes in Heaven* (both 1985), and *One Crazy Summer* (1986). All the same, the conflicts of young romance continually captured audience imaginations for further generations, as with the murder–for–love plot in *To Die For* (1995), the cross-class clash of *Titanic* (1997), the transgendered taboo of *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), the international intrigue of *What a Girl Wants* (2003), the cultural dissention in *Towelhead* (2007), and the barely pubescent peregrinations in *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012).

Throughout the early ’80s, the depiction of teens’ sexual pursuits had become primarily ribald and explicit, as in *Private Lessons* (1981) and *Risky Business* (1983), but by the mid-’80s a distinct shift took place toward more serious and sensitive representations of teen relationships. The specter of AIDS had become a widespread heterosexual concern, as did the increasing teenage pregnancy rate, so John Hughes films like *Sixteen Candles* (1984) and *Pretty in Pink* (1986), as well as such softer tales as *Can’t Buy Me Love* (1987) and *Say Anything . . .* (1989), were welcome antidotes to the increasingly delicate debacles of youth sex at the time. Then by the mid-’90s,
films about youth having sex returned to a greater diversity of issues that sometimes accompany these practices, as with the three topics I address extensively hereafter: virginity (in *Kids* [1995], *American Pie* [1999], *Superbad* [2007]), pregnancy (in *Manny and Lo* [1996], *Riding in Cars with Boys* [2001], *Juno* [2007]), and queerness (in *All Over Me* [1996], *But I’m a Cheerleader* [2000], *Running with Scissors* [2006]).

The output of juvenile delinquent dramas was the most voluminous of youth subgenres until the early twenty-first century, when studios and audiences became especially uncomfortable with the topic after the Columbine murders in 1999. Such films have always been controversial, because they offer a rich appreciation for the aggressive expressions that teens most crave and parents most fear. The subgenre nonetheless persists with a clear range of immorality across its productions, which have become more refined since the older days of gang fights (*West Side Story* [1961], *The Warriors* [1979]) and drug trips (*Wild in the Streets* [1968], *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* [1970]). This range now runs from harmless mischief that youth enact in daily life—such examples as *Adventures in Babysitting* (1987), *Snow Day* (2000), and the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* films (2010–2012)—to life-threatening criminality of teen thugs in films like *Class of 1984* (1982), *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), and *Loren Cass* (2006). I look at five specific delinquent styles that represent this spectrum, starting with movies about “deviant dancing” from *Beat Street* (1984) to *Footloose* (2011) and concluding with crime films after Columbine such as *Elephant* (2003) and *Gran Torino* (2008).

School films are probably the most foundational subgenre of youth films, yet they often consider teenage identities quite separately from other subgenres. In most school films, the educational setting becomes an index for youth issues, featuring a variety of youth culture styles and types, as best represented by *The Breakfast Club* in 1985. Five character roles played out in that film—the nerd, the delinquent, the rebel, the popular girl, and the athlete—are the roles most commonly seen in all school films, going back to examples such as *High School Confidential!* (1958), *Billie* (1965), and *Grease* (1978), and thus my study examines the impulse of smart students to transform, the impact of delinquents on school order, the liability of conformity to rebels, the effects of popularity on teen girls, and the sensitive depiction of athletes. The cycles in school films are best revealed through tracing the characters that embody those cycles, from the nerdy outcasts of *Lucas* (1986) and *Dear Lemon Lima* (2009) to the tormented clique queens of *Heathers* (1989) and *Mean Girls* (2004) to the jock heroes of *Vision Quest* (1985) and *Coach Carter* (2005).

These subgenres remained in place into twenty-first-century American
cinema, and with the further development of fantasy films within the horror realm, they form the frame in which youth films are made and marketed to this day, even as a number of the particular styles within the subgenres fade or change. Looking back, after the boom in the early ’80s, the output of successful American youth films began to decline by the late ’80s, as the “Brat Pack” of popular teen stars in the mid–’80s began taking adult roles and Hollywood moved away from the limited market of teen stories. Many little-seen youth films did continue to be made at this time, and while many were quite good, most were by small studios and thus had restricted releases. With the exception of a few notable films, such as those about African American crime in the early ’90s, Hollywood did not demonstrate a refreshed interest in youth films until the mid-’90s, which once more ebbed in the early ’00s only to rise again a few years later with teen fantasies. Part of the reason for this cycle is the cyclical nature of genres in general, and the short-lived recycling of teen films in particular. As the media industries have been merging and consolidating their products during this time, the movie market inevitably works to synergize its influences with teen-oriented TV shows and Internet sites as well.

This strategy certainly appeared to be working at the turn of the century, since the Internet had established its prominence as a means of two-way youth communication, and television networks expanded with more channels carrying teen shows that often found synergistic cult followings with movies, music, and fan blogs, as with Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Dawson’s Creek, and later Veronica Mars, Friday Night Lights, and Glee. Further, the industry discovered the financial advantages of making big-budget films about youth—such as Titanic (1997), Spider-Man (2002), and Transformers (2007)—while enjoying more modest profits from less expensive productions like She’s All That (1999), Napoleon Dynamite (2004), and Precious (2009). The youth population by this point was clearly witness to another wide wave of films that catered to their interests and surveyed their images, films that were undoubtedly influenced by and built on the evolution of cinematic youth representations in previous decades.

The rich and compelling history of films about youth informs us of more than the changing social conditions and perceptions of young people; it gives us a special appreciation for how successive generations have endured the conflicts of claiming identity and seeking recognition for their actions. This endurance was seen most visibly in the post–World War II teen films as young people restively entered the Cold War era their parents created, and then again in the ’60s counterculture films, through the falsely liberatory sex romps of the ’80s, and in the current abundance of teen fantasies.
This study examines American youth films since 1980 to determine how recent generations of young people have been represented in American cinema and what that representation tells us about the various phenomena that constitute the contemporary coming-of-age process. Through this examination I demonstrate not only that youth films constitute a legitimate genre worthy of study on their own terms, but that they are imbued with a unique cultural significance: they question our evolving identities from youth to adulthood while simultaneously shaping and maintaining those identities.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATION
AND GENRE THEORY

This is a work of film criticism based on the analysis of hundreds of films that are my primary texts, and my method employs genre theory to study social representation. Social approaches to film seek an understanding of cinematic images of groups and individuals under the tacit assumption that films are both aesthetic and cultural documents produced by an industry whose aim is to appeal to populations that will find the films worth seeing. Genre analysis considers patterns, motifs, and trends across a spectrum of films that share a commonality, usually subject matter and theme (such as melodrama, science fiction, and horror), and further explores how the elements of a genre are manifested and change over time. My study considers how American films about teenagers have utilized different techniques and stories to represent young people within a codified system that delineates distinct subgenres and character types within the “youth film” genre. Unlike other genres that are based exclusively on subject matter, the youth genre is based on the ages of the films’ characters, and thus the thematic concerns of its subgenres can be seen as more directly connected to specific notions of different youth behaviors and styles.

Pioneering cinematic image studies include those of women (From Reverence to Rape by Molly Haskell, 1974), African Americans (Slow Fade to Black by Thomas Cripps, 1977), Native Americans (The Only Good Indian by Ralph Friar and Natasha Friar, 1972), Jews (The Jewish Image in American Film by Lester Friedman, 1987), and the disabled (Cinema of Isolation by Martin Norden, 1994). The authors of these studies employ various approaches to their investigations, all of which are built on the belief that films are cultural artifacts revealing much about not only the people who are depicted in them but also those who make and view them. These approaches can be
primarily interpretive, utilizing a subjective understanding of the films and
the population in question, or more quantitative, attempting an objective
“content analysis” to disclose various features of the films.

I study the images of youth in American cinema by combining both of
these approaches. I feel that in any social study of cinema one cannot and
should not rely solely on quantitative and statistical information, and an
“objective” study of a medium as personal and social as film would not be
effective in such matters as attitude, nuance, and style. However, I also feel
that relying solely on inferential readings of films is problematic, for such
a study can become so subjective as to be indifferent to other perspectives.
I therefore aim to understand the subtleties and possible interpretations of
youth films while also understanding the social and industrial contexts of
the films’ productions; I try to identify and analyze the “image” of youth
with as much information as possible about what inspired and manifested
that image and how that image developed over time. The films are thus my
primary texts, while broader studies of youth cinema provide my theo-
retical and historical foundation, supplemented with current perspectives
from critics who reviewed the films in their time of release. I do not study
the reception of youth images however, and leave such a study to those
who can pursue thorough audience research.

Genre theory has been developed alongside social analysis methods. While
many critics observed the social influence of movies on viewers
from the earliest days of cinema, serious genre examinations did not pro-
ceed until after World War II. Paul Willemen in 1983 described the two
functions that genre theory was then designed to fulfill: (i) “to challenge
and displace the dominant notions of cinema installed and defended on
the basis of the assumed excellence of the ‘taste’ of a few journalists and
reviewers, appealing to the ‘age-old canons and principles’ of Art in gen-
eral,” and (2) “in the wake of the realisation that any form of artistic pro-
duction is a rule-bound activity firmly embedded in social history, [genre
theory] set about discovering the structures which underpinned groups of
films and gave them their social grounding.” Thus, as genre theories were
staked out, many scholars argued alternately for political, aesthetic, social,
and industrial methods for studying genres.

Theoretical arguments abounded before and after Willemen’s work, and
these polemics continue to this day with no consensus in sight. As early as
1973, Andrew Tudor pointed to the “empiricist dilemma” of arbitrary defi-
nitions and post hoc descriptors that are often used to describe a genre,
in which a genre is defined “on the basis of analyzing a body of films that
cannot possibly be said to be [a certain genre] until after the analysis.”
1981, Thomas Schatz took a more symbiotic view, arguing that “a genre represents a range of expression for filmmakers and a range of experience for viewers” as audiences shape genres by describing to the film industry what films should be made based on what films they go to see. Steve Neale employed an even broader compass in 2000 by suggesting that genres are “ubiquitous, multifaceted phenomena rather than one-dimensional entities to be found only within the realms of Hollywood cinema or of commercial popular culture.” And in 2012, Barry Keith Grant deftly summed up the customary academic practice of viewing genres as “cultural myths serving similar social and ideological functions in that they tend to take social debates and tensions and cast them into formulaic narratives, condensing them into dramatic conflicts between individual characters, heroes and villains, providing familiar stories that help us ‘narrativize’ and so make sense of the large, abstract social forces that effect our lives.”

In the case of my study, I consider the image of the American youth population within evident ranges of experience that youth are afforded within the films themselves, such as the educational environment, relationships of family and friends, and types of deviance. These experiences are essentially what define the more precise subgenres within the genre of youth films. Because my study argues primarily from the point at which images of youth are produced—the texts of the films—and not their reception within a historical reality of youth, nor their stylistic components (e.g., lighting techniques, editing patterns, use of sound), I offer primarily interpretive arguments about the social milieu as well as about the industrial and narrative range of films themselves. While any study that deals with representation must necessarily consider the context of said representation, my study only occasionally incorporates box office results as a measure of films’ success, as well as statistics about historical trends, film release patterns, and the number of films within certain subgenres over time, as far as this information is relevant to particular arguments. Otherwise, cultural conditions of learning and lifestyle among young people in “real life” are too complex to analyze within the scope of this study.

One of the conspicuous problems of genre analysis over the past generation has been the assumption by many scholars that a genre’s characteristics and development can be discerned by exclusively studying the most popular and “meaningful” examples of a genre or else a random sample of its offerings. Obviously this approach presents a number of dilemmas: how the determination of “importance” is made for the sample selected, what is lost in the films not studied, and how claims about the genre may not apply to every film that can be argued to fit the genre’s code. Yet a methodology
in which all the available films within a genre, and its respective subgenres, are addressed in order to ensure complete knowledge of that genre is untenable. Many films may be unavailable for viewing; the restrictions of space do not allow for ample discussion of all films; and some films that are only partially germane to a genre may not contribute to an understanding of the genre as a whole.

The first problem cannot be avoided: there are simply many films that are so obscure as to be inaccessible, and a scholar is left with the faulty option of making comments on these films based on plot descriptions. The second problem is unfortunate, demanding that some valuation be placed on films and styles that do warrant more extensive commentary, while others are given shorter coverage or omitted altogether. This and the third problem are symptomatic of the inevitably judgmental nature of generic definition: the author must determine which films are significant, as well as how they operate within a genre. I argue that most youth films fall into one of four subgenres as of 2013, but not all portray youth in such a way that lends deeper insight to the patterns and operations of those subgenres. Thus I have had to select the films that are most germane to these subgeneric categories, and I have needed to eliminate a number of valuable films and important issues for the sheer sake of concentration and demonstration. I thus apologize for the marginalization of numerous teen classics in the otherwise endearing cult of personality which they have fostered.

That films about youth actually constitute a genre has rather recently been identified in film studies. After the pioneering work of David Considine and a few other authors in the 1980s, two catalogs offered codifications for the youth genre. In his massive compendium Films by Genre: 775 Categories, Styles, Trends, and Movements Defined, with a Filmography for Each (1993), Daniel Lopez identifies the “Teen Movie,” which has also been called the “’Juve’ Movie,” “Teenage Movie,” “Teenpic,” and “Youth Picture,” placing undue weight on the exploitative nature of many films since the 1950s that have featured teenagers. He then divides the Teen Movie into subgenres, while cross-listing other relevant genres such as the “Exploitation Film,” the “Juvenile Delinquency Film,” the “Motorcycle Movie,” the “Rock Film,” and the “Youth Film.” Of Teen Movie subgenres, Lopez offers the divisions of “Beach Films,” “High School Films,” “Teen-Violence Films,” and “Teen Comedies,” the latter of which he distinguishes from “Teen Sex Comedies.”

His further distinction of the “Youth Film” appears a matter of historically specific semantics, because he cites examples only from 1967 to 1972 and claims that these films “highlighted the concerns of young people querying the Establishment, society and its values,” as if films before or
since this time frame had failed to do so. Such a dubious category exposes
the difficulty of finding accurate descriptors for generic styles and move-
ments, when Lopez would have done better to label the Vietnam-era films
to which he was referring by their thematic concerns, calling them perhaps
“Anti-establishment Films,” or placing them in a temporal subgenre such as
the “Vietnam-Era Youth Film.” Lopez’s attempt to define and divide films
about youth is still significant, for he locates Teen Movies as a genre unto
itself, and sees the necessity of making subgeneric distinctions.

In 1995, the Library of Congress commissioned its Motion Picture/
Broadcasting/Recorded Sound Division to study the cataloging of films
by types, and by 1997 the group produced *The Moving Image Genre-Form
Guide*, which relies on the work of archival sources (such as the *Film Litera-
ture Index* and the *American Film Institute Catalog of Feature Films*) to construct
a descriptive structure for the various genres and forms of film. This guide
locates one comprehensive genre it labels “Youth,” which comprises “fic-
tional work portraying aspects of the trajectory through adolescence, in-
cluding high school years, peer pressure, first love, beach parties, and initial
attempts at adulthood, along with strains in the relationship with family.”
The emphasis in these films is on teenaged characters, and the guide thus
subsumes the distinction of “Teen” films within this category, moving films
about characters aged twelve and younger to “Children,” and films set in
a collegiate environment to “College.” These are essentially the same dis-
distinctions that I make (although I do include twelve-year-old characters) in
delimiting the genre that is the youth film.

As Janet Staiger and other theorists continued to argue, many films do
not easily conform to manufactured categories: some films may simply not
fit into a discrete (sub)generic classification, or may cross over so many
themes and styles as to defy any single (sub)generic location. This is a
dilemma of which I am keenly aware, and I attempt to address it by always
foregrounding the existence of youth cinema as a genre itself, which has a
relatively reliable denotative frame—that is, films in which youth appear.
Then within that frame, I allow for much categorical interplay and cross-
generic influence. Yet because not even all “films in which youth appear”
can properly be identified as youth cinema (as when young characters are
negligible to the story), the larger generic frame under which I work is still
contentiously constructed. This is a dilemma that I do not feel disrupts the
process of examining how youth have been represented in cinema because
so many youth images are still being studied; yet from a methodological
standpoint it does bear reminding, if only to argue that a truly reliable,
consistent, internally and externally integrated model of genre study by
Adult actors representing teenage characters—such as Jonah Hill (age twenty-nine) and Channing Tatum (age thirty-two) in *21 Jump Street* (2012), who play adults posing as teens within the story—are not contemporary contrivances. Mickey Rooney was twenty-four when he made his seventeenth film as famous teenager Andy Hardy in 1944, and Catherine Burns was twenty-five when she earned an Oscar nomination for her debut role as a teenager in *Last Summer* (1969).
social types may be an impossible goal. I believe that this book employs the paradigm that is best suited to the study of cinematic social representation through generic analysis, however incomplete and arguable it may remain.

What delimits youth in this context? For the purposes of my study, I consider the youth population to be between the ages of twelve and twenty. This represents a range of years that includes the actual teen years as well as the traditionally recognized entrance into adolescence (or at least in the United States, the beginning of middle school, or junior high school), as well as late adolescence and entry into the post–high school world. This is the same age range that David Considine analyzed in his foundational work *The Cinema of Adolescence.* It is also the same age range used by Mark Thomas McGee and R. J. Robertson in their study of juvenile delinquency in movies, *The J. D. Films: Juvenile Delinquency in the Movies.* The same upper limit of age twenty is used by the Young Artist Foundation in their selection of performers for the annual Young Artist Awards, which began in 1978. However, I do not analyze films that are about characters in college—who tend to be between eighteen and twenty-four years old—because the college genre itself has been extensively covered in other studies, and further, because the majority of college films do not concern the same issues about youth as do teen and high school films. Therefore, the chapters on delinquency, horror, and romance consider films about characters aged twelve to twenty, while the chapter on school covers characters in junior high or high school (generally twelve to eighteen years old). Using these parameters allows for a clear demonstration of the diverse and yet confined images of youth that the industry produces.

I further delimit my study by concentrating on feature-length films, although I do consider many straight-to-video movies that achieved recognition outside of theatrical release. I do not examine films that, despite the presence of young performers or their appeal to young audiences, are not about the youth experience. As Thomas Doherty and other critics have argued, Hollywood “juvenilized” its films after WWII to such an extent that virtually all movies can be said to appeal to youth. Thus, given the comprehensive reach of what can be labeled “youth” films, I am not only concentrating on those films that are relevant to the dominant subgenres of youth cinema since 1980, but I am excluding films that just tangentially or incidentally depict youth. This study is designed to consider as many pertinent perspectives about these films as possible, without being indebted to any specific authors’ theoretical arguments about youth films, youth culture, or film representation at large.
Assembling the filmography for this analysis proved to be an arduous task, and the process evolved considerably in the years between the first and second editions. Many of the so-called indexes of genres are incomplete or, as is the case with many generic categories, based on ambiguous or arbitrary judgments of what constitutes relevant films in the “youth” genre. Back in the mid-’90s, I began to create the filmography from scratch by consulting topical film guides and movie review collections, eventually generating a list of just over one thousand films. When Generation Multiplex first appeared in 2002, I was confident that my filmography was the most complete and refined list of American youth films since 1980 that could be compiled. For this edition written in 2013, I was able to further employ the Internet Movie Database and other Internet sites in building the filmography over another decade. Using the keyword search function of IMDb—adolescence, adolescent, coming-of-age, high-school, junior-high-school, juvenile, middle-school, school, teen, teenage, teenager, teen-angst, tween, twelve-year-old, youth—I added another 650 films to the study and removed some erroneous titles from the previous list, so the filmography now stands at approximately 1,700 titles, all of which are listed in appendix A. I remain confident in the exactitude and extent of this list.

A note on terminology: I use the label “youth cinema” to refer to the entire sphere of films made about young adults, a population that I may refer to as “teens” when accurate, and dub “youth” in general. “Children” are the offspring of parents, and thus youth may be included under this label in reference to families and adults. “Adolescence” is ambiguous in terms of precisely defining age, so I reserve use of the term for when I specifically discuss the social or psychological process of entering adulthood and leaving childhood. For the sake of classification, each chapter is about a subgenre of the youth film genre, and within each subgenre I identify and analyze categories, and when a category is prolific enough to create clear and consistent distinctions within its examples, I further distinguish varieties.

THE STUDY OF YOUTH,
IN AND OUT OF MOVIES

A study of cinema and youth offers an interesting historical parallel: motion pictures were invented in the 1890s and “youth” as an area of academic research emerged less than twenty years later in 1904, when social psychologist G. Stanley Hall wrote his pathbreaking Adolescence: Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Edu-
cation, which may be credited as the beginning of youth studies. That the proliferation of cinema and the founding of youth studies coincide within the same historical generation may not be indicative of a cause-and-effect relationship; however, the relationship between cinema and youth is significant. The twentieth century produced a series of “moral panics” around young people and social behavior, and the cinema—both as a gathering place and as a site of stimulation—has been a perennial source of those panics.

Of course children and teenagers existed before the twentieth century began, but the social perception of the pre-adult population was considerably different before the early 1900s, and certainly before the Industrial Revolution. Many girls and boys abandoned school at preteen ages in the nineteenth century and started families soon thereafter, often entering the labor force in their early teen years or younger. As the modern era took hold, renowned researchers like Hall (and later Havighurst, Piaget, Winnicott, Erikson, and Anna Freud) began recognizing a distinct age of specialized development between childhood and adulthood that had been initially described through characteristics of sexual development and was then later examined as a more complex sociopsychological manifestation of cultural and internal conflict. This age of development was adolescence, and its study by researchers (including Keniston, who even divided adolescence from youth) and its acceptance by society during the progressing twentieth century resulted in a new notion of youth, if only to distinguish a crucial transitional period during the teen years between childhood and adulthood.

Until the 1960s the study of youth remained largely a discipline within the behavioral sciences as researchers studied the changing attitudes and “pathologies” of youth during the various cycles of twentieth-century life. Then in the ’60s, certain global political events brought about a visible change in the activities of young people, not the least of which were the escalating war in southeast Asia and the student revolts in France in 1968. During this same decade Philippe Ariès wrote the next paradigmatic study of youth, shifting attention away from behavior and toward history in Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life (1962). Throughout the 1960s and the 1970s, the new research on youth history was taken up by the growing field of cultural studies, which eagerly considered how the youth uprisings of that era could be representative of previously repressed or diffused class, gender, and race conflicts. First appeared the work of James Coleman in his 1961 book The Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and Its Impact on Education, after which British scholars in the 1970s, among
them Stuart Hall, Angela McRobbie, and Dick Hebdige, studied patterns of resistance and revolt within what was now called “youth culture.”

By the 1980s, as the Reagan/Thatcher era brought about a series of new moral panics based on the vision of the New Right, the trend in youth research shifted back toward studies of youth “pathologies” (e.g., teen pregnancy, unemployment, crime) within a cultural studies method.

One of the first such studies was *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (1983), in which Geoffrey Pearson claimed that essentially the same moral accusations about youth had been recycled for the past 150 years. A subsequent study in this vein was *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* (1992), in which Jon Lewis relied much on the observations and opinions of Hebdige and Hall as he studied various teen “vices” in cinema.

The influence of British cultural studies remained evident in further youth studies, such as *Teenagers: An American History* (1996), by Grace Palladino, who examined the emergence of the American teenage population in terms of its institutional identification through the rise of high schools in the early twentieth century, and its economic identification through the greater consumptive capacities that teenagers developed in the years after World War II.

Another notable study of youth culture from a perspective on power was *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids* (2006), in which Murray Milner argued that the regimentation of schooling induces students to find meaning in forming their own subcultures of high and low status, yet this supposedly empowering effort is to the detriment of their own personal progress. Regardless of how youth studies have focused on deviance and development (psychology) and/or resistance and economics (politics), one theme of youth studies has been undoubtedly clear since the 1980s: youth culture is not homogenous.

The 1980s thus became a time of distinct change in youth studies as the trajectories of sociology, history, and cultural studies merged over concerns about refreshed conservative attitudes that were broadly vilifying youth.

These concerns may have been legitimate given conditions of the time; however, these conditions were not necessarily being visibly addressed in the American cinema of this period. Most Hollywood films about youth in the 1980s relied on formulas that exploited youth issues, specifically sexual development, while gradually revealing an increasing tension and confusion about the roles of contemporary youth. By the early ’90s, in the wake of the Reagan and Thatcher years and under the patriotic swell of the Gulf War, teens in American films had been entirely reconfigured, if not often extinguished, as increasing emphasis fell on portraits of the post-teen generation in movies after *Slacker* in 1991 (examples
include *Singles* in 1992 and *Reality Bites* in 1994). Popular studies of youth thus shifted their attention: in July 1990, *Time* magazine published an extensive and influential article titled “Proceeding with Caution,” which debuted the skeptical “twentysomething generation”; over the next few years more magazines followed suit (including dueling cover stories in the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *New Republic* at the end of 1992) with studies of young adults now labeled “Generation X” after Douglas Coupland’s eponymous 1991 novel.42 “Youth” by the mid-90s then covered a wider age range than ever before, spanning the first year of post-elementary education (usually the age of twelve) to the first few years after college (or, considering that the majority of young people do not complete college, at least the mid-twenties).43

This perception had already been supported in Susan Littwin’s *Postponed Generation: Why America’s Grown-Up Kids Are Growing Up Later* (1986), in which she argued that adolescents required ten years after the onset of puberty (usually the early teens) to become adults.44 Further evidence of this widening age range and the tensions about young people prolonging their youth came from more demographic studies like *Marketing to Generation X* by Karen Ritchie (1995) and *Welcome to the Jungle: The Why Behind “Generation X”* by Geoffrey T. Holtz (1995).45 These studies argued that “youth” had been realigned as a specialized and crucial age group for American commercial marketing, and they showed how certain youth attitudes—notably cynicism and narcissism—had been amplified and exploited by advertisers, corporations, and even politicians. Arguing from an earlier historical assessment in *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (2000), Thomas Hine actually located this identification of teenagers in the desires of post-WWII businesses that wanted to capitalize on the burgeoning youth population, and he went on to further indict schooling practices for stifling youth ambitions.46 And demonstrating that this issue did not fade with the close of the last century, Christina Lee published *Screening Generation X: The Politics and Popular Memory of Youth in Contemporary Cinema* in 2010, which addressed the insecure economic, social, and even spiritual conditions under which youth had been living while witnessing their own tenuous identities reified in the cinema.47

Sustaining the consumer market for youth became no less crucial for commercial forces in the new millennium, just as other adult forces continued to exploit the perceived weaknesses of young people. New tags for teens emerged, such as “Generation Y” and “Millennials,” and youth studies remained fixated on establishments that threatened young people—especially the media, advertising, and education. Thus appeared books such
as Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers (2003), by Alissa Quart; The Corporate Assault on Youth: Commercialism, Exploitation, and the End of Innocence (2008), edited by Deron Boyles; and Youth in Revolt: Reclaiming a Democratic Future (2012), by Henry Giroux. Yet alongside these critical concerns, the field still welcomed work that handled youth from a more holistic view, such as Youth Cultures: Texts, Images, and Identities (2003), edited by Kerry Mallan and Sharyn Pearce; American Youth Cultures (2004), edited by Neil Campbell; Understanding Youth: Perspectives, Identities, and Practices (2007), edited by Mary Jane Kehily; and most recently Youth Culture and Private Space (2012), by Siân Lincoln.49 Comprehending young people, as these numerous volumes have repeatedly proved, is a laborious and disconcerting endeavor, more so when undertaken by adults.

The shifts in youth studies and the cultural perception of youth over the past generation thus makes for intriguing research, but studying how the image of youth has changed, and further how it has diversified into a heterogeneity of styles, attitudes, and ages, offers insight into the significant and often contradictory notions of who young people are. The cinema, with its limited range of products with unlimited ranges of meaning, is a system of representation that provides a useful inventory of issues about various conditions, especially those of youth, its most vital audience. Yet general studies about youth in cinema did not emerge until the 1980s with Considine’s Cinema of Adolescence, which had a lasting impact notwithstanding its rather limited release.50

Considine employs a method that many other studies omit or minimize: he provides narrative descriptions of virtually all the films he discusses within the context of a thematic examination of the history of a population he calls “screenagers.” His overall argument is that American youth films over the course of the century have lacked verisimilitude because “the American film industry has been spectacularly unsuccessful in realistically depicting adolescence,” and thus the image of youth in films has been distorted.51

Considine proceeds chronologically (up to the early 1980s) through chapters divided into sections on family, school, delinquency, and sexuality, and thereby lays out a structure that other critics and I have followed. (I do not locate “family” as an individual subgenre of the youth film since 1980: few recent youth films actually concentrate on family issues—indeed, much of Considine’s examination of family is from pre-1970 films—or the family issues are contained within dramatizations more relevant to other subgeneric qualities.) The Cinema of Adolescence strikes the best balance between historical and narrative analysis of any study I have found (with em-
phasis on the sociological), and his study demonstrates quite well the ways in which Hollywood had portrayed youth until the early '80s, predominantly in negative images. I proceed from this representational model and analytical method with a deeper consideration of how youth themes have become subgenres and how individual movies themselves became the paradigms for those subgenres.

The less sympathetic *Road to Romance and Ruin* by Jon Lewis preserves a thematic approach similar to Considine’s, although with a perspective that is often pessimistic and occasionally condescending. He proceeds through various forms of teen vice to support his ultimate thesis that “despite stylistic, tonal, industrial, and by now even generational differences within the genre, teen films all seem to focus on a single social concern: the breakdown of traditional forms of authority.” Lewis is rather selective with the films that demonstrate his argument, and ultimately he is more concerned with teen films’ audiences, moving away from film analyses to incorporate ideas on youth movements (mods, rockers, punks), music, and to a lesser extent, sociopsychological commentary. This could have resulted in a study that would have cast new light on the conditions of contemporary youth culture, yet so much of what Lewis says about young people is recycled from notions that are two or three generations past. When he concludes, “For this [current] generation of teenagers, the present is dominated by images and narratives of their parents’ youth,” his overall approach is revealed as exaggerated and lacking in serious study of teen films after the early 1980s, which are much more occupied by a nostalgia for the present—the instant recycling of, and ironic longing for, contemporary phenomena—than they are by scenes of an extinct parental history.

A waggish yet surprisingly comprehensive analysis of teens in ’80s films appeared in 1997, when Jonathan Bernstein published *Pretty in Pink: The Golden Age of Teenage Movies*, an often rousing if largely frivolous set of ruminations, because Bernstein only briefly mentions the many significant social, political, and economic conditions of the time, a shortcoming that is more glaring when he then attempts to study the representations of youth in films. An immediate liability, as Bernstein admits, is that he does not intend to examine an “exhaustive collection” of these films, and even though he does address about 120 examples, his review process is rather skewed to easily fit his blanket remarks about the hedonism and angst portrayed in the films he describes. This yields sentimental reflections that can be amusing, while Bernstein’s arguments remain self-fulfilling and lacking in much depth.

Perhaps the surest sign that the teen genre had achieved academic legiti-
macy by the ’00s was the publication of numerous anthologies on the subject. Murray Pomerance and John Sakeris were among the first to bring together a diverse range of scholars to discuss youth culture and screen media, and coedited a collection of articles based on their 1996 conference, *Pictures of a Generation on Hold*. Pomerance then joined Frances Gateward in editing two distinctive anthologies dealing with youth movies in terms of gender: *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood* (2002) and *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth* (2005). Even more encompassing compendia appeared later in the decade, as Alexandra Seibel and I turned to an international scope in coediting *Youth Culture in Global Cinema* (2007), and all manner of media were considered in *The Changing Portrayal of Adolescents in the Media Since 1950* (2008), coedited by Patrick Jamieson and Daniel Romer. Evidence of the continuously increasing array of interests and authors around the topic came in 2009 with the publication of conference proceedings from Wake Forest University, titled *Coming of Age on Film*, which was hosted by their Romance Languages Department.

Stephen Tropiano and I published books within a year of each other that evaluated the emergence of youth cinema in addition to the greater prominence of the genre since the 1980s. My own *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen* (2005) traced images of youth back to the silent era, but Tropiano’s *Rebels & Chicks: A History of the Hollywood Teen Movie* (2006) agrees with my approach, and that of many others, in tracing the foundation of the genre to the 1950s. Tropiano admittedly strikes a lighter tone than my writing, yet he is no less thorough in his research, providing a thoughtful consideration of the post-WWII era and its movies, moving through the counterculture years that he broadly identifies as 1965–1980, and celebrating films of the past three decades. Lamenting the extremes to which so many movies carry their representations of youth, Tropiano idealistically concludes, “It would be refreshing to see a film about an ordinary teenager, who, in the final reel, is still ordinary, yet happy.”

Most recently, Catherine Driscoll took on the genre in *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (2011), which offers a generally more theoretical approach beyond concerns about character representation and social developments. Driscoll is clearly influenced by postmodernism, a popular school of thought in recent years that has often been applied to youth culture in terms of consumption, reproduction, identity, and the loss of history. While the book moves toward a stimulating argument about the classification of teen cinema and its location in the realms of commerce and globalization, her historical analysis is more expansive than most, elabo-
Arguments regarding the generic formation and conditions of youth films have persisted since 2000 in such works as *Genre and Hollywood* by Steve Neale, who made the judicious observation that the myriad movies he identifies as “teenpics” tend to “testify to the complexity and interest
of a genre which has for years been important to Hollywood, but rarely, it seems, to genre critics, theorists and historians.”64 Pam Cook employed Neale’s work in her encyclopedic tome The Cinema Book (2008), giving a significant identification to “teenpics” that indicated how the film field was taking the genre seriously.65 Amanda Ann Klein took an alternate look at the genre as part of compound cyclical developments in American Film Cycles (2011), exploring the effect of youth subcultures on film releases. She argued that “fragments” of these subcultures—such as hot rod racing, drug use, teen sex—“are eventually conventionalized by their appearance in film cycles, spreading out through mainstream culture and exposing a broader public to styles and images that were once contained within a small, isolated subculture.”66 (Richard Nowell maintains a similar cyclical discourse about the horror subgenre in Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Cycle [2011].)67 Such arguments continue to illuminate the nature of the youth film genre as a product of both industry and culture, and suggest the further range of research that has yet to be written in the effort to understand the genre.68

In their 1980 reference catalog The Screen Image of Youth: Movies About Children and Adolescents, Ruth Goldstein and Edith Zornow describe a 1972 article by New York Times film critic Vincent Canby titled “Stop Kidding Around,” in which he portrayed a ten-year-old boy who was so angry about the “lies” that films told about children that he was going to write a corrective book, “The Image of the Child in Film.”69 Neither Canby nor the mythical boy ever produced such a book, although the critic did indeed recognize a significant need for research, revision, and appreciation for the ways in which young people are represented in cinema. Most of the authors above, knowingly or not, have participated in fulfilling that need articulated by Canby over thirty years ago, and my goal is to augment that tradition by examining young adult films in this book.