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Children and Teenagers in the Twentieth Century

The twentieth century was fascinated with young people. Seen variously as victims, villains, and the hope of the future, children and teenagers in the United States have been objects of care and concern in both the popular consciousness and academic studies. No longer viewed as miniature grownups or apprentice adults, they have come to be seen—and to see themselves—as distinctive groups with their own subculture and customs. Their portrayal in films throughout the century has reflected changing perceptions and concerns in the society as a whole.

After 1900, children and teenagers increasingly became subjects of academic study. Beginning with G. Stanley Hall's 1904 pioneering work *Adolescence*, sociologists and psychologists have examined the world of the young. The widely read books of Robert Coles have intensified and popularized a long fascination with the psychology of the early stages of life and the meaning of growing up in the changing cultural climate of the developed world. Historians, too, have found much social significance in the institution of childhood. Beginning with Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood* (1960), which first postulated the "invention" of the notion of childhood as a separate and distinct life stage, the field today includes growing numbers of books, journal articles, college and university courses, and online discussion groups.

The concern for the social construction of childhood and adolescence has also inspired several scholars to examine the cinematic portrayal of the young, notably Kathy Mer-

lock Jackson on children in films, plus David Considine and Thomas Doherty on screen adolescents. They have insightfully analyzed their subjects both as reflections of the time in which the movies were made and as influences on the behavior of youthful members of movie audiences. More recently, a 1998 journal article by Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kinchloe reviewed some of the scholarship concerning celluloid teenagers, and added provocative cultural analysis of their own.

Children and adolescents have appeared in commercial film productions from the beginning. Their changing roles throughout the twentieth century reflected a society in transition, as traditional adult authority over young people waned and youth culture grew increasingly autonomous. In their earliest appearances, young actors portrayed characters who exemplified both innocence and dependence, love objects needing adult protection and guidance. Although occasionally showing resourcefulness and an ability to help adults—what Kathy Merlock Jackson has called "fix-it" children—their screen presence represented a sentimental, adult view of childhood. Occasionally amused by youthful quirks and often nostalgic, this perspective dominated films for the first half of the century. A shift in the demographics of movie audiences and a rise in power among both children and teenagers, beginning in the 1940s and exploding in the 1950s and 1960s, created a new, more independent—and often more defiant—image.

The Silent Era: Guardians of Innocence

As early as 1903 in *The Great Train Robbery*, a child actor played a significant role. In that film, the plucky little daughter of the overpowered stationmaster revives and frees him, enabling him to raise the alarm after robbers leave him bound and unconscious. In 1908, a child played the title character of D. W. Griffith's *The Adventures of Dolly*, an innocent victim of kidnapping who survives a harrowing trip through river rapids and over a waterfall. Viewers identified with her distraught parents and her brave young rescuers more than with the happy, adorable child herself. Such a point of view typified films throughout this era. Children served alternately as resourceful helpmates or imperiled victims needing protection and rescue. This period in film history coincided with the intense child protection campaigns of the Progressive era (1889–1920).

The Kid (1921), with seven-year-old Jackie Coogan in the title role, was Charlie Chaplin's first feature-length film and the first to star a child actor. Its characteristically Chaplinesque mixture of humor and sentiment appealed to audiences and set a pattern for future films to follow. As in King Vidor's early sound-era production *The Champ* (1931), a child devoted to his loving (but socially unacceptable) father defied the busybodies of social convention who sought to separate them. Though these and similar subsequent films featured strong performances by their child protagonists, the point of view consistently was that of a protective adult. Children in danger gave the adult the opportunity to play the part of rescuer.

The Early Sound Era: A Sense of Loss

When children died, as in *Penny Serenade* (1941) or *Little Women* (1933, 1949, 1994), films focused directly on the sorrow of those left behind more than on the feelings of the languishing child. All of the protagonist's siblings in *The Yearling* (1946) die young, leaving him as his parents' only surviving offspring. The film emphasizes his relationship with his

beloved pet fawn, which ultimately he has to put down. After the passing of grief for the loss, his bonds with his parents provide the basis for his own passage to adulthood. As in many films about childhood, its setting in the past emphasizes a strong sense of nostalgia. Two classic films from 1941 invoke this quality as well: John Ford's *How Green Was My Valley* is an achingly poignant memory film, told by the adult Huw Morgan (Roddy McDowall), about his childhood in the Welsh mining community where his family had lived for generations; and Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*, though not ostensibly a film about children, based its narrative on its title character's dying words "Rosebud," harking back to Charles Foster Kane's childhood innocence in a pristine Colorado from which he was so abruptly torn.

Combining innocence and self-reliance, a "fix-it" child who still needed adult love and care, the biggest box-office attraction for four years in the mid-1930s was a curly-haired moppet named Shirley Temple, who starred in more than twenty-five feature-length films as a child, among them *Stand up and Cheer* (1934), *Curly Top* (1935), *The Little Colonel* (1935), *Captain January* (1936), and *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937). Her characters' inevitable overcoming of obstacles made her especially appealing to Depression-era audiences. Kathy Merlock Jackson attributes the success of Temple's screen persona to an American sense of guilt combined with hope, regretting the misfortunes so many children had to endure and simultaneously seeing these children as promises of a brighter future.

1940–1980: Increasing Complexity

The social upheaval that marked American life from World War II through the 1970s affected children. From *National Velvet* (1944) and *The Yearling* (1946) through *The Member of the Wedding* (1952) and *Shane* (1953), films reflected the effects of this upheaval. The motion picture lives of children became increasingly

complex: the demands of the adult world impinged on them ever more severely, and the potential for psychic and physical perils loomed large. The children themselves could become the villains, as they increasingly resisted adult control, in film as well as in life. In *The Bad Seed* (1956), a demonic little girl (Patty McCormack) commits mayhem and murder until finally and fatally stopped by her mother. In *Children of the Damned* (1960), an entire village of monster children conceived by a mysterious extraterrestrial force seeks to dominate and destroy the adult world. In *The Innocents* (1961), based on Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*, Deborah Kerr's governess character uncovers grotesque lasciviousness and corruption in the two children under her care. While the children of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) display traditional resourcefulness and wide-eyed wonder and must be rescued from deadly peril, the playful laughing children in the opening scene of *The Wild Bunch* (1969) find sadistic pleasure in torturing scorpions to death, feeding them to swarming hordes of ants and then setting all the creatures on fire. Suddenly children were suspect: the spawn of Satan in *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Omen* (1976); possessed by a demon in *The Exorcist* (1973); prostitutes in *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Pretty Baby* (1978).

1980–2000: Children of Change

Yet, as the 1980s began, some children's roles returned to innocence and vulnerability. *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) derives much of its emotional power from the love between the Dustin Hoffman character and his little son (Justin Henry) and the boy's difficulty in understanding the departure of his mother (Meryl Streep). That same year, director Carroll Ballard's *The Black Stallion* reprised many of the themes of the best of the child-animal films such as *National Velvet* in a beautifully realized movie that also emphasizes the pain of the loss of a parent. In *E.T.* (1982), Steven Spielberg depicts a ten-year-old whose father

has abandoned the family; the boy (Henry Thomas) finds love with an adorable alien creature. Resembling in many ways the child-animal films, *E.T.* is a remarkable celebration of the world of an innocent childhood, besieged by adult intrusions. As these examples indicate, the fragmented family became increasingly the norm on the screen as it also did in society, and the costs to children were evident even before the publication of Judith Wallerstein's studies of the impact of divorce. In *Irreconcilable Differences* (1984), ten-year-old Casey Brodsky (Drew Barrymore) seeks to divorce herself from her self-absorbed single parents (Ryan O'Neal and Shelley Long). By the mid-1990s, child performers returned to the "cute kid" style on display in *Jerry Maguire* (1996), as a young boy (Jonathan Lipnicki) charms everyone into wanting Tom Cruise for his stepdad. Today's movie children of divorce are neither monsters nor simple innocents, as they embody and reflect the social changes, the single-parent families and the loss of community that have transformed the reality of American childhood.

The First of the Screen Teens

Hollywood's attention to the American teenager has been less enduring than that given to the younger child. Though the American interest in the teen years as a distinct phase of life began with the 1904 publication of G. Stanley Hall's *Adolescence*, motion pictures were slow to include recognizably teenage characters. Comic-strip hero Harold Teen made the transition from the newspaper pages to the movie screen in a 1928 silent feature directed by Mervyn Leroy and in a Warner Bros. musical in 1934. In both these films, and in the subsequent Andy Hardy (e.g., *A Family Affair*, 1937; *You're Only Young Once*, 1938; *Love Finds Andy Hardy*, 1938) and Henry Aldrich (e.g., *Life with Henry*, 1941; *Henry Aldrich for President*, 1941; *Henry and Dizzy*, 1942) series, teenage life seemed to consist largely of comic adventure. The occasional

moral or emotional conundrums faced by Andy Hardy (Mickey Rooney) could be resolved with some sage advice from wise old Judge Hardy (Lewis Stone). The beginnings of a distinct adolescent subculture received treatment that was essentially humorous, often affectionately nostalgic and sometimes condescending, with almost none of the poignancy or intense emotion associated with movies about younger children. Teenagers had a more problematic relationship with adults and thus received a less sentimental treatment. Representative of the era's attitude toward youth, Robert and Helen Lynd's widely read *Middletown* (1929) and *Middletown in Transition* (1937) portrayed the growth of a distinctive adolescent subculture in a typical Midwestern American small city—Muncie, Indiana.

The 1940s: Teenagers as Beings Apart

Historian Grace Palladino notes that by 1936 nearly two-thirds of teenagers were in school, creating a social center for the teenage culture that emerged more fully during the early 1940s. As the wartime economy boomed and social upheaval diminished adult supervision of youth, Hollywood took note of increasingly autonomous adolescents. *Youth Runs Wild* (1944), a rare example of the movies sharing the popular press's fears about rampant juvenile delinquency, came out the same year as *Janie*. The latter film, though very much in the comical teenage-hijinks mode typical of the era, also depicts its title character (Joyce Reynolds) as beyond her parents' control. Her father, David Considine writes, "can only denounce 'the way the children of today dance and the records they play.' . . . He looks upon his daughter as an alien; she speaks differently, acts differently, and seems to live in a world with customs and codes totally unknown to him" (37). The comic plot hinges on the father's attempts to keep a precocious Janie and her friends away from romantic associations with soldiers stationed at a nearby base, a sit-

uation often played out in wartime America with considerably less amusement. Considine explains Hollywood's "obsession with adolescence . . . and [its] tribal customs" as a product of a cultural crisis: "With the war on, adolescence remained one of the few areas of society left intact" (42). Sociologist A. B. Hollingshead showed adolescent society as a mirror of the class divisions of the adult communities in which its members grew up. His *Elmtown's Youth* (1949) presents a darker view of youth behavior, stressing the secrets teenagers kept from their parents about the breaking of social taboos.

The 1950s: Troubled Teens and Teenpics

Within the next several years, films such as the Henry Aldrich and Andy Hardy series, *Janie*, *Margie*, *Junior Miss*, and *A Date with Judy*, were joined by productions featuring a much more troubled take on teenagers. This noir approach began in 1955 with *The Blackboard Jungle*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Running Wild*, and *Teenage Crime Wave*. These films started what film historian Thomas Doherty calls a glut of "teenpics," often featuring young actors playing juvenile delinquents engaged in exciting adventures designed to thrill the audience. The enduring classic of this genre is Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause*, with its remarkably effective ensemble of young actors including Wendell Corey, Dennis Hopper, Sal Mineo, Natalie Wood, and, most especially, James Dean. Though the script seems to emphasize patriarchal values, subversive moments undercut conventionality throughout the film, giving it an edge and an attitude that continue to attract viewers. Its viewpoint resembled that of Paul Goodman's influential book *Growing up Absurd*: teenagers were right to rebel against a deeply flawed social system. In Goodman's words, "the young really need a more worthwhile world in order to grow up at all" (xvi).



FIGURE 26. *Janie* (1944). Hollywood capitalized on attracting a wartime demographic, the adolescent, in popular films such as *Janie*. In the simple comedy, Janie's (Joyce Reynolds) father tries constantly to prevent her romantic rendezvous with soldiers from a nearby base. During wartime, this real social problem received no serious attention on film. Courtesy Warner Bros.

The 1960s and 1970s: A Revival of the Teenpic

The movies' teenage werewolves and Frankenstein's of the next few years represented a heightened sense of the distinctive youth culture that had emerged and its potential as a market, with a subtext of adult fear of teenagers as alien beings—and counterculture ones at that, as *Village of the Giants* (1965), starring young Ron Howard and Beau Bridges, makes clear. After the late 1950s flood of "teenpics," though, the genre foundered. The youth of the Beach Party movies of the early 1960s and the counterculture rebels of the latter part of the decade seemed well past their teenage years. Then, in 1973, George Lucas recalled his own teenage years in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the groundbreaking *American Graffiti*. As nostalgic and affectionately humorous about its era as *Margie* (1946) had been about teens of the 1920s, *American Graffiti* features a soundtrack of Golden Oldies, great pop songs of the early years of rock and roll. It may have inspired *Cooley High* (1975), with the greatest hits of soul music scoring a film about African

American teenagers of the previous decade. Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976) displayed the director's penchant for Hitchcockian visions in a film filled with *Psycho* references both in the title character's home and at Bates (as in Norman) High School. In the course of the action, the meanness and the petty exclusiveness of teenage cliques were thoroughly roasted (as were most of the teenagers, literally).

The Late 1970s and 1980s: A New Wave of Teen Movies

A new wave of teenager movies emerged in the late 1970s. Although often cited as a teenage film, *Grease* (1978) is self-consciously ironic and condescending toward 1950s popular culture, mocking its style and its characters. The humor encouraged its audience to feel superior to the young people on display, making the film the antithesis of the warmth and sentiment that characterized *American Graffiti*. Amy Heckerling's humorous, heartfelt *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) uses a contemporary setting rather than nostalgically sending up the recent past. Sean Penn's performance as the classroom surfer-dude Spicoli set the tone for later awesome, gnarly characters such as Bill and Ted (*Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*, 1989) and Wayne and Garth (*Wayne's World*, 1992). Martha Coolidge's *Valley Girl* (1983) came close to matching the effective mixture of humor, sentiment, and insightful commentary on teenage society displayed by Heckerling. That same year, Tom Cruise starred in Paul Brickman's satirical dark comedy *Risky Business*, turning one upscale family's teenage son into entrepreneurial pimp. In another category altogether was the bleak vision of *River's Edge* (1984), portraying the anomie of a teenage wasteland where even murder within the group failed to register on the malfunctioning moral radar of clique members.

For four years in the mid-1980s, the king of the teenager film seemed to be director John Hughes, with his hit movies *Sixteen Candles*

(1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Weird Science* (1985), *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), and *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987). Writer Jonathan Bernstein saw the Hughes films as so emblematic of their era that he named his 1997 book on "The Golden Age of Teenage Movies" after one of them: *Pretty in Pink*. As teenage culture became increasingly autonomous, a trend that had begun in life and film some forty years earlier, adults seemed increasingly irrelevant. The few adult characters appeared as occasional annoyances, largely stereotyped. Mixing teen soul-searching, sentiment, and a somewhat sophomoric sense of humor, Hughes set the tone for many imitators.

Four end-of-decade films probed the outer edges of the genre and showed teenage society in a biting satiric light. Two starred the youth culture's version of Jack Nicholson, Christian Slater: *Heathers* (1989) and *Pump up the Volume* (1990). Two others displayed the outrageous, campy vision of John Waters: *Hairspray* (1988) and *Cry-Baby* (1990). All of these movies exhibited considerable filmmaking talent as they examined teenage social conventions from the point of view of adolescent outsiders.

The 1990s: New Directions

Variations in the genre included racial minorities (a theme of *Hairspray*) and an amalgam of teenage movie conventions with those of other film types. Despite the whiteness of most screen teenagers, portrayals of black teenage culture also appeared occasionally, such as the rollicking *House Party* (1990), the bleak *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), and the powerful *Menace II Society* (1993). Another subgenre that should be mentioned is the teenager-in-peril "slasher" film. John Carpenter's classic *Halloween* (1978) spawned a host of less artful imitators such as *Friday the 13th* (1980) and its seemingly endless train of sequels. The underlying premise of the slasher film held that premature sex kills, as sexually active teenagers became the victims of crazed, unstoppable murderers wielding butcher knives and axes.

The subgenre's apotheosis came in 1996 with the entertainingly self-referential *Scream*, a virtual *Cliff's Notes* guide to teen slasher film conventions.

The mid-1990s also saw the release of one of the best teenage comedies of many years, written and directed by Amy Heckerling, and loosely based on Jane Austen's *Emma*. *Clueless* (1995) was even better than Heckerling's *Fast Times at Ridgmont High*. Sensitive, insightful, and witty, *Clueless* simultaneously celebrated and spoofed upscale Southern California teen culture. Though it recognized the cliques and the sometimes mean-spirited exclusiveness of its social milieu, the film's own point of view is generous and kind-hearted. Although its adult figures are typically out of touch and largely irrelevant, they are treated with some amused affection.

From the *Andy Hardy* series to *Janie to Bye Bye Birdie* to *Clueless*, viewers can see portraits of a society in transition. Teenagers had created a world of their own, and adult influence on that world decreased dramatically. As films depicted this change, the point of view shifted. Filmmakers had shown teenagers from an adult perspective, as parents and teachers were alternately charmed, amused, alarmed, or even frightened by them. As teenagers became the dominant audience and as a new generation of young filmmakers created the motion pictures, they transformed Hollywood's vision of children and teenagers. Recent cultural studies of youth such as Sydney Lewis's *A Totally Alien Life-Form* (1996), Patricia Hersch's *A Tribe Apart* (1998), and Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson's *The Ambitious Generation* (1999), as well as studies of film such as Jon Lewis's *The Road to Romance and Ruin* (1992), have described a further growth in peer group autonomy and alienation from adults as defining characteristics of teen culture. Young screen characters have become more complex and their situations more challenging, reflecting the changed social reality of coming of age in America.

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