

Beyond the Pink:
(Post) Youth Iconography in Cinema

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De c l a r a t i o n

I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Publications and Conference Presentations

Referred Publications

Christina Lee. "Party people in the house(s): The hobos of history" in *Liverpool of the South Seas: Perth and Its Popular Music*. Tara Brabazon (ed.) Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2005. pp. 43-52. This chapter was written in association with the research on rave culture, as featured in Chapter Six.

Christina Lee. "Let me entertain you" in *TTS Australia: Critical Reader*. Bec Dean (ed.) Northbridge: PICA, 2005. pp. 17-18. This piece was written in association with the research on nationalism and xenophobia, as featured in Chapter Seven.

Christina Lee. "Lock and load(up): The action body in *The Matrix*", *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, forthcoming 2005. This journal article was written in association with the research on simulacra and masculinity, as featured in Chapter Two and Chapter Seven.

Conference Presentations

"Lock and Load(up): The Action Body in *The Matrix*". *Alchemies: Community Exchanges*. 7th Annual Humanities Graduate Research Conference. Curtin University of Technology: Bentley, Australia. 6-7 November, 2003. This conference presentation was derived from research on the simulacra and the action hardbody as presented in Chapter Two and Chapter Seven.

"Taking Out the Trash: Remembering Molly Ringwald". *Culture Incorporated: Bodies, Technologies, Habitats*. Cultural Studies Association of Australasia Annual Conference. Christchurch Arts Centre: Christchurch, Aotearoa/New Zealand. 6-8 December, 2003. This conference presentation was derived from Chapter Three.

"Donnie Darkest: Master of the Universe?". *Beyond the Frame: Transcending Borders in Cinema*. Annual Graduate Student Conference. San Francisco State University: San Francisco, United States of America. 14-16 October, 2004. This conference presentation was derived from Chapter Seven.

"You Must Remember This: The Teen Time Traveller". *Everyday Transformations: The Twenty-First Century Quotidian*. Cultural Studies Association of Australasia Annual Conference. Murdoch University: Murdoch, Australia. 9-11 December, 2004. This was a revised version of the conference paper presented at San Francisco State University.

Abstract

Beyond the Pink: (Post) Youth Iconography in Cinema is a project in cultural time travel. It cuts up linear cinematic narratives to develop a hop-scotched history of youth, Generation X and (post) youth culture. I focus upon the pleasures, pedagogies and (un)popular politics of a filmic genre that continues to be dismissed as unworthy of intellectual debate. Accelerated culture and the discourse of celebrity have blurred the crisp divisions between fine art and crude commodity, the meaningful and meaningless, and real and fictive, unsettling the binary logic that assigns importance to certain texts and not others. This research project prises open that awkward space between representation and experience.

Analysts require methods and structures through which to manage historical change and textual movement. Through cinema, macro-politics of identity emerge from the micro-politics of the narrative. Prom politics and mallrat musings become imbued with social significance that speak in the literacies available to youth. It grants the ephemerality and liminality of an experience a tactile trace. I select moments of experience for Generation X youth and specific icons – Happy Harry Hardon, Molly Ringwald, the Spice Girls, the Bitch, the invisible raver, teen time travellers Marty McFly and Donnie Darko, and the slacker – to reveal the archetypes and ideologies that punctuate the cinematic landscape. The tracked figures do not configure a smooth historical arc. It is in the rifts and conflicts of diverse narratives and subjectivities where attention is focused.

This research imperative necessitates the presentation of a series of essays arranged in a tripartite framework. The first section proposes theoretical paradigms for a tethered analysis of filmic texts and Generation X. The second segment explores sites of struggle in public spaces and time. The final section leaves the landscape of post-Generation X to forge the relationship between history, power and youth identity. I particularly focus on the iconography, ideologies and imaginings of young women to lead the discussion of the shifts in the experience and representations of youth. By reinserting women into studies of film, it is imperative to stress that this is not a dissertation in, and of, women's cinema. Rather, it serves as an historical corrective to the filmic database.

The existing literature on youth cinema is disappointing and narrow in its trajectories. Timothy Shary's *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* and Jon Lewis' *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* exemplify the difficulties of capturing the complexities of individual films when they are collated in artificial and stifling categories. At one end of the analytical spectrum is the critique that comes with the caveat of 'it's just another teen movie'. Jonathon Bernstein's monograph *Pretty in Pink: The Golden Age of Teenage Movies* is one such example which derails into acerbic diatribes and intellectual dismissal. *The Cinema of Generation X: A Critical Study* by Peter Hanson is a more successful project that is interested in the influences that inform a community of filmmakers than arriving at a catalogue of generic themes and narratives. There is an emphasis on the synergy between text, producer and readership.

I continue this relationship explored by Hanson, but further accent the politics of film. The original contribution to knowledge offered by this doctoral thesis is a detailed study of (post) youth popular culture, building into a model for Generation X cinema, activating the interdisciplinary perspectives from film and cultural studies. With its adaptability into diverse media forms, cultural studies paradigms allow navigation through the expansive landscape of popular culture. It traverses beyond simple textual analyses to consider a text's cultural currency. As an important carrier of meaning and sensory memories, cinema allows for alternative accounts that are denied in authorised history. As a unique form with its own visual literacy, screen theory is needed to refine observations. This unique melding of screen and cultural studies underscores the convergent relationship between text, readership, production and politics.

This doctoral thesis activates concepts and methods of generationalism, nationalism, social history and cultural practice. There is a dialogue between the chapters that crosses over text and time. The 1980s of Molly Ringwald shadows the dystopia of *Donnie Darko*. The celebrity status of the Spice Girls clashes with the frustrated invisibility of the female raver. Douglas Coupland's vision of Generation X in 1991 has evolved into Richard Linklater's documentation of post-youth in the new millenium. Leaping between decades through time travel in cinema, I argue that the nostalgic past and projections for the future evoke the preoccupations and anxieties of the present.

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Introduction

I think it's safe to say that this party is about to become a historical fact.¹

~ Duncan [*Some Kind of Wonderful*] ~

My 'high school education' began long before I was sent to boarding school in the city at thirteen years of age. Up until that point, I had grown up in a mining town called Goldsworthy in the north-west Pilbara region of Western Australia. Located in the centre of what many deemed a dusty 'No Man's Land', the closest neighbouring towns were Shay Gap (approximately seventy kilometres to the north) and Port Hedland (approximately one hundred kilometres to the west). Many adjectives narrate my childhood and early teenage years. It was unusually adventuresome and rustic, but also familiarly girlish. Afternoons and weekends were spent roaming the open countryside, picnicking in the hills, creating secret clubs, going to bingo nights and car rides to the local dump. There were no malls or arcades, just a little supermarket and milk bar at one end of the town. Posters of Tom Cruise and Michael J. Fox were plastered on my bedroom wall. My musical tastes included Bananarama and Kylie Minogue. I enjoyed primary school immensely. It was a small community with no more than one hundred students. At one point, the numbers dropped to sixty. The population of the town could not sustain a high school. Those who graduated from their final year were either sent to boarding school in Perth or attended secondary school in Port Hedland. Their weekend visits were quite an event for the rest of us. Stories of food fights, dorm parties and Home Economics were a source of intrigue. They were foreign concepts. This fascination would be whetted by the books I read, which were mostly of

American origin that took place in high schools and colleges – or at the very least, educational institutions that had more than one hundred students. They included the likes of the Judy Blume oeuvre and the Babysitters Club series. My voracious appetite for books was equalled only by my voracious appetite for movies.

The isolation of Goldsworthy was more than compensated by the facilities provided by the mining company to maintain a comfortable standard of living. We considered our town to be an oasis in the desert. Of the many benefits, one of my favourites was the open-air cinema. It was free and screened movies several times a week. My parents would allow my sister and me to attend the cinema to amuse ourselves on the weekends, and often on the weekdays. Being the 1980s, my pre-teen years were complemented by the spate of ‘teen movies’ that would appear frequently. My youth was as much (in)formed by traipses to the local creek as it was by *The Karate Kid* and *Back to the Future*.²

Whether it was a juvenile crush on one of the male idols, or the trials and tribulations of being young that were projected on the silver screen, I always found some relevance in the films to my own life. It was a mix of desire, fantasy, curiosity and identification. One of my earliest, and most profound, memories is of the film *The Breakfast Club*.³ Taking place within a high school, the narrative follows five students who must begrudgingly spend Saturday in detention. It is a revelatory experience: secrets are

¹ *Some Kind of Wonderful*. Directed by Howard Deutch. Written by John Hughes. Paramount Pictures, 1987.

² *The Karate Kid*. Directed by John G. Avildsen. Written by Robert Mark Kamen. Columbia Tristar Pictures, 1984.

Back to the Future. Directed by Robert Zemeckis. Written by Bob Gale and Robert Zemeckis. Twentieth Century Fox, 1985.

³ *The Breakfast Club*. Directed and written by John Hughes. Universal Pictures, 1985.

shared, pretences are shed and alliances built on equality are formed. I confess I did not completely understand the story. The context was alien to me, and the stereotypes so pronounced that it bore no resemblance to my own life. Of course there were students at my school who were academically-inclined or extremely gifted at sports, but there was none of the aggression and discrimination attached to those labels that I witnessed in the film. As I had never been to a high school, the setting of *The Breakfast Club* was a strange place. The in-jokes were lost on me. The chasm between the film's projected reality and my own social reality was insurmountable. I left the cinema that night feeling rather disoriented and 'affected'.

The aftertaste of *The Breakfast Club* proved to be a more tantalising experience. The story lingered in my head. I began collecting newspaper clippings that reviewed the film. I began to play around with the semantics of the title in an attempt to gain further depth and insight into the moralising of the story. Could it also be interpreted as the 'Break Fast Club'? Whatever I lacked in understanding was matched by curiosity with the world that had unravelled before me, and the sensation of witnessing something important, although not certain why. *The Breakfast Club* meant something more than my comprehension at the time. It was not until I watched the movie several years later when I was at high school that I *got* what John Hughes had been trying to say in *The Breakfast Club*. The enemies in the film were neither one another nor the school authorities, but the private demons each character harboured. The personal was political, and the political was intensely private.

The pedagogic function of cinema has often been underwritten, stressing instead its role as a popular cultural panacea, the "mythic fantasy and lure of entertainment" for

‘the masses’.⁴ Often grounded in fiction, the art form is continually consigned as mere diversion from the everyday. The cliché of being able to ‘switch off the brain’ at the cinema is a case in point.⁵ Viewers do not however, abandon their sense of self and society – even within the darkened theatre that is screening the latest Hollywood comedy. Henry Giroux states that:

Deeply imbricated within material and symbolic relations of power, movies produce and incorporate ideologies that represent the outcome of struggles marked by the historical realities of power and the deep anxieties of the times; they also deploy power through the important role they play connecting the production of pleasure and meaning with the mechanisms and practices of powerful teaching machines.⁶

Pedagogically, cinema conveys notions of ethics, personal and communal responsibility and social conventions. It informs the construction of identity. Inequalities of class, race, age, ethnicity, gender and sexuality are articulated through narrative and characterisation. Cinema plays out popular and unpopular politics and carries the fickle authority to affirm, refute or negotiate existing ideologies and hierarchies of power. When I was six years old, I desperately wanted to be Princess Leia or Snow White. These secret daydreams would invariably be overcome by a darkness sinking through these aspirations. It was not because they were fictional figures who existed in another galaxy or in antiquity. The reason was quite simple. Neither of them was Chinese. I implicitly learnt the limits of aspiration and representation by observing the role models cinema provided. When *The Karate Kid* was released in 1984, I felt an instant rush of self-empowerment. Mr Miyagi (Pat Morita) may have been Japanese, but he was heroic and ‘Asian enough’ for me to

⁴ Henry Giroux. *Breaking in to the Movies: Film and the Culture of Politics*. Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. p. 3.

⁵ In an article on ‘high school movies’, Robin Wood articulates this sentiment with the opening statement, “The first question is, I suppose, Why? Why bother, when everyone knows these films are trash?” (2002, p. 2).

Robin Wood. “Party time or can’t hardly wait for that American pie: Hollywood high school movies of the 90s”, *CineAction*, 2002 (Winter). p. 2.

⁶ Giroux, *Breaking in to the Movies*, p. 3.

claim as one of my own. I did not have the words to articulate this absence or displacement at the time, but the movies were instrumental in embedding ideas of who I would want to become – and what I was supposed to become.

There is a reason for my wanders down memory lane that arches beyond nostalgic indulgence, although nostalgia and emotional investments in the past do summon a particular function in this thesis. Any study of youth requires a return to the past – whether it is an exercise in historic mapping or our own reminiscence of seminal events in our lives. We cannot escape this regression. On occasions, when out socially with friends for a cup of coffee, we will catch ourselves making some sort of commentary on ‘kids these days’. I realise that, through our banter, we are really talking about ourselves. Our focus upon the teenager with the baggy jeans and the crotch that falls to his knees is merely an anchor point for our articulation of difference, self-identity and place in history. There is a knowing community, even though our teenage years are long gone, sharing images, iconography and ideas that are as fresh and lucid as when we experienced them over a decade ago. The present is inevitably dragged back into the past. Rifts and rivulets of social change are carried through cultural texts and memory sites.

There has been a growing trend since the 1990s of films revisiting 1980s youth – whether they are narratives of young adults rekindling their adolescent years, or directly poaching from the iconography and distinctive plotlines of well-known films of the decade.⁷ These texts suggest that the uses of memory arising from Generation

⁷ Such films include *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion*, *Grosse Pointe Blank*, *She's All That* and *Not Another Teen Movie*.

X's movement into post-youth are both strategic and nostalgically political. This nostalgia is not sugar-coated or easily placed in the present. Bryan Turner discusses four dimensions of the nostalgic paradigm as a social and cultural discourse.⁸ It implies the departure from a golden age of "homeliness", moral uncertainty and the collapse of values, the loss of individual freedom with the death of God, and the loss of personal authenticity, simplicity and emotional spontaneity.⁹ This appeal to the past in critical theory develops "an anti-modern critique of mass culture, the cultural industry and modern forms of consumerism".¹⁰ It is a problematic position that does not only sanitise the past, but also censors the present and the study of popular culture. Nostalgic evocations in current youth cinema, while at times wistful, are streaked with scepticism that are as critical of the past as they are of the present. Nostalgia begins to resemble the new "disease" of the twenty first century – a residue of the seventeenth century which saw nostalgia as a sickness – than a temporary remedy for troubled times.¹¹ Just as "[t]he family album functions as a portable graveyard", this could be similarly applied to film.¹² The past is like a cadaver which nostalgia has clothed and preened, until even the stench of formaldehyde smells like sweet perfume. If "nostalgia is memory with the pain removed" as David Lowenthal writes, this thesis

Romy and Michele's High School Reunion. Directed by David Mirkin. Written by Robin Schiff. Touchstone Pictures, 1997.

Grosse Pointe Blank. Directed by George Armitage. Written by John Cusack, D. V. DeVincentis, Tom Jankiewicz and Steve Pink. Hollywood Pictures, 1997.

She's All That. Directed by Robert Iscove. Written by R. Lee Fleming. Miramax, 1998.

Not Another Teen Movie. Directed by Joel Gallen. Written by Michael G. Bender, Adam Joy Epstein, Andrew Jacobson, Phil Beaman and Buddy Johnson. Columbia Tristar Pictures, 2001.

See:

Lesley Speed. "Together in electric dreams: Films revisiting 1980s youth", *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Vol. 28 (1), 2000 (Spring). pp. 22-29.

⁸ Bryan S. Turner. "A note on nostalgia", *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 4, 1987. pp. 147-56.

⁹ Turner, "A note on nostalgia", pp. 150-51.

¹⁰ Georg Stauth and Bryan S. Turner. "Nostalgia, postmodernism and the critique of mass culture", *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 5 (2-3), June 1988. pp. 511-12.

¹¹ David Lowenthal. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. pp. 10, 12.

¹² Turner, "A note on nostalgia", p. 151.

reinserts the lacerations and bruises of time back into the narrative.¹³ It uses nostalgia as a tool to open out youth cinema, rather than a masking device to smooth over historical imperfections.

Over the last two decades, there has been a distinctive development in commercial cinema with the explosion of the ‘teen film’. While this genre has been popular since the 1950s in American cinema, it gained considerable exposure during the 1980s. It has since witnessed a revival in the 1990s with critically acclaimed and financially profitable productions such as *Clueless* and *Scream*.¹⁴ The teen invasion of the Cineplex has been bolstered by an exponential growth of television programs for, and concerning, youth that includes *Beverly Hills, 90210*, *Dawson’s Creek*, *My So-Called Life* and the recent series *The O.C.* and *One Tree Hill*.¹⁵ This trend has been echoed in the pulp literature of fanzines, entertainment magazines and high-profile fashion and style editorials.¹⁶ In a 1997 edition of *Entertainment Weekly*, Chris Nashawaty proclaimed, “a youth-quake is blowing the lid off Hollywood”.¹⁷ While the author points out the power of teen icons that are produced as part of the media machine, there

¹³ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 8.

¹⁴ *Clueless*. Directed and written by Amy Heckerling. Paramount Pictures, 1995.

Scream. Directed by Wes Craven. Written by Kevin Williamson. Miramax, 1996.

¹⁵ *Beverly Hills, 90210*. Created by Darren Star. Spelling Productions. Originally aired on 4 October, 1990 (USA). The series ran for ten seasons.

Dawson’s Creek. Created by Kevin Williamson. Warner Bros. Originally aired on 20 January, 1998 (USA). The series ran for six seasons.

My So-Called Life. Created by Winnie Holzman. ABC. Originally aired on 25 August, 1994 (USA). The series ran for one season.

The O.C. Created by McG and Josh Schwartz. Fox Studios. Originally aired on 5 August, 2003 (USA). The series is currently in its second season.

One Tree Hill. Created by Mark Schwahn. Warner Bros. Originally aired on 23 September, 2003 (USA). The series is currently in its second season.

¹⁶ The lucrative youth market has even seen couture magazines produce a subsidiary ‘teen-downed’ version of their publications. For instance, *Vogue* now also produces *Teen Vogue* that focuses exclusively on fashion, beauty, trends and issues applicable to teenagers and features young celebrities and personalities.

¹⁷ Chris Nashawaty. “Teen steam”, *Entertainment Weekly*, No. 45, 14 November, 1997. pp. 24-25.

is the suspicious whiff of cynicism that places the consumer in a rather awkward and disempowered position. It is encapsulated by the comment that:

According to the Census Bureau, there are 37 million 10- to 19-year-olds right now, and that number will soar to 42 million in the next decade. (Call it *Baby Boomers: The Sequel*.) And with this population explosion comes a hungry horde of consumers itching to spend what amounts to \$82 billion per year in disposable income.¹⁸

Nashawaty's article is a parable of the laws of economics applied to a youth market. The condescending tone is exacerbated by the assertion that "behind the teen face of this revolution is an army of thirtysomethings wallowing in a steamy, hormonally charged gymnasium of arrested development".¹⁹ At its core, Nashawaty's verdict is that the cyclical business of teen entertainment is style without substance. Its allure is its sensorial stimulation and little more.

While Nashawaty's critique is not uncommon, there has been the growing recognition that youth commands considerable clout in the entertainment industry financially and politically. In July 2003, *Vanity Fair* dedicated the issue to 'kid culture'.²⁰ The front cover is an attractive double-spread of nine of the industry's most recognised and influential female celebrities under the age of twenty. Although the feature includes several boy wonders, the emphasis is upon the powerful princesses of pop culture. It cites that the sixteen year old twins Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen preside over the Dualstar Entertainment Group which is responsible for marketing the billion-dollar empire of the pair's franchise line, and that each of the girls' net worth is an estimated \$150 million.²¹ Clearly, youth are no longer just the target market. They have become the producers of popular couture and meaning. Although Hollywood continues to

¹⁸ Nashawaty, "Teen steam", p. 31.

¹⁹ Nashawaty, "Teen steam", p. 31.

²⁰ James Wolcott. "Teen engines: Riding with the kid culture", *Vanity Fair*, No. 515, July 2003. pp. 70-87, 132-33.

pander to the pin-up male idols of teendom, the star treatment has unequivocally been centred upon female personalities. The focus extends beyond notions of glamour and the insatiable market for girly merchandise. More importantly, it registers a movement in the construction of gendered identity. It is in the representational politics of cinema where the most profound transformations of female identity have been witnessed.²² Teen heroines have become omnipresent. Their reclamation of feminine power and force has become fashionable and *de rigueur*. We need only turn to the burgeoning academic literature surrounding the Spice Girls and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as examples of third wave feminism, Girl Power and chick solidarity.²³

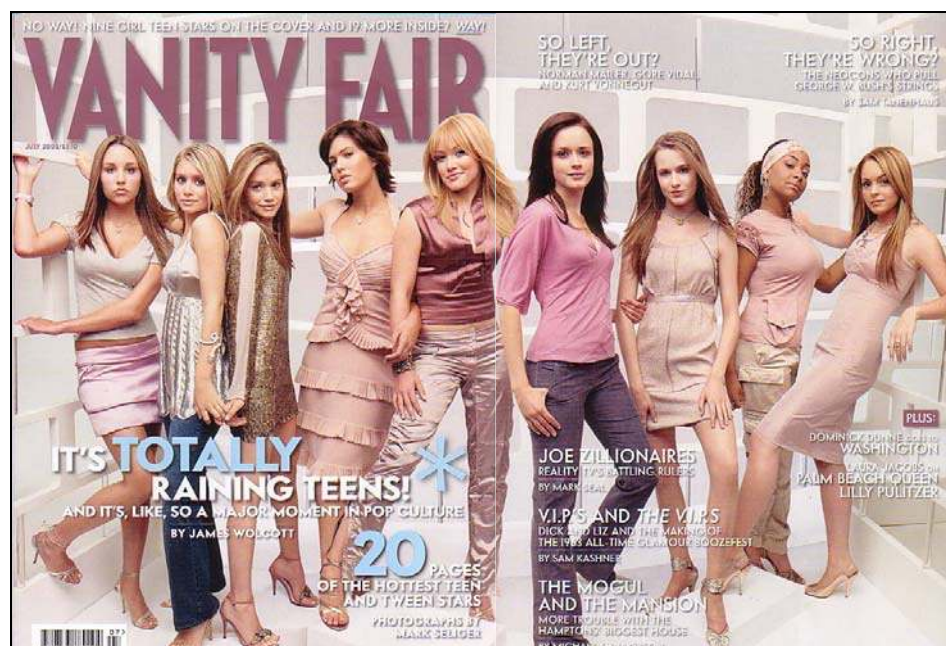


Figure 1: *Vanity Fair*'s homage to the teenage power brokers of popular culture.

²¹ Wolcott, "Teen engines", p. 72.

²² Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance. "Introduction" in *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*. Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance (eds) Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002. p. 15.

²³ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Based on an original concept by Joss Whedon. Twentieth Century Fox. Originally aired on 10 March, 1997 (USA). The series ran for seven seasons. There is even an electronic, refereed journal devoted to the study of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. See: David Lavery and Rhonda V. Wilcox (eds) *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies*. <<http://www.slayage.tv>> Accessed online on 5 January, 2005.

Women are the siren call for social progress in the post-war period. As a result of feminism, young women have faced a greater range of changes, choices and challenges than men.²⁴ Shifts in gender discourses implicate wider movements in generationalism, nationalism, social history and cultural practice. Vested in the study of Generation X and (post) youth cinema, I focus on the iconography, ideologies and imaginings of young women to lead the discussion of these concepts. By reinserting women into studies of films, it is imperative to stress that this is not a dissertation in, and of, women's cinema. Rather, it serves as an historical corrective. This thesis provides a jump-cut narrative that teases out the unpopular politics of youth that is so often dismissed as an unworthy subject in academia and the more generalised reportage in the media. In 'talking pictures', John Hartley argues that even the most intensely private image is politically charged.²⁵ It is not in "mug shots of presidents

²⁴ Feminism has also prompted the 1980s and 1990s Men's Movement and the establishment of Men's Studies as an academic discipline that has also been shadowed in popular culture (McEachern, 1994, p. 70). Debates of gender roles and the construction of masculinity/masculinities have questioned the implications of structural changes in patriarchal organisations and traditional hierarchies of power. Leading theorists in Men's Studies, including Jeff Hearn, R. W. Connell and David Buchbinder, have problematised the 1980s 'crisis of masculinity' as a crisis of changing masculinity that incited a burgeoning body of self-help literature to reclaim the 'wildman' or a nostalgic, spiritual masculinity. Some of the most prominent titles include John Lee's *At My Father's Wedding: Reclaiming Our True Masculinity* and Patrick Arnold's *Wildmen, Warriors, and Kings, Masculine Spirituality and the Bible*. Extremist backlashes against feminism have witnessed claims of masculinity under siege by cultural forces beyond their control, typified by literature such as Susan Faludi's *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man*. The Men's Movement and its relation to popular culture will be further discussed in Chapter Seven.

Charmaine McEachern. "Bringing the wildman back home: Television and the politics of masculinity", *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media and Culture*, Vol. 7 (2), 1994. p. 70.

Susan Faludi. *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1999.

John Lee. *At My Father's Wedding: Reclaiming Our True Masculinity*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991.

Patrick Arnold. *Wildmen, Warriors, and Kings, Masculine Spirituality and the Bible*. New York: Crossroad, 1991.

See:

Jeff Hearn. *The Gender of Oppression, Men, Masculinity, and the Critique of Marxism*. Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1987.

R. W. Connell. "Live fast and die young, the construction of masculinity among young working-class men on the margin of the labour market", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 27 (2), 1991. pp. 141-71.

David Buchbinder. *Masculinities and Identities*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994.

²⁵ John Hartley. *The Politics of Pictures: The Creation of the Public in the Age of Popular Media*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992. pp. 33-34.

and potentates” where evidence of these political processes is to be sought, but in the “detritus of everyday life”.²⁶ Advancing Hartley’s assertions, I propose cinema as one of the most decisive sources where meanings of social identity and youth can be negotiated between textual producers and the readership.

This thesis is not an exercise in cultural populism. It acknowledges the resistive potential of popular youth culture, but also recognises the conservatism, patriarchy and unlimited celebration of consumerism. Meaghan Morris points out the dangers of emotional and theoretical simplification that often creeps into cultural studies, which either posits a Baudrillardian dystopia – “a scenario that is so grim, obsessive, and, in its enunciative strategies, maniacally overcoherent” or a “voxpath style of cultural studies ... offering us the sanitized world of a deodorant commercial where there’s always a way to redemption”.²⁷ Reading culture cannot be so easily reduced to negative and positive representations. Analysts require methods and structures through which to manage historical change and textual movement. Through cinema, macro-politics of identity are manifested in the micro-politics of the narrative, where prom politics and mallrat musings become imbued with social significance that speak in the literacies available to youth.

Cinema remains one of the most powerful and unique socio-cultural art forms. Its dynamic relation with the audience separates it from the way we interact with television. Watched in darkness and without the continual interruption of commercial advertising, cinema provides an intensely intimate experience. The suture between the

²⁶ Hartley, *The Politics of Pictures*, p. 34.

²⁷ Meaghan Morris. “Banality in cultural studies” in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Patricia Mellencamp (ed.) Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. p. 26.

audience and the unfolding narrative is tight. Only when we are disturbed by other patrons talking loudly during the screening, or when we glimpse an usher patrolling the aisles with a flashlight, are we reminded that we have temporarily surrendered our senses and willingly suspended our own reality to occupy another time and space. To borrow from the cliché, the characters and the plot become ‘larger than life’. Projected onto the immense, white canvas of the Cineplex, emotions and events become magnified and loaded with gravity – the intricate contours of a face, the subtlety of a sigh and the prosaic acts of the everyday.

Studies of youth and their (sub)cultures are often disappointing projects. They tend to shed more light on the political proclivities of the commentators than they do the subjects. The sentiments are often accusatory, dismissive or attached with an apology that youth have once again made the headlines. Even *Vanity Fair*’s homage to the power brokers of the pop kingdom comes with a disclaimer.

To some prunes and professional mourners, *Vanity Fair*’s salute to the talent, potential, good looks, mass appeal, and bankable power of Hollywood youth will be seen as another sign of the end of civilization, like Paramount’s decision to make *Grease 3* ... dying bubbles from a society drowning in the kiddie pool.²⁸

News stories are permeated with reports of the latest juvenile folk devils and the moral panics they incite, or condescendingly suggest that they are incapable of being responsible, independent individuals.²⁹ The social sciences of psychology, ethnography and sociology tend to reduce youth to symptoms and stages of development. History has a habit of classifying young people into seductively

²⁸ Wolcott, “Teen engines”, p. 72.

²⁹ Stanley Cohen provides an extensive account of how youth subcultures have been regularly targeted as socially deviant. See: Stanley Cohen. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987 (1972).

convenient categories.³⁰ Our time is more productively spent embedding circulating criticisms and discussions of youth in discourses of class, race and sexuality.

I do not point the finger at journalists, behavioural scientists and historians because they are *the* offending perpetrators of ill-advised views of youth and their subcultures. Each paradigm, perspective and profession has merit, energy and insight, but as separate disciplines, they can reproduce overly-simplified definitions and cause-effect explanations for youth and their activities.³¹ No one theory of youth and culture provides a definitive method or application. An interdisciplinary framework is needed to integrate lived experience with representation, practice with theory, memory with official history, style with content, and the personal with the political. Ideology, (temporal and spatial) context and relations of power and powerlessness cannot be divorced from meaning and an understanding of the social landscape. Youth cannot be demarcated from popular culture. The meanings of texts are only triggered in their circulation in social and intertextual relations, and how they are articulated and used.³²

This thesis activates an interdisciplinary approach. It melds cultural studies with screen theory to (re)read youth in cinema. Cultural studies theories provide a pliable framework in which to position analyses of popular culture, with its adaptability to a

³⁰ Lawrence Grossberg states, “Youth *is* a historical construct” (1994, p. 27. Italics in original text). Lawrence Grossberg. “The political status of youth and youth culture” in *Adolescents and their Music: If It’s Too Loud, You’re Too Old*. Jonathon S. Epstein (ed.) New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1994. p. 27.

³¹ For instance, Mark Davis points out that the media and government policy have consistently demonised youth in Australia. Davis illustrates this through the supposed epidemic of ‘gang activity’ that is often conjured in times of social unease and paranoia (1999, pp. 232-41). David Matza and Gresham Sykes suggest that sociological studies of juvenile delinquency may be skewed by flawed views of middle-class value systems (1961, p. 712). Mark Davis. *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism. Second Edition*. St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1999 (1997). pp. 232-41.

diversity of media forms. It reinforces the convergent relationship between text, readership and politics. As bell hooks argues, cultural studies' investment in popular culture creates a powerful site where intervention, challenge and change can occur.³³ Rather than smoothing over the problematic aspects of cultural practice, this discipline questions *why* it is so. As an unfolding discourse, cultural studies researchers respond to shifting political and historical conditions.³⁴ While it provides the main vehicle in which to manoeuvre through 'the highway of high school' in youth cinema, screen theory is necessary to hone observations. Although television and the digital medium of the Internet share similar characteristics to film, cinema is a distinctive art form that differs in terms of how it is projected, produced and interpreted. Cinema requires its own highly specific and unique literacy. By reading the cinematic body of youth, it is necessary to broaden this analysis to its amniotic spaces of consumption and production that includes music, dance culture and fashion. With the evolution of the cinematic experience now integrating the soundtrack as a vital promotional hook (and physical manifestation of the experience), the thesis stresses the inter-media relationships between film and music.

The thesis is composed of a series of integrated essays arranged in a tripartite framework. The first section proposes theoretical paradigms for the analysis of filmic texts and Generation X youth. The second segment explores sites of struggle in public spaces and in time, focusing on several seminal female icons. The final part exits into

David Matza and Gresham M. Sykes. "Juvenile delinquency and subterranean values", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 26 (5), October 1961. p. 712.

³² John Fiske. *Reading the Popular*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989. p. 3.

³³ bell hooks. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. New York and London: Routledge, 1994. p. 6.

³⁴ John Storey. *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996. p. 2.

the landscape of post-Generation X. It articulates the relationship between history, power and youth identity. I am not interested in singling out role models or writing a chronological history of a particular genre of film. Timothy Shary's monograph *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* exemplifies the difficulties of capturing the complexities of individual films when they are collated in artificial and stifling categories such as "Youth in School: Academics and Attitude" and "Youth in Love and Having Sex".³⁵ It is a problem which echoes Jon Lewis' earlier monograph *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* which also reduces its subjects to contrived groupings.³⁶ Peter Hanson's *The Cinema of Generation X: A Critical Study* is a more successful project.³⁷ While Hanson is not exempt from classifying the movies under discussion – there is the obligatory slacker section – the author is more interested in the influences that inform the filmmakers of Generation X cinema as a collective and as individual artists, than arriving at a catalogue of generic themes and narratives. Hanson's chapters do not act as sacrosanct and divisive boundaries between topics, theories and ideas, but as spaces for transgression, integration and juxtaposition of subjects and style. In Chapter Three "Culture Vultures", the art-house drama *sex, lies, and videotape* finds company with the violent *Reservoir Dogs* and the farcical exploits of *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*.³⁸ What is laudable about *The Cinema of Generation X* is the emphasis between text, producer and readership through social critique. This thesis similarly stresses this

³⁵ Timothy Shary. *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002.

³⁶ Jon Lewis. *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 1992.

³⁷ Peter Hanson. *The Cinema of Generation X: A Critical Study*. Jefferson and London: McFarland and Company, 2002.

³⁸ *sex, lies, and videotape*. Directed and written by Steven Soderbergh. Miramax, 1989.

Reservoir Dogs. Directed and written by Quentin Tarantino. Miramax, 1992.

Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back. Directed and written by Kevin Smith. Dimension Films, 2001.

triadic relationship, but deploys film and cultural studies paradigms for more rigorous discussion. It accents the pleasures, pedagogies and politics of popular film.

My research stops the proverbial clock and cuts up the smooth narrative of youth cinema. Although I have maintained the definitional ‘integrity’ of this genre, I have frayed the edges of its boundaries to also draw upon films that focus upon youth, but may not necessarily be made *for* young people. I select moments of experience in Generation X to create a series of archetypes and ideologies that punctuate the landscape of cinema. As Lawrence Grossberg states, “Every exploration, no matter how speculative and abstract, has to find some event or landmark through which it can gain access to the labyrinths of culture and power”.³⁹ This configuration avoids forging a ‘naturalised’ relation of cause and effect. Youth is a messy process to understand, track and interpret. It is fraught with ambiguity, contradiction and instability. Proposing a tidy trajectory discounts the complicatedness of traversing from childhood to adulthood, and provides a resolution – an end of youth. Personal and collective memory and experience is not this abrupt.

The first two chapters lay the conceptual foundation of the thesis. I argue that youth is a constructed, elastic category that is stretched and pulled by the ideologies of its time. Its meaning alters and acts as a commentary of its historical conditions. Young people have traditionally felt the blunt end of criticism for society’s ills and grievances. With their supposed endless cycle of folk devils and incitement of moral panics, they have rarely been regarded as the progenitors of revolution, but more likely as the perpetrators of revolt (or simply the revolting). This section interrogates the

plausibility of this aphorism by turning to the politics of ‘serious fun’ and subcultural stylings of Generation X. While not all films presented in this thesis are strictly classified as belonging to Generation X, the majority do occupy the historical context in which this cohort aged. The first section introduces themes of time, technology, style, postmodernist politics and carnival that are developed throughout the thesis. It concludes with a critique of the pedagogic function of youth cinema. This approach bypasses the impossible task of arguing for, or against, the (de)merits of the genre. Such circular arguments resurrect binary oppositions of high and low culture which ignore the relativism and subjective nature of these definitions. A constructive and critical dialogue that integrates popular culture with the theoretical rigours of the academy is needed. It must be capable of adjusting accordingly, rather than remaining stubbornly rooted in an unchanging framework. This strategic approach does not circumvent the awkward politics and representations of Generation X, but cleaves a space to problematise current discourses of gender, age and nationalism that are often glossed over in discussions of youth cinema. As a vital locus in the exchange of knowledge, cultural criticism is also capable of forming new epistemologies.⁴⁰ The thesis works as a conduit – a virtual meeting ground – for communication between the interests of a broad viewership and the practice of an elite few.

I look at the cultural body of Molly Ringwald as actor and icon of a decade. It is not an understatement to claim that she was *the* archetypal teenager in middle America during the Reagan presidency – a time that was not only significant for its economic and political restructuring, but also the booming industry of youth cinema. She

³⁹ Lawrence Grossberg. *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 1992. p. 3.

⁴⁰ hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, p. 6.

epitomised the teen invasion of the Cineplex. Her clout at the box-office and as one of the youngest power brokers in the film industry was intense, but short-lived.

Ringwald's descent into obscurity provides an incisive study of how the preoccupations of the present impinge upon the past to freeze time and history.

Anchoring this chapter to an unfashionable and out-dated personality is an ideal trigger to explore the politics of nostalgia in film. It summons a host of assumptions and urban myths of an idyllic 1980s that have been transferred onto Ringwald as the repository of an imagined community. Popular memory is used as a paradigm in which to analyse filmic representations of youth (and youthfulness). It validates stories and experiences that are normally omitted from authorised historiography. Rather than a flight of fantasy or inane fictional narrative, this chapter recognises cinema as a valuable source of documentation that captures transitory moments of emotional intensity.

Popular cultural time is not linear, chronological or predictable. It is cyclical, accelerated and then slowed. I jump-cut film and history from the 1980s to the 1990s. Popular culture has become the colosseum for the showmanship and struggle for young people declaring their independence. Celebrity status has functioned as a platform for vocal demonstration, which was clearly illustrated by the global phenomenon of the Spice Girls. Research on this group demonstrates the relationship between idolatry and identification, and the functions of popularity and fandom. The Spice Girls did not present what many cultural critics would define as 'unambiguous feminist politics', if there is such a thing. Instead, they proposed an effective and accessible strategy of space invasion that enabled young women to engage in a feminism that had previously been denied them. Similar to The Beatles, the Spice Girls would emerge from Great

Britain to become international icons. Their music would build into star vehicles for their forays into cinema, crystallising the intertextuality of music and film.⁴¹ Unlike The Beatles, the rapid rise to stardom and equally rapid descent into obscurity of the Spice Girls within a two year span demonstrates the accelerating speed of pop cultural redundancy in the 1990s.

Molly Ringwald and the Spice Girls, in all their previous power and glory, constitute relatively 'safe' images of youth – the former associated with her pink and pastels, and the latter with their cartoonish brashness. They stand in contrast to the vicious femme in youth cinema – the dangerous bitch who constitutes a permanent sight in the genre. The bitch is like the femme fatale of film noir. Both are seductive, beautiful, cunning and threatening. They are not, however, identical. While she has been a constant in youth cinema, the bitch is not a static character but evolves. To borrow from the Guerrilla Girls, "Bitch is a stereotype in transition".⁴² This became clear during the 1980s and early 1990s when images of the angry girl in film came to prominence. She drags her sharpened fingernails across the surface of the high school and suburbia by saying, and doing, what others will not. It is through her excess – the acid that flows from her perfectly puckered lips, her lack of hesitation to use violent means, her uber-femininity (indicated by impeccable grooming, fashion and shopping) – that marks her as both envied and despised. This chapter argues that the bitch is a transgressive character who is not easily contained. If high school is a battlefield, it is often the teen

⁴¹ Greil Marcus demonstrates the tight relationship between music and cinema through his discussion of rock films, in particular rock concerts staged for the camera. See: Greil Marcus. "Rock films" in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*. Jim Miller (ed.) New York and Toronto: Random House/Rolling Stone Press, 1980 (1976). pp. 390-400.

⁴² The Guerrilla Girls. *Bitches, Bimbos and Ballbreakers: The Guerrilla Girls' Illustrated Guide to Female Stereotypes*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. p. 26.

bitch who is the master strategist. Unlike her femme fatale forerunner, she offers a model of femininity that has the potential to act as the agent of social change.

Just as each decade harks back to the iconography of youth as key markers in social history – the 1950s with rock and roll and James Dean, the 1960s with Beatlemania and the flower power of the Woodstock generation – its equivalent in the 1980s and 1990s is the rave phenomenon. The debate over Ecstasy use has tended to displace the paradoxes and conflicts of interest that exist within rave itself. I zoom in on the problematic aspect of rave, by looking at the noticeably invisible women (not) in the scene. In rave, the female replaces the homosexual, the ethnic and the downtrodden working class as the new marginalised in youth cinema. The ‘case of the missing woman’ implicates inequalities of economics, gender and youth that underpin this (sub)culture and undermines assumptions of its utopian doctrines. This recognition is an important analytical revelation in my research. While 1980s youth cinema was saturated in the feminine, rave was a rupture in this ideology and rebuilt the genre into a more masculine form. As the nostalgia increased through the 1990s and 2000s, so did the men re-assume leadership in the narrative.

A retrospective study of post-1980s youth iconography in film is a project in time travel. Earlier discussions of nostalgia and the writing of history are advanced by looking at movies that literally employ time travel to read the present and reshape the past. Specifically, I juxtapose *Donnie Darko* with *Back to the Future* to gauge the ideological disparity between Generation X and the Baby Boomers.⁴³ *Donnie Darko* is the harmonic response to the earlier chapter on Molly Ringwald. While the latter

rewinds time, *Donnie Darko* fast-forwards from the past to the present, creating a dialogue of the transformations in youth identity and ideals. Using the rites of passage narratives of teenage boys, this chapter questions what happens to (masculine) authority when the ability to control time, and history, is compromised. This has implications not only over the formation of identity, but also unsettling relations of power in the context of the 1950s, 1980s and the second millennium.

The concluding chapter reappropriates the cyclical nature of Generation X. Like *Donnie Darko*'s journey through an alternate universe, this thesis completes a full revolution by a return to its beginning. Just as recycling retro 1970s disco wear or the bell-bottoms of the 1960s indicates nostalgia for the past, we are beginning to see a similar movement with Generation X. This cohort has started to poach from its own iconographic database, which is evident from its self referentiality and kitsch merchandising. The 1980s has replaced the 'old skool' of the 1960s and 1970s – Atari tee-shirts are the new vintage, dancing to remixes of Michael Jackson's "Thriller" is 'so bad, it's good', and Gen X boasts its own bona fide cult figures.⁴⁴ This chapter provides an overview of the trajectory from the 1980s to the present day through a detailed study of the cinema of Richard Linklater, whose works of slacker cynicism became part of the vocabulary that was used to define a generation. The films function as pop culture signposts of youth experience. Linklater's repertoire leaves behind

⁴³ *Donnie Darko*. Directed and written by Richard Kelly. Pandora, 2001.

⁴⁴ Michael Jackson. "Thriller", *Thriller* album. Epic, 1982.

By cult figures, I include in this repertoire characters such as Vincent Vega (John Travolta) and Jules Winnfield (Samuel L. Jackson) from *Pulp Fiction*, and Jay (Jason Mewes) and Silent Bob (Kevin Smith) from the movies of Kevin Smith.

Pulp Fiction. Directed by Quentin Tarantino. Written by Quentin Tarantino and Roger Avery. Miramax, 1994.

traces of the past and present, and comments upon a future that was never supposed to arrive.

This thesis is a product of its (post-postmodern) times. It is a filament of socio-political culture that is comprised of snippets from a longer tradition of film and cultural studies, history and popular memory. It is not a chronological narrative of youth cinema from *Pretty in Pink* to the present. I do not make that statement for reasons of modesty, but realism and analytical clarity. Conceptualising youth should not be the attempt to build a definitive truth that is flawless and complete. Human experiences and emotions are too convoluted to be contained by a singular narrative. Meaning and coherence is created by extracting and linking landmarks from a vast memoryscape that may appear disjointed. The ethereal nature of memory is anchored by tangible artefacts. It is a ticket stub from a movie, the photograph of the annual school ball and the obsolete cassette filled with outdated tunes. Official historiography of youth is tracked and measured through changes in fashion, fads, practice, language, audio-visual stimuli and political viewpoints. Popular culture has punctuated the stories of our lives. While cultural studies theorists have tended to use film as illustrative examples to underscore an argument, this thesis places emphasis upon its pedagogic nature. Case studies that accompany each chapter operate as anchors, not oars, for each respective section.

A glance of the chapter topics appears a line-up of the usual suspects, such as the rebel, the bitch, the prom princess and the slacker. They are the tropes of teen cinema whose function in the narrative is often limited and predictable. Nevertheless, what James Dean meant *then* is different from what he means *now*. As Richard Dyer states,

“Images also have a *temporal dimension*. Structured polysemy does not imply stasis; images develop or change over time”.⁴⁵ The nuances are to be found, and perhaps only become evident, after a lapse in time. A cultural study of a particular era is best observed from a distance when it is removed from the immediate context. The iconic figures in this thesis do not represent a neat linear history. At times, they offer ambiguous and conflicting understandings of youth. I provide additional inserts between each chapter to reiterate its relevance to the wider project. These inserts do not replace the essential exposition of each chapter. They function like the precursory, over-exposed film stock at the start of a new roll, preparing for and signalling the projection of the main footage.

This thesis is written at a crucial juncture for Generation X. It passes ideologies and narratives through the hub of post-millennarianism. Generation X has now been unofficially superseded by the equally nebulous Generation Y. Those of the former, born between the 1960s and early 1980s, are no longer ‘youth’. They have outgrown MTV, and are now raising children and accruing mortgages. They are the leaders of the dot-com empire. Defying their critics, Generation X did grow up eventually. As the successors of the 1970s Brat Pack filmmakers, they are now making the movies that dominate our theatres.⁴⁶ While official history presents beginning and end points to narratives where the centre is always suspiciously logical and commonsense, this thesis rides the ambiguities and absences. It serves as a cultural time travel machine that retrieves artefacts from the past to gauge the present – where the party of today

⁴⁵ Richard Dyer. *Stars*. London: BFI Publishing, 1979. p. 73. Italics in original text.

⁴⁶ The Brat Pack referred to the neo-classical filmmakers, such as Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg, who emerged during the 1970s and achieved fame and critical acclaim. While these figures are still key players in the industry, the success of Generation X filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino, Steven Soderbergh, Spike Jonze and Paul Thomas Anderson has made them a formidable presence. See:

becomes the historical fact of tomorrow. *Donnie Darko* is not only a film studied in this thesis, but has had an impact on the method, structure and writing. There is a darkness to my prose, caused by writing at a time of war, instability and rage, shadowing the recognition that every happy event presents a bill, and every happy ending has a coda.

The Subcultural Style of Generation X

When Douglas Coupland published *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* in 1991, he had unintentionally created a slogan, mantra and motif for a decade. For good or ill, the progeny of the Baby Boomers had been given a title to contain and explain their arcane and imagined identity. Today, we still grapple with the term Generation X and its unresolved analytical potential. (When) did it end? Media trendsetters are bandying about the rather unfortunate Generation (wh)Y that is more a commentary of its predecessors than the post-Xers.¹ Generation X permeates the discursive fabric of 1980s and 1990s youth cinema, and currently still bears a heavy influence. It continues to capture the public's imagination. Whether we choose to view the Generation X appellation as label, brand or identity is an indicator of the complex relation between youth, consumption, commodification, appropriation and cultural resistance.

A thesis that delves into the representational politics of youth cinema requires a framework in which to place and contextualise its object and focus of study. Ask a development psychologist or a judge in juvenile court to provide a definition of this group, and their responses will differ markedly from that of a struggling single parent of adolescents. Youth is a loaded term. It describes an experience that is specific to a time and place. It is not a natural fact or pattern of life, but a cultural construction. By

¹ Bob Guccione, Jr. "Foreword" in *Marketing to Generation X*. New York: Lexington Books, 1995. p. viii.

See:

Scott Donaton. "The media wakes up to generation X", *Advertising Age*, Vol. 64 (5), 1 February, 1993. pp. 16-17.

Horst Stipp. "Xers are not created equal", *Mediaweek*, Vol. 4 (12), 21 March, 1994. p. 20.

Karen Benezra. "Don't mislabel gen X", *Brandweek*, Vol. 36 (20), 15 May, 1995. pp. 32, 34.

mapping its origins and shifting meanings over history, from antiquity to the present day, we can trace the altering importance and function of these citizens of the state. While young people proudly claim their distinctiveness through culture, language, social practices and the spaces they occupy, the same border that distinguishes also works to discriminate. This chapter binds the negotiative, and at times combative, process of youth subcultural formation through Generation X. Only through this intervention, can we attempt an informed critique of the subject of the thesis.

Chapter 1

Elastic Youth

Redefining the Experience

Generation X means a lot of things to a lot of people. We are a culture, a demographic, an outlook, a style, an economy, a scene, a political ideology, an aesthetic, an age, a decade, and a literature.

To some, belonging to GenX is a cop-out. To us, it is a declaration of independence. We exist.¹

~ Douglas Rushkoff ~

Sometime, somewhere along the journey through history after the Second World War and after the 1960s, older Americans, or at least older American media, began throwing up their hands in despair at the state of youth: lazy, apathetic, confused, disillusioned and shallow. Stigmatised as problematic, this younger deadbeat generation became a mascot for how they had failed society (and how society had failed them). Branded like barcodes, they were christened as Generation X and used to explain changes in public attitudes, values and beliefs. Notwithstanding the relative ease which many found in identifying Generation X, *what* constituted this group remained less obvious. At its most banal and crude, watching cable television all day with Pringles crumbs scattered over their grunge(y) tee-shirts, sporting a goatee or unkempt greasy hair and listening to ‘that awful music’ was enough to convince any person over forty that Generation X youth were in serious need of a good cuff behind the ears. Youth had been boxed, labelled and put in its place on a social shelf in a metaphoric basement. The 1960s were indeed over.

¹ Douglas Rushkoff. “Introduction: Us, by us” in *The GenX Reader*. Douglas Rushkoff (ed.) New York: Ballantine Books, 1994. p. 3.

Generation X is a genealogical conundrum. Definitions of this imagined and imagining community perpetuate an image of pathological aimlessness and dysfunction. It not only points to generational elitism and misconception, but more significantly the ineptitude of social and professional discourse to articulate Generation X as an historical experience that cannot be explained based on reductive sociological narratives. While the term provides a useful platform from which to leap, what is required is a more flexible definition that incorporates (and perhaps begins to reconcile) private experience with public representations. This thesis shifts beyond conceptualising Generation X simply as a population or age cohort. Instead, it describes ideological and representational practices. I argue that Generation X is a media literacy – a way of reading culture. This (re)definition recognises the plurality of what constitutes this imagined community. Acknowledging it as an elastic category, this requires new approaches of discussing Generation X and youth. This chapter teases out the ambiguity of defining youth. It then critiques the limitations of subcultural theory as an interventionist method that attributed symbolic meaning to social practice through observing style. I then return to Generation X by updating subcultural analysis to include the reappropriation of media by youth as a modality for identity formation.

In conversational vernacular, ‘youth’ has become interchangeable with ‘teenager’, ‘adolescent’ and ‘juvenile’ at different stages of its history. They have become commonsense phrases that homogenise and solidify a ‘natural’ and ideal trajectory from childhood to adulthood. The obviousness of these terms would at first appear an unnecessary point for discussion. Pulled apart and relocated into professional discourse, they become as ambiguous as they are slippery. While teenager loosely

refers to an age-based phase book-ended by the years thirteen and nineteen, medical discourse cites adolescence as a transitional period that extends beyond age to encompass psychological and physical maturation.² In legal parlance, the classification of a juvenile varies according to the individual's region of residence, state legislation and the severity of the offense committed by the subject in question.³ Youth is defined situationally. It is neither natural nor static, but a constructed and relative formation.

Attempts to whittle youth down to a singular definition are problematic. They merely stabilise and alienate youth like taxidermal subjects to perpetuate the notion of a uniform experience. As Allison Whitney argues:

The use of biological and psychological theories to explain the teenage phenomenon serves to pathologize the terrifying and violent transformations of the teenage body while seeking to establish a new set of rationalized social boundaries that might contain and regulate the teenage experience.⁴

I do not propose that existing definitions of youth in public discourse are redundant. Children *do* undergo physical and psychological growth before attaining a specific level of maturation. Juveniles *do* have the right to be judged differently than adults in a court of law. Minors *do* require protection of the state as they may not possess the same access to various economic, political and legal facilities as adults. However,

² Grace J. Craig. *Human Development. Sixth Edition.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1992. p. 411.

³ The complexities of distinguishing between minors and adults need not refer exclusively to cases of juvenile delinquency. For instance, according to the West Annotated California Family Code: Emancipation of Minors Law, an adolescent may be classified as a legal adult if the person fulfills various criteria, such as entering into a valid marriage (prior to eighteen years of age) or is on active duty with the national armed forces.

Dean J. Champion. *The Juvenile Justice System: Delinquency, Processing, and the Law.* New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992. pp. 15-17, 212.

Also see:

S. Davis, E. Scott, W. Wadlington and C. Whitebread. *Children in the Legal System: Cases and Materials. Second Edition.* Westbury: The Foundation Press, 1997. p. 223.

⁴ Allison Whitney. "Gidget goes hysterical" in *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood.* Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance (eds) Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002. p. 57.

youth extends beyond simply being an inevitable phase. It is an historical formation that is culturally and temporally unique. It is, as Gennaro Vito and Deborah Wilson comment, a sociocultural construct “generated by a group of people at a given period in history”.⁵ In the book *Centuries of Childhood*, Philippe Ariès charts the historical progression of the idea of childhood.⁶ He argues that until the twelfth century, this life stage was not recognised. Portrayals of infants and children were often pictorially represented as little men. The thirteenth century saw these subjects more closely resembling the modern conceptualisation of childhood, inspired by religious iconography of the Infant Jesus. It was not until the seventeenth century that the young were considered sufficiently important to be featured alone in artwork, as opposed to being a part of the family portrait.⁷ Prior to the thirteenth century, children’s attire, past-times, games and hobbies were largely indistinguishable from that of their elders as indicated in sources such as art, school records and journals.⁸ David Nicholas notes that in the eleventh century, literary references of “kindness to children” and affection towards them became more apparent, most likely resulting from the extolling of the holy family and religious worship.⁹

While it would be naïve to view cultural representations as accurately or authentically shadowing lived experience, it would be equally naïve to disregard the relationship. Transformations in artistic impressions of children suggest that the social imagining and definition of youth was evolving as a result of religious beliefs, but also industrial

⁵ Gennaro F. Vito and Deborah G. Wilson. *The American Juvenile Justice System. Vol. 5.* Newbury Park, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1985. p. 14.

⁶ Philippe Ariès. *Centuries of Childhood.* Translated by Robert Baldick. London: Jonathon Cape, 1962.

⁷ Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, pp. 31-44.

⁸ Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, pp. 48, 65.

⁹ David Nicholas. “Childhood in medieval Europe” in *Children in Historical and Comparative Perspective: An International Handbook and Research Guide.* Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner (eds) New York, Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1991. p. 33.

progress and the new economy of supply and demand, production and consumption. David Bakan ascribes three significant social movements in modern American history which made adolescence a social fact.¹⁰ These institutions and historical events included the schooling system, child labour legislation and legal procedures for juveniles. In the late nineteenth century, the wide introduction of compulsory public schooling in America for those aged between six and eighteen years created a youth population.¹¹ The rise of industrialisation witnessed increasing numbers of young people in the work place, which resulted in the construction and enforcement of child labour laws aimed at protecting their welfare. In the legal system, young people were regarded as vulnerable citizens who were to be separated from older offenders and administered corrective rather than punitive treatment.¹² As Hugh Klein elucidates:

industrialization occurring during the later 1800s created the *need* for a stage of adolescence; the Depression created the *legitimized opportunity* for adolescence to become differentiated from childhood and adulthood; and the mass media influence/blitz of the 1950s *crystallized* this life stage by giving it a reality all its own.¹³

It is Klein's final point – the crystallisation of youth as a result of mass media influence – that brings us back to contemporary times. It was the concept of youth as consumer that radically altered existing perceptions and propelled them into the public eye as an identity and significant population in their own right.

¹⁰ David Bakan. "Adolescence in America: From idea to social fact", *Daedalus*, Vol. 100, 1971 (Fall). pp. 979-95.

¹¹ Here David Bakan is referring to the refined, well-structured schooling system that the education system today most closely resembles. Hugh Klein however, notes that as early as the eighteenth century, schools referred to as academies, colleges, pensions or little schools were founded, where children could be sent to "further their tuition in life and manners" (1990, p. 449).

Hugh Klein. "Adolescence, youth, and young childhood: Rethinking current conceptualizations of life stages", *Youth and Society*, Vol. 21 (4), June 1990. p. 449.

¹² Bakan, "Adolescence in America", pp. 981-82, 984, 988.

¹³ Klein, "Adolescence, youth, and young adulthood", p. 456. Italics in original text.

Piercings, Pinball and Punk: The Style of Subcultures

Familiar ideologies and narratives of youthful behaviour, beliefs and archetypes are maintained and propagated through the circulation of visible signs and symbols in the media, spaces of consumption and sites of production. By switching on the television, visiting the Cineplex, turning on the radio, logging onto the internet, or perusing through a magazine rack at the newsagents, we cannot avoid images geared towards youth from the preteens to the ‘twentysomethings’. Popular American television programs have become one of the most effective means of representing the youth experience and packaging it into cultural products and captured moments. During its six year run on the Warner Bros. network, *Dawson’s Creek* was responsible for placing a bevy of songs in the top ten play list on commercial radio.¹⁴ The short-lived science fiction series *Roswell* spawned an exclusive fashion line by Levi Jeans in the Spring 2000 collection entitled “Lot 53”.¹⁵ It also inspired publications in the tradition of



Figure 1: Jason Behr (as Max Evans) and Shiri Appleby (as Liz Parker) in cross-promotion of the series *Roswell* and Levi Jeans “Lot 53” collection.

¹⁴ *Dawson’s Creek*. Created by Kevin Williamson. Warner Bros. Originally aired on 20 January, 1998 (USA).

fanfiction which continued the saga of its characters long after the show had been cancelled.

Through the proliferation and convergence of media and film, youth has become diffused and commodified. The definition of youth as an inevitable phase in the life cycle begins to crumble as its attributes, rituals and practices enter the realm of pathology or normalcy, rebellion or compliance. This conceptualisation separates youth from context. It does not recognise the importance of a tee-shirt slogan, the graffiti on an abandoned building, or the investment in fanzines. Conversely, an economist's approach to youth culture sees dollar signs and profit margins.¹⁶ It has no concept of the politics of pleasure and play, and the active *production* of meaning during the process of consumption. Here I turn to subcultural theory as an entry point into which to discuss the significance of culture and style as a means of collective and individual expression, identity and generational dissonance.

Before proceeding further in this analysis, it is important to justify the application of subcultural theory in this thesis. As a social formation, youth is a volatile ideological construction in a state of constant struggle. Youth as consumer and cultural producer is a relatively new concept in modern history. As a result, analytical paradigms need to evolve over time and through different spaces. Generalisations, while almost impossible to avoid, need to be undercut by considered and subtle historical specificity. Subcultural theory, as expounded by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary

¹⁵ *Roswell*. Created by Jason Katims. Based on the novels by Melinda Metz. Warner Bros. Originally aired on 6 October, 1999 (USA). The series ran for three seasons.

¹⁶ "Before they became earners, the young are already powerful spenders" (from *The Economist* print edition), *Economist.com*, 21 December, 2000.
<http://www.economist.com/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_ID=455191> Accessed online on 28 January, 2005.

Cultural Studies (BCCCS), was one of the earliest and most prominent models developed to respond to the dramatically changing socio-economic climate by analysing the symbiosis between youth, capitalism, style and identity. Influenced by theorists such as Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes and the critical writings of several British Marxists, the BCCCS developed an innovative approach to the analysis of youth subcultures that was interdisciplinary in scope.¹⁷ The theorists introduced a dramatic rethinking of youth subcultures from the American tradition of qualitative empiricism of the earlier Chicago School by redirecting focus from sociology and ethnography to social semiotics.¹⁸ The Centre “constructed youth as symptomatic of the central contradictions of the time”.¹⁹ Rituals and practices were read as gestures of meaning and political resistiveness. Youth became the barometer of structural and social change.

While my research departs from the Birmingham tradition, it acknowledges the work which has been profoundly influential not only in studies of youth and (sub)cultures, but also the broader discipline of Cultural Studies.²⁰ I also extend this acknowledgement of influence to Cinema Studies. Youth cinema is a siphon and repository of (popular) cultural representations where narrative is conveyed and read through style, from the fashions worn to the movies watched, from the moments of resistance in detention to the ecstasy of a crowded rave dance floor. It is essential that this thesis takes as its starting point the first major theoretical model to address this dramatic change in the socio-historical trajectory of youth. All intellectual innovations

¹⁷ Ken Gelder. “Chapter ten: Introduction to part two” in *The Subcultures Reader*. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (eds) London and New York: Routledge, 1997. p. 83.

¹⁸ Sarah Thornton. “Chapter two: Introduction to part one” in *The Subcultures Reader*. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (eds) London and New York: Routledge, 1997. p. 11.

¹⁹ Gelder, “Chapter ten”, p. 84.

²⁰ Gelder, “Chapter ten”, p. 88.

– particularly the ‘original contribution to knowledge’ required by a doctorate – must also be theoretically and politically humble of the great, the edgy and the risky scholarship and scholars that fills footnotes and floods each page of a researcher’s notebook.

In the monograph *No Future: Youth and Society*, E. Ellis Cashmore argues that prior to the 1950s, youth in Britain were “simply younger versions of their parents” and indistinguishable in terms of music, styles of dress and leisure patterns.²¹ Youth served as a preamble to adulthood with the establishment of employment, social standing and the eventual transition to married life. A consumerist ethos and increasing forms of mass media contributed to greater importance placed upon leisure time and comfort. This was augmented by the abolishment of National Service in 1960. Able-bodied young men were no longer required to serve a minimum of two years in the armed forces. By the time rock and roll swept through the nation, the youth were more than prepared for a cultural and generational revolution.

Stemming from the observations of working-class culture, youth subcultures in post-World War II Britain, the establishment of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1964 would become the defining approach to the study of spectacular subcultures that included the Teds, Rockers, Mods, Skinheads and Punks for the next two decades.²² The Centre advocated that subcultures are a mediated response by youth to counter prevailing social problems and inequalities that are largely class-based. They expose a fundamental tension between the bloc of the political, cultural and economic elite, and the subordinated underclass. Subcultures

²¹ E. Ellis Cashmore. *No Future: Youth and Society*. London: Heinemann, 1984. p. 23.

were seen as physical manifestations of the general contradictions of their existence which attempted to resolve inter-generational and class paradoxes.²³ As a result, they are context-specific to place and time.

According to the subcultural theorists, post-war upheaval and expropriation of land in the 1950s was integral to the formation of the Teddy Boy subculture. The most destructive effect was the dissolving of cohesive kinship networks of the traditional neighbourhood structure with the development of new towns and high-density estates which destroyed “the function of the street, the local pub, the corner shop, as articulations of communal space”.²⁴ The demise of communal networks was accompanied by changes in the workforce and economic restructuring. The widespread introduction of automated techniques made redundant many semi-skilled occupations that began to split the relationship between “traditional work ethic, the pride in the job” and the ability to enter what Phil Cohen refers to as the “artificial paradise of the new consumer society”.²⁵ Future upward mobility of the working class and its youth was dire.

The appearance of the Teddy Boys during this period was not coincidental, nor an illogical formation for the times. The Teds poached from the style of 1950 Saville Row high fashion that was originally designed for affluent young men.²⁶ They expended exorbitant sums of money, particularly for low-paid manual workers, on

²² Dick Hebdige. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London and New York: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1979. p. 73.

²³ Phil Cohen. “Subcultural conflict and working class community”, *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, No. 2, 1972 (Spring). p. 25.

²⁴ Cohen, “Subcultural conflict and working class community”, p. 16.

²⁵ Cohen, “Subcultural conflict and working class community”, pp. 21-22.

²⁶ Jon Stratton. “Youth subcultures and their cultural contexts”, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 21 (2), July 1985. p. 214.

flamboyant hairstyles and the Edwardian-style outfits more theatrical than practical, such as the jackets draped with flaps and velvet collars, “knitted ties, plain or flowery waistcoats, tight-fitting trousers or ‘strides’, and – incongruously at first – blunt shoes with enormous crêpe soles”.²⁷ Fashion became part of an arsenal to signify and reaffirm a sense of exclusive membership to a distinct community that had been denied them.²⁸ It “represented a symbolic way of expressing and negotiating with their social reality; of giving cultural *meaning* to their social plight”.²⁹ As Jon Stratton demonstrates, this was more than a simple case of attempting to buy status, but of “establishing status in the context of an aristocratic heritage with the awareness that, in a visually oriented culture, style is a singular sign of belonging”.³⁰ The Teds had transformed new-age dandyism into the masculinist reclamation of territory and communal identity of the neo-lumpen proletariat in protest of their dismal conditions.

Subcultures allowed marginalised youths to win space in which to assert their own agendas and ideas.³¹ Donning Doc Martens (Skinheads) or taking hallucinogenics (Hippies and Ravers) ceased being random acts turned trend. They were read as statements of defiance. The process of bricolage enabled the original meaning of a text or action to be subverted or even erased.³² With regards to the Mods:

pills medically prescribed for the treatment of neuroses were used as ends-in-themselves, and the motor scooter, originally an ultra-respectable means of transport, was turned into a menacing symbol of group solidarity. In the same improvisatory manner, metal combs, honed to a razor-like sharpness, turned narcissism into an offensive weapon.³³

²⁷ T. R. Fyvel. *The Insecure Offenders: Rebellious Youth in the Welfare State*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1961. p. 41.

²⁸ Tony Jefferson. “Cultural responses of the teds” in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds) London: Routledge, 1976. pp. 81-82.

²⁹ Jefferson, “Cultural responses of the teds”, p. 86. Italics in original text.

³⁰ Stratton, “Youth subcultures and their cultural contexts”, p. 215.

³¹ Sue Widdicombe and Robin Wooffitt. *The Language of Youth Subcultures: Social Identity in Action*. Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995. pp. 16-19.

³² Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 104.

³³ Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 104.

One of the most prominent examples of the hijacking and undermining of the meanings of signs was the reappropriation of the national symbol of the Union Jack to adorn the backs of shoddy anoraks, or were refashioned into stylish tailored jackets. During an extended period of high youth unemployment, the original signification of the suit as that of ambition, efficiency and compliancy became an empty fetish.³⁴ The attire's meaning was not lost, but became a reflexive pastiche of the ironic situation in which the Mods found themselves.

Subcultures convey a shift, and at times a violent shake, of the tectonic plates underlying the existing social structure. It is at the very site where they are denied access to power that provides the place of most resistance. For instance, the Hippies of the 1960s actively contravened capitalist culture, in an attempt to avoid buying in, or selling out, to conventional ideals of the model citizen. They blatantly denounced the ideologies of industry and progress, yet unashamedly consumed the fruits that were not of their labour. In addition to their hedonistic lifestyle, was a refusal to work and celebration of the transient nature of the present. As Paul Willis contends, industrial society relies on the regulation and absolutism of time.³⁵ The Hippies refused to participate in this structural order by disrupting the logic of the market economy and the flow of human and monetary resources.³⁶

³⁴ Hebdige, *Subculture*, pp. 104-5.

³⁵ Paul E. Willis. *Profane Culture*. London, Henley and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978. pp. 173-74.

³⁶ Punk was also established as "a set of economic strategies within late capitalism" (Thompson, 2001, p. 61). Stacy Thompson argues that signs of punk authenticity and success included a failure to generate profit and to remain independent of major labels (2001, p. 58). While it is unable to escape or transcend its economic conditions, punk symbolises the "continuing cultural desire for 'something else'" (Thompson, 2001, p. 61).

Stacy Thompson. "Market failure: Punk economics, early and late", *College Literature*, Vol. 28 (2), 2001 (Spring). pp. 58, 61.

Despite their preoccupation with symbolic stylings and their own coded language, subcultures are not free-floating, autonomous agents. They do not operate outside structures of power. The mutual construction of relations of power is encapsulated in Michel Foucault's assertion that multiplicitous points of resistance "play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relationships".³⁷ Dominant discourse is reliant on rules established by authority and institutions. It is neither a passive nor natural process, but a vehement ordering of objects to delimit and specify.³⁸ Any situation in which oppression is exerted is met with subordinating forces. The ownership and construction of identity is not imposed or merely accepted, but contested. They are always in an unstable state of struggle and negotiation.

While the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies advanced a more progressivist model of youth as active agents, its limitations would render it restricted in application beyond its British and temporal context. Although it is not feasible to provide an in-depth discussion of these methodological concerns, it is important to highlight several of the main problems. One of the major criticisms was that subcultures were interpreted as dead-end formations. The stylised form meant that:

Sub-cultural strategies cannot match, meet or answer the structuring dimensions emerging in this period for the class as a whole. So, when the post-war sub-cultures address the problematics of their class experience, they often do so in ways which reproduce the gaps and discrepancies between real negotiations and symbolically displaced "resolutions". They "solve", but in an imaginary way, problems which at the concrete material level remain unresolved.³⁹

³⁷ Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. p. 95.

³⁸ Michel Foucault. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London and New York: Tavistock Publications, 1972. pp. 44-49.

³⁹ John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts. "Subcultures, culture and class" in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds) London: Routledge, 1976. pp. 47-48.

As Stanley Cohen discloses, these “magical” solutions are self-deluding gestures that are “as effective as sticking pins into kewpie dolls or as neurotic defence mechanisms like displacement or suppression ... bosses, educational disadvantage, unemployment, the police, remain where they were”.⁴⁰ For Cohen, subcultures therefore have no life or relevance beyond their immediate present. In effect, “subcultural empowerment is empowerment without a future”.⁴¹ Subcultures that cannot outlive their transitory existence become historical anomalies without future, and therefore without the ability to evoke social change.

The over-emphasis upon the symbolic gestures and imaginary resolutions in subcultural theory is conducive to misreading signs. With no future, there is an almost desperate urgency to read youth as pro-active dissidents and to assign them political motive where there may be none.⁴² As David Harris claims, “The seeking of semiotic pleasure becomes the central form of resistance, the appropriation of signifiers the substance of politics, linguistic practice the archetype of all subjective and cultural practice”.⁴³ Subcultural theory upholds an asymmetrical methodology where the tactical consumer assumes a position of authority.⁴⁴ Youth subcultures are reduced to acts of resistance, leaving little room to argue the negotiative relation between the centre and the periphery. For example, while Ravers may undermine the legal system and disregard normative modes of behaviour in the confines of a warehouse on a Saturday night, the withdrawal of sponsorship and capital by producers can just as

⁴⁰ Stanley Cohen. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987 (1972). p. xi.

⁴¹ Gelder, “Chapter ten”, p. 87.

⁴² Widdicombe and Wooffitt, *The Language of Youth Subcultures*, pp. 18-19.

⁴³ David Harris. *From Class Struggle to the Politics of Pleasure: The Effects of Gramscianism on Cultural Studies*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992. p. 166.

⁴⁴ Harris, *From Class Struggle to the Politics of Pleasure*, pp. 165-67, 170.

easily incapacitate this act of pleasurable dissonance. Studies of youth subcultures must acknowledge the complexity of networks of power.

(Symbolic) resistance requires a precise force of antagonism to maintain its credibility. Subcultures therefore become vulnerable to the very process of consumption that grants them significance and agency. In his study of subcultural style, Dick Hebdige laments the demise of 1970s punk subculture as a result of its integration into mainstream industry.

as soon as the original innovations which signify “subculture” are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become “frozen”. Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise.⁴⁵

It assumes that subcultures, like any meaning system, mobilise their own language and codes. When a subcultural text is removed from its context, it loses its original meaning. Once the safety pin in punk subculture becomes merchandise that can be used to replicate an aesthetic look without a punk ethos, it is stripped of its symbolic rebellion, nihilism and chaos. It is transformed into a fashion accessory, a passing fad and gimmick. In its translation, the text is emptied of political agenda. Oppositional youth loses its credence and is reduced to a “uni-dimensional, commercialized and massified youth culture”.⁴⁶ Incorporation of subcultural style into popular culture industries signals the neutralisation of its subversiveness.⁴⁷ The consequence is that once a youth (sub)culture enters the terrain of the dominant culture, it has sold out on terms not of its own. The problem with this theoretical underpinning is that the concept of effective resistance begins to collapse. At the point of subcultural

⁴⁵ Hebdige, *Subculture*, p. 96.

⁴⁶ E. Ann Kaplan. *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 1988 (1987). p. 152.

formation, the obituary is written. The public announcement of its death occurs when it appears on the shelves of the local Target or Kmart.

Theorists of the Birmingham tradition viewed the reaction of youth to authority as a commitment to preserve the authenticity of (their) subculture.⁴⁸ The poaching of style by consumer culture becomes the metaphoric body bag signalling the demise of subcultural cause and rebellion where packaging has taken over politics.⁴⁹ The dilemma with this tragic romanticisation of youth subcultures is that they become tied to linear time and take on an almost organic form.⁵⁰ Once its moment is over, it becomes an historic artefact that can only be revived via poor imitations or going back nostalgically to ogle its preserved remains. A certain type of youth is idealised (or demonised) and kept in a glass cabinet. This leaves no room in which to position youth subcultures as capable of dubbing and sampling style and non-linear narrative. In relation to Generation X, subcultural theory is unable to account for this (sub)culture's symbiotic relation to consumer culture and commercial exchange as that which sustains it.

The gravitation towards mainly white, masculine, working-class subcultures in subcultural theory left an analytical gap in researching the roles and importance accorded to other disempowered groups, such as young women.⁵¹ The emphasis upon

⁴⁷ Stephen W. Baron. "Resistance and its consequences: The street culture of punks", *Youth and Society*, Vol. 21 (2), December 1989. pp. 208-9.

⁴⁸ Steve Redhead. *The End-Of-The-Century Party: Youth and Pop Towards 2000*. Oxford and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990. pp. 29-31.

⁴⁹ Redhead, *The End-Of-The-Century Party*, pp. 28-29.

⁵⁰ Redhead, *The End-Of-The-Century Party*, p. 23.

⁵¹ While later attempts were made to rectify this absence of other marginal groups using the template of subcultural theory, the results were at times ambivalent. For instance, the early efforts of Angela McRobbie to insert women into subcultural studies (re)produced regressive modes and readings of femininity, especially in regards to the bedroom culture of the teenybopper female fan (Gelder, 1997, p.

class issues in the development of youth subcultures limits its usefulness in situations where gender, race and nationality may be more central concerns. The limited focus on modern mass media in subcultural theory also renders it an outdated approach and narrow in scope. It was not until the late 1970s that popular television and film became significant areas in the study of subcultures.⁵² Up to that point, the style of subcultures had tended to concentrate on aspects such as fashion and street leisure. As a result, subcultural theory on its own is an insufficient model when applied to youth that is immersed in a media-saturated environment.

Putting the (wh)Y in X

A study of Generation X requires an understanding of its unique socio-temporal context. As a result, retreading over familiar historical tropes is unavoidable. While these terms, concepts and methods do present often contrived versions of the past and reductive definitions, these templates are used as a starting point to refashion an alternative narrative of Generation X that brings together the political with the popular, the public with the private, and the importance of social practice and symbolic meaning. Generation X was preceded by what has come to be known as the Baby Boomers. Slight discrepancies aside in the exact year range, the latter referred to those born from the mid 1940s to the early 1960s in North America, a period in which there was a dramatic upsurge in the nation's birthrate. Charged as the selfish "spoiled darlings" of the 1960s and 1970s, Baby Boomers benefited from a renewed post-war

86). Efforts have also been made to bring issues of race into the paradigm of subcultural theory. Paul Gilroy's monograph *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* is one example.

Gelder, "Chapter ten", p. 86.

Paul Gilroy. *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

⁵² Harris, *From Class Struggle to the Politics of Pleasure*, p. 112.

idealism.⁵³ Born to parents who had experienced the traumatic after-effects of two world wars that resulted in the extended disruption to family and home life, young parents of the 1940s and 1950s were determined to “kick back, get normal and grow kids and a lawn”.⁵⁴ Consequently, family orientation and a state of normalcy provided the idyllic grounds for societal stability. Gaining much of its formidable clout by way of its sheer numbers, this group attended colleges in unprecedented numbers and exerted enormous pressure in political arenas in a general atmosphere of economic and political optimism.⁵⁵

If the Baby Boomers were hailed as the leaders of a new (and improved) nation with the promise of the great American Dream more attainable than ever, the proceeding generation was (re)viewed as a disappointing sequel. From the 1960s, the introduction of readily available birth control witnessed the marked decline in births, prompting the disaffectionate term Baby Busters. Furthermore, statistics indicated that children of this era were twice as likely as their parents to be the progeny of divorce.⁵⁶ The official declaration of a new (but now dysfunctional) generation began to fray the social and family-centred fabric that the Boomers had advocated. The honeymoon period was over.

The definition of a Baby Buster was not determined by being born between certain years or coming from a broken home. Nor was it the fact that it was their parents who had, in their heydays of the 1960s, sang out the radical anthem of ‘sex, drugs, and rock

⁵³ Shelley Gare. “Too much truffle oil: Baby boomers and the generation war” in *Future Tense: Australia Beyond Election 1998*. Murray Waldren (ed.) St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1999. pp. 217-19.

⁵⁴ Karen Ritchie. *Marketing to Generation X*. New York: Lexington Books, 1995. p. 29.

⁵⁵ Gare, “Too much truffle oil”, p. 228.

⁵⁶ Ritchie, *Marketing to Generation X*, pp. 36-39.

and roll' and social change, but by the 1980s had ironically leapt to the extreme end of conservatism and were more likely to be found heading corporate institutions than a picket line protest.⁵⁷ This generation was the first to be defined primarily by its engagement with popular culture. Televisual and cinematic texts, music, fashion and literature became the unofficial soapboxes for the venting of youthful frustration and the formation of an imag(in)ed community.

In 1991, Douglas Coupland penned the fictional narrative *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*.⁵⁸ It followed the lives of three twentysomethings who abscond to a desert town on the fringes of Palm Springs, California to escape the formal expectations of a vacuous middle-class mentality and ponder the meaning(lessness) of their existence.

We live small lives on the periphery; we are marginalized and there's a great deal in which we choose not to participate in ... Our systems had stopped working, jammed with the odor of copy machines, Wite-Out, the smell of bond paper, and the endless stress of pointless jobs done grudgingly to little applause. We had compulsions that made us confuse shopping with creativity, to take downers and assume that merely renting a video on Saturday night was enough.⁵⁹

Overeducated and underpaid, Andy, Claire and Dag take up "Mc-Jobs" and spend their days telling disturbing tales and discussing seemingly facile topics.⁶⁰ They live in the Now, but muse about the past and theorise the future. It is a transient existence where nothing is seriously planned. The future is watching a nuclear mushroom cloud while wearing sunglasses, a cheap beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Despondent, fearful and angry, the novel was quickly adopted by the media as the instruction manual and dictionary of the Baby Boomer progeny. Although various other terms

⁵⁷ Ritchie, *Marketing to Generation X*, p. 25.

⁵⁸ Douglas Coupland. *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. London: Abacus, 1996 (1991).

⁵⁹ Coupland, *Generation X*, p. 14.

⁶⁰ Douglas Coupland coined the term "Mc-Job" to describe a "low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no future job in the service sector" (1996 [1991], p. 6).

had floated around such as ‘twentysomethings’, ‘Baby Busters’ and ‘thirteeners’, it was ‘Generation X’ that persisted in the public’s imagination.⁶¹ It was sufficiently broad to encompass a wide age group, as opposed to only those in their twenties, and nondescript enough to apply to any group or individual even vaguely fitting the title.

The image of a generational takeover was reinforced with the theatrical release of Richard Linklater’s independent feature *Slacker* in 1991.⁶² The movie interwove loosely related narratives concerning under-employed youngsters in the college town of Austin, Texas. Overloaded with left-wing “losers and schmoozers, conspiracy buffs, angry romantics, vanishing poets, and whacky philosophers”, *Slacker* depicted a youth that had turned its back on the endorsed values of practicality, economics and productivity to embrace aimless roaming.⁶³ Cynical, indolent and with an anti-establishment philosophy, ‘slacker’ became a household label symbiotic with Coupland’s Generation X.

The near simultaneous advent of Coupland’s book, Linklater’s feature film and the development of the distinctive grunge music scene in Seattle, Washington was sufficient validation that the Baby Boomers’ time had reached its end. Two being coincidence, three being a trend, the terms were latched upon, labelled, packaged and retailed to become an industry unto itself.⁶⁴ The frenzied media response endeavoured to demystify this generation, bandying around the catchphrases with reckless abandon.

Coupland, *Generation X*, p. 6.

⁶¹ ‘Generation X’ was also the name of a punk group formed by Billy Idol in 1976.

⁶² *Slacker*. Directed and written by Richard Linklater. Detour Filmproduction, 1991.

A comprehensive analysis of *Slacker* appears in Chapter Eight.

⁶³ John Pierson. *Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes: A Guided Tour Across a Decade of American Independent Cinema*. New York: Hyperion and Miramax Books, 1995. p. 187.

⁶⁴ Douglas Coupland. “Generation X papers: Douglas Coupland commits gen-x-cide”, *Details*, June 1995. p. 72.

Its widespread dissemination incited moments of moral panic that demanded the devil “be given a particular shape to know what virtues are being asserted”.⁶⁵ In his study of deviants and their subcultures, Stanley Cohen suggests that the labelling of folk devils does not invent social (d)evils, nor does it tag a visible phenomenon with a title after it has been self-generated. Rather, the process of identifying deviance involves a conception of its very nature. Drawing upon stock images and ideas in cultural memory, the deviant is assigned a role or type, behaviours are explained and visualised, motives are ascribed and causal patterns are sought.⁶⁶ The process of labelling participates in the act of becoming. They not only place and distinguish individuals and events, but also assign events to a context.⁶⁷ Labels assume forms which borrow from existing meanings, which ricochet to produce subsidiary ones. Subcultures are not immaculately conceived, nor are they the effluvial by-products of culture. Generation X itself was present at its own conception.⁶⁸ Subcultures are forged out of circumstances where external forces encourage the formation of appropriate technologies and spaces for its expression. They are a type of evolution in fast-forward speed. They are as reactionary as often as they react. In the case of Generation X, the exponential growth in technology demanded an advanced media literacy to engage with the constant stream of information they were surrounded with. It is a response to make sense and create meaning from the changing social landscape.

⁶⁵ Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, p. 75.

⁶⁶ Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, p. 74.

⁶⁷ Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1978. p. 19.

⁶⁸ I have borrowed from E. P. Thompson’s study of eighteenth century social history in England in which he proposed that a group or community is present at its own making. Thompson states, “the working class made itself as much as it was made”, asserting that it was not merely the “spontaneous generation” of the new factory system in England (1991, p. 213). It extended beyond economics alone to encompass the cultural and political social organisation. The growth of a class-consciousness, that is the shared interests of working people, and the formation of self-conscious working-class institutions such as trade unions, were just as integral to the arrival of a distinct class as was the dramatic changes in the work environment.

As the precursor to film, television functioned as the training ground for the accelerated development of a media literacy that would shape, and be shaped by, a generation.

I Want My M(e)TV: Media Saturation

If Baby Boomers were classified according to age and the shared experience of major societal changes, Generation X was identified according to its relationship with popular culture and media texts. Despite the paucity in numbers compared to Baby Boomers – Xers born between 1965 and 1977 constituted only forty five million of the general American population – they possessed an imposing annual purchasing power of \$125 billion.⁶⁹ Deemed a lucrative target market, advertisers scurried to cater the products and images that would satisfy the appetite of this younger population which would eventually reach peak saturation in media technology. Privy to a period of accelerated technological advancement in which an impressive range of electronic devices had become financially viable for common use in the home, this generation had access to sources of information in a way that was unparalleled in previous decades. By the time they had even completed school, a startling proportion of Xers had already encountered personal computers and rudimentary electronic games.⁷⁰

While the American public of the 1950s experienced a television revolution, the 1980s

E. P. Thompson. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Penguin Books, 1991 (1963). pp. 211-13.

⁶⁹ Margot Hornblower. "Great Xpectations", *Time*, Vol. 149 (23), 9 June, 1997. p. 58.

⁷⁰ Ritchie, *Marketing to Generation X*, p. 114.

Growing up as a child, I recall that when there was a problem with the VCR or instructions on operating it were required, my parents would turn to my younger brother. He was an electronics guru at age five. Born in 1980, he was technically at the tail end of Generation X. Although not typical of all children his age, he was an example of a youth that knew how to set the timer on the video or conquer kingdoms in a computer game before he could even tie his shoelaces.

and 1990s was marked by a multi-technological explosion and the information superhighway.⁷¹

This technological invasion was explored in the 1984 film *Electric Dreams*.⁷² A young urban architect, Miles (Lenny von Dohlen), purchases a personal computer in an effort to organise his life. Hooked up to his main electrical system, the computer is the ultimate in scientific engineering. Edgar, the computer, not only makes the perfect coffee, operates all the lights and security system among a multitude of other domestic duties, but also assists the protagonist in winning the affections of his neighbour Madeline (Virginia Madsen). Edgar is not only a modern appliance. It is an extension of Miles himself. This becomes evident when Edgar assumes human traits and emotions. The potential nihilism of the computer, as shown by Edgar's jealous rage of Miles' relationship with Madeline, can only be resolved by the dissemination of the technology throughout the rest of the San Francisco Bay community. Edgar hijacks the air waves of a local radio station and transmits one of his musical arrangements over all frequencies. The film closes with Miles and Madeline blissfully driving off into the sunset, as people at the beach, in the city streets, on rigs, in aerobics classes and in shopping centres are compelled to dance with joyous abandon to Edgar's song. The message is simple. Technology is the new utopia. There is no escape.

Preceding the digital saturation of computers, Generation X's exposure to the televisual medium was an integral factor that shaped their experience and perceptions. The decreasing price of television sets and improved quality meant that the

⁷¹ Aimee Dorr and Dale Kunkel. "Children and the media environment: Change and constancy amid change", *Communication Research*, Vol. 17 (1), February 1990. pp. 5-6.

⁷² *Electric Dreams*. Directed by Steve Barron. Written by Rusty Lemorande. Virgin/Twentieth Century Fox, 1984.

entertainment box was not only found in a high proportion of households as Xers grew up, but that multiple-sets were prevalent. According to McCann-Erickson Research, the growth of multi-set households in North America was 12% in 1960, 32% in 1970, 50% in 1980 and 65% by 1990 which resulted in less time expended with parents and increased unsupervised time in front of the television.⁷³ Coupled with the easy access to the medium was network restructuring which additionally redefined the function of television within the home as entertainer and educator.

Prior to the mid 1960s, most networks were regulated by advertisers who sponsored programs by paying for airing time and production costs. This fostered television's squeaky clean image as program integrity was regarded as a reliable indicator of the reputability of advertisers and their endorsed products. The invention of the 'scatter plan' in the early 1960s meant that program structure and content would be forced to adapt to a free market of supply and demand economics. Under the scatter plan system, networks were to cover production costs with advertisers simply purchasing a segment of broadcasting time. This alleviated sponsors of their responsibility for program content. In effect, networks generated higher profits from selling air time and there was greater diversity in program material.⁷⁴

The increased selection of programs, types of advertised products and channels prompted fierce competition to snare the attention of viewers. This broadened the scope of the role of television in the home and contributed to a liberalising of programming content. Family shows of the 1950s and 1960s such as *Leave It To Beaver*, *The Brady Bunch* and *The Partridge Family* which were once the staple diet

⁷³ Ritchie, *Marketing to Generation X*, pp. 86-87.

quickly become vapid and irrelevant in a climate of escalating fears of illegal drug use, crime and the reality of the AIDS virus.⁷⁵ Issues previously considered taboo or risqué proliferated to become typical of prime time television.⁷⁶ Networks acceded that they could no longer continue a televised romantic ideal of a white, middle-class, heterosexual America where all malaise was solved by the end of a thirty minute time slot.

Viewing patterns were further revolutionised by the proliferation of VCRs in the 1980s, along with cable and satellite services, personal computers, video game players, and new televisual forms such as the music video that was made infamous by MTV.⁷⁷ In a trend analogous to television sets, the improved technology and reduced cost of the VCR ensured that Xers either owned one or had access from a relatively early age. One study reported that by the end of the 1980s, approximately 75% of American households owned remote control devices.⁷⁸ By the middle of 1989, the penetration level for cable subscription was 54.8% of American homes, showing a subsequent annual growth rate of two to three percentage points.⁷⁹ Generation X was the impetus for pushing home entertainment beyond multiple sets to multiple channels and multi-range devices.

⁷⁴ Ritchie, *Marketing to Generation X*, pp. 88-90.

⁷⁵ *Leave It To Beaver*. Created by Joe Connelly and Bob Mosher. CBS/ABC. Originally aired on 4 October, 1957 (USA). The series ran for six seasons.

The Brady Bunch. Created by Sherwood Schwartz. ABC. Originally aired on 26 September, 1969 (USA). The series ran for five seasons.

The Partridge Family. Created by Bernard Slade. ABC. Originally aired on 25 September, 1970 (USA). The series ran for four seasons.

⁷⁶ Ritchie, *Marketing to Generation X*, p. 90.

⁷⁷ Dorr and Kunkel, "Children and the media environment", p. 6.

⁷⁸ P. Ainslie. "Watching TV: A mobile audience", *Channels '89 Field Guide to the Electronic Environment*, December 1988. p. 12.

⁷⁹ "By the numbers: Summary of broadcasting and cable", *Broadcasting*, 17 July, 1989. p. 14.

Weaned on a culture of capitalism and hypermarketing, television and advertising ceased being a comfort and benign form of entertainment for Generation X. While Boomers saw television as representing “a friendly face, because it [was] their own face”, television for Xers became a gateway to the greater community that either blatantly contradicted their lived experiences or gave expression to their worst fears.⁸⁰ Wholesome family viewing could not be taken seriously in light of the breakdown of the family structure. The scandal of Watergate in the early 1970s continued to remain fresh in the nation’s memory, circulated by the media. The once stalwart icons of order that had in the past been trusted no longer stood for the paragons of stability and security. The cynicism and despondency that filtered throughout the 1990s was exacerbated by recessions in the early 1980s and 1990-91. The crash of the stock market in 1987 capped off a dismal decade of economic hardship which resulted in corporate downsizing and some forty three million jobs being terminated between 1979 and 1995. The youth entering the employment sector during this period laboured longer hours for considerably less pay. The educational system was also failing to provide adequate support. Studies have shown that one in three students has needed to concomitantly work during studies as a result of cutbacks of federal grants since 1981.⁸¹

I’m sick of people talkin’
About American dreams
That’s all gone
Ain’t nothing there for me
Cause you see
I’m nuthin’.⁸²

Life, as seen through an Xer’s gauze, was devoid of the optimism and aspirations that their parents possessed, encapsulated in the lyrics of David Baerwald’s “I’m Nuthin”.

⁸⁰ Ritchie, *Marketing to Generation X*, p. 63.

⁸¹ Hornblower, “Great Xpectations”, p. 60.

⁸² David Baerwald. “I’m Nuthin’”, *Reality Bites* album. Universal City Studios, 1994.

The song expresses the dejected sentiments of a generation for whom the American dream was no longer a goal but a bitter-sweet nostalgic memory of the past. If Baby Boomers had been bestowed with abundant opportunities and the means in which to bring them to eventual fruition, Xers held greatly diminished expectations regarding their futures. Although the benefits of a two-income household were not uncommon for Xers growing up, this was countered by the knowledge that there was a high probability that they would be less financially successful, or even on par, with their parents.⁸³ The American Dream of the 1960s had not simply soured. It became the waking nightmare of the 1990s.

Television was not a mocking reminder of the depressing situation that afflicted youth. After all, they continued to wear the fashions marketed to them, drank Pepsi and purchased the latest albums released by Nirvana. The overriding difference was the “detached appreciation for consumer culture”.⁸⁴ The appropriation of the most commodified of texts – popular culture – played a significant role in the conceptualisation of Generation X as an identity, political ideology, and generational and (sub)cultural style.⁸⁵

The Truth About Time Travel

Left to their own devices, the television set became the surrogate “babysitter, their entertainment, their teacher, and their night light” for Generation X.⁸⁶ They learnt about issues at a much earlier age than their predecessors, bombarded with a mind-boggling diversity of televisual texts. Aided with the VCR and remote control,

⁸³ Sally Ann Corbo. “The X-er files”, *Hospitals and Health Networks*, Vol. 71 (7), 5 April, 1997. p. 58.

⁸⁴ Carolyn Hicks. “The only things that aren’t fake are you, me and Sprite: Ironies and realities in generation X advertising”, *Metro Magazine*, No. 106, 1996. pp. 71-81.

watching the box no longer meant just watching it but interacting with it. The act of channel surfing and being able to reorder their viewing material with the VCR (via editing or removing a program from its intended temporal context) allowed media to be altered to the individual's own liking and purposes. This was also attributable to the fact that VCR use fostered an individually oriented rather than communal viewing practice.⁸⁷

Sean Cubitt argues that television attempts to create reality by capturing, or at least simulating, a sense of the present as happening right before the viewer's eyes in which "videotape forces back on to broadcast its own incompleteness ... Through video, TV can cease to be a slave to the metaphysics of presence".⁸⁸ This is most evident in news-of-the-hour segments, where events boasted as current may be several minutes or hours old. The video recorder breaks down this veneer. If reality is premised on its immediate presence, video exposed it as transparent, manufactured and unnatural. Video makes the present contingent on the replication of the past and a mapping of the future.⁸⁹ Timeshifting demonstrates that history, content and meaning are not monolithic, but fluid and unstable. Time becomes relative. It is no longer a fixed metaphysical formation. History can be modified.

The volatility and dynamism of time, space and history allows logics and narratives to emerge where the search for truth becomes irrelevant, if not impossible. It opens up discussion to the process of constructing meaning as opposed to a preoccupation with the final product. This logic, or attitude, relies on the distancing from the supposed

⁸⁵ Tom Beaudoin. *Virtual Faith*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998. p. 22.

⁸⁶ Ritchie, *Marketing to Generation X*, p. 86.

⁸⁷ Eleanor Grant. "VCR'S: No family affair", *Psychology Today*, Vol. 22 (1), January 1988. p. 14.

⁸⁸ Sean Cubitt. *Timeshift: On Video Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991. p. 36.

real in order to assign it credibility.⁹⁰ As Lawrence Grossberg states, “Authentic inauthenticity refuses to locate identity and difference outside the fact of temporary affective commitments”.⁹¹ Authentic inauthenticity represents a willingness to admit to its own superficiality. Devoid of grassroots and depth, its intrinsic value lies in the significance it is temporarily invested with. It enters the realm of affect where politics cannot be divorced from pleasure, and visible action from intangible emotions.⁹²

Loosened from the constraints of linear time and narrative, and the quest for absolute truth and reality, the inauthentic becomes a potential site of plural meanings and modes of textual engagement to unsettle the dominant centre. Fragmented entities and free-floating signs no longer signify lack, but may be reappropriated into texts of personal and collective relevance. Before proceeding further, it is important to stress that politics and pleasure are not synonymous. Pleasure alone is not a radical agenda unless it evokes a sense of social responsibility and action. There is nothing progressivist in watching reruns of *Beavis and Butthead* to mock ‘the Establishment’ while contributing nothing to the wider community or economy.⁹³ For any form of politics to be effective, it must originate from a vested, personal interest and utilise the literacy

⁸⁹ Cubitt, *Timeshift*, pp. 35-37.

⁹⁰ Lawrence Grossberg. “MTV: Swinging on the (postmodern) star” in *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*. Ian Angus and Sut Jhally (eds) London: Routledge, 1989. pp. 264-66.

⁹¹ Grossberg, “MTV”, p. 265.

⁹² Grossberg, “MTV”, p. 265.

The rejection of depth models premised on uncovering an absolute truth has prompted a burgeoning volume of literature detailing how to advertise for a generation that does not want to be advertised to. This has resulted in a variety of tactical strategies such as ‘anti-advertising’ which employ irony and parody. Carolyn Hicks cites a Sprite advertisement that relies on its proud confession of what is real and fake for its successive campaign:

Macaulay Culkin is sitting in front of a house with a cute little girl, who leans over to kiss him but is thwarted when he declares ‘I’m not really your boyfriend, I’m an actor. And this house isn’t real, it’s a set’. He pushes over the house façade, revealing the set behind it, and exposes two more actors backstage: ‘And these aren’t really your parents, they’re just extras’. Offering the girl a Sprite, he comforts her with the words ‘The only things that aren’t fake are you, me and Sprite’, at which point the girl turns into a cardboard cut-out and is carried off stage (1996, p. 77).

Hicks, “The only things that aren’t fake are you, me and Sprite”, p. 77.

⁹³ *Beavis and Butthead*. Created by Mike Judge. MTV. Originally aired on 8 March, 1993 (USA). The animated series ran for seven seasons.

that its membership is adept at. For Generation X, it is through the monitoring and assessment of style.

The postmodern sensibility of Generation X, with its self-referentiality, irony and pastiche finds its heightened expression in the film *Pulp Fiction*.⁹⁴ Released in 1994, the film is exemplary of a product of its times. Its strength and appeal reside in its proud exploitation of “hackneyed stories, stereotyped characters and general genre clichés”.⁹⁵ The story intertwines several narratives, switching from one storyline to another. Its rearrangement of time resembles the act of channel surfing.⁹⁶ The characters participate in a type of time travel in which “a 40s film noir meets 50s and 70s celebrities with 1990s sensibilities”.⁹⁷ This collage culture is most lucidly depicted when Vincent Vega (John Travolta) takes his boss’ wife, Mia (Uma Thurman), to a diner called Jackrabbit Slim’s. It is fashioned in the nostalgic style of the 1950s. There they drink milkshakes in booths shaped like convertibles of a bygone era. The waiters and waitresses pose as Marilyn Monroe, Buddy Holly and James Dean. When the couple takes to centre-stage for a dance competition, they twist to Chuck Berry’s “You Never Can Tell”.⁹⁸ Vega himself is a recycling of a 1940s film noir gangster depicted by the 1970s icon of cool – John Travolta. Here, time has not been stopped. It has been looped, grafted over itself several times over until it is difficult to distinguish where (or when) in time they are located at that precise moment. Time,

⁹⁴ *Pulp Fiction*. Directed by Quentin Tarantino. Written by Quentin Tarantino and Roger Avery. Miramax, 1994.

⁹⁵ Paul A. Woods. *King Pulp: The Wild World of Quentin Tarantino*. London: Plexus, 1998. p. 100. Quentin Tarantino, the director of *Pulp Fiction*, professes that cinema and television culture were his main influences and salvation growing up in an uneasy period in American history. Tarantino recalls: “The Vietnam War and Watergate were a one-two punch that basically destroyed Americans’ faith in their own country ... The attitude I grew up with was that everything you’ve heard is lies. The president is a monkey” (quoted in Woods, 1998, p. 13).

⁹⁶ Susan Hopkins. “Generation pulp”, *Youth Studies Australia*, 1995 (Spring). p. 16.

⁹⁷ Hopkins, “Generation pulp”, p. 17.

⁹⁸ Chuck Berry. “You Never Can Tell”, *St. Louis to Liverpool* album. Chess, 1964.

like truth, is not fixed. It is no longer linear, but cyclical. This “recycled imagery” rejects being conveniently slotted into a static historical context, granting multiple renderings of the text.⁹⁹

I've Got You Under My Skin: The Subversiveness of Media

Douglas Rushkoff argues in his monograph *Media Virus: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* that power is no longer marked by physical territory and material acquisitions but by images, ideologies and data which have become the most valued currency.¹⁰⁰

The final frontier that remains uncolonised is the mediascape.¹⁰¹ Boundaries are no longer definitive but imagined. If youth culture had been aligned with *subcultures* in the past, then the reappropriation of media texts became the equivalent of rallies, picket lines and the spliff smoked behind the school gym in the present digital era. This is captured in Andrew Hultkrans' acerbic commentary that Generation X was “so goddamn media-savvy that the phrase ‘The Medium is the Message’ has for us the cozy familiarity of a nursery rhyme”.¹⁰² This media and digital literacy has subversive potential.

Rushkoff likens media events that provoke actual social change to biological viruses. Using the multitudinous networks available in mediaspace, media viruses spread rapidly and easily over an extensive population. The “protein shell” that attracts attention – be it “an event, invention, technology, system of thought, musical riff, visual image, scientific theory, sex scandal, clothing style or even a pop hero” – affixes

⁹⁹ Rushkoff, “Introduction”, p. 5.

¹⁰⁰ Douglas Rushkoff. *Media Virus: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1994. pp. 3-4.

¹⁰¹ Rushkoff, *Media Virus*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁰² Andrew Hultkrans. “The slacker factor” in *The GenX Reader*. Douglas Rushkoff (ed.) New York: Ballantine Books, 1994. p. 298.

itself onto the recipient.¹⁰³ From there, the virus injects its viral code that strives to transform or even destroy the existing genetic code.¹⁰⁴ The subversiveness of media viruses lies in their workings through the host, beneath the skin, as opposed to against it. Media viruses have the ability to alter the social DNA. Rushkoff's viral agent is a useful metaphor in which to work through the relationship that binds Generation X with its media-saturated environment and how existing audio-visual texts and formats can be slowly affected (and infected). To illustrate this point, I turn to the ubiquitous influence MTV has had upon Generation X and how it has in turn impacted the configuration of the channel.

Conceived in 1981 as the brainchild of Robert Pittman, the Executive Vice President of Warner Amex Satellite Entertainment Company (WASEC), MTV promised a revolution in television programming and how it was to be watched. It was a commercial cable channel broadcasted via satellite that was devoted to rock music videos – airing twenty four hours a day, seven days a week.¹⁰⁵ Its most prominent departure from the stock standard viewing content at the time was its heavy emphasis on discontinuity within the video clips. There was an accentuation upon creating an “aesthetic world rather than a narrative one” which advocated televisual pleasure over plausibility.¹⁰⁶ The violation of spatial and temporal logic demanded new modes of engaging with, and reading, the texts to assemble order from the stream of disparate and seemingly unintelligible images. As one eighteen year old interviewee commented in a study:

¹⁰³ Rushkoff, *Media Virus*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁴ Rushkoff, *Media Virus*, pp. 9-12.

¹⁰⁵ Kaplan, *Rocking Around the Clock*, pp. 1-2.

WASEC was later bought by Viacom International.

¹⁰⁶ Rushkoff, *Media Virus*, pp. 127-34.

It's an art to catch just enough of different story lines to follow all of them. My parents can't take it. I usually end up alone in front of the television.¹⁰⁷

MTV required its audience to actively participate in the process of making connections and meaning. Lasting on average four minutes, music videos rested on their “moment to moment appeal to the senses” rather than on substance to create a “textural experience”.¹⁰⁸ Visual style and the surface became the basis for understanding the text. The visceral and transitory nature of the image meant that it could not be reduced to a singular interpretation of a singular reality.

In MTV, conventional narratives were de-narrativised and coded in a lexicon that recognised the irony of its own ephemerality. It revelled in its “discontinuity as an opportunity for instantaneous transformation”.¹⁰⁹ The fragmented aesthetics, while a major factor in its entertainment value, served to break away from what Rushkoff described as “consensus reality”.¹¹⁰ The “frequent raids upon the past” in music videos did not signify sardonic parody, but a postmodernist ethos of textual poaching and reappropriation.¹¹¹ Like a virus, its very existence relies on its act of spreading, infecting and transforming. The final outcome is never definitive. Its trajectory is highly unpredictable. Here lies the subversive nature of MTV. Its slick veneer makes it difficult to hold and control. This is further accentuated at the speed which MTV moves. Blink, and you might miss it.

6:11 P.M. It's “Classic MTV” and they're showing a video from three years ago. That's how fast this operation moves – three years and you're in the fucking archives.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Ainslie, “Watching TV”, p. 127.

¹⁰⁸ Rushkoff, *Media Virus*, p. 128.

¹⁰⁹ Rushkoff, *Media Virus*, p. 134.

¹¹⁰ Rushkoff, *Media Virus*, p. 129.

¹¹¹ Andrew Goodwin. “Music video in the (post) modern world”, *Screen*, Vol. 28 (3), 1987 (Summer). p. 47.

Prior to MTV, the shortest edit utilised by filmmakers was approximately two seconds. Anything of lesser duration was considered incomprehensible to the audience.¹¹³ With MTV, edits became dramatically shorter. Cuts of one third of a second became common, resulting in a metaphorical IV-push of televisual images into the viewer's system. The speed of the media text and the speed at which it was read refuted the prosaic complaint that Generation X had a limited attention span.¹¹⁴ As quickly as a text was processed, it was as rapidly superseded by its replication and recycling. An accelerated culture demands not only the ability to keep pace with the rapid deluge of information, but also to adapt and evolve with it.¹¹⁵ MTV flits on the borders, always out of grasp of the centre. Viewers (and theorists) cannot catch what moves too fast. And social semioticians certainly cannot fix what cannot be identified.

An analysis of Generation X requires an historical and theoretical acknowledgement of how youth culture has been studied. Dominant discursive frameworks insist upon a definition of youth as the sum of age, psychology and physiology which has proven to be inadequate. While the categories constructed by the medical and legal professions allow the regulation of an otherwise disorderly group, there is a need to move beyond the boundaries set by these authoritative bodies. Turning to subcultural theory, this approach allows for a more elastic definition favouring youth as a (life)style. It is the entry point into the cultural landscape of rituals, practices and (symbolic) meaning. As with any apparatus however, it becomes dated over time and its initial flaws more

¹¹² Hugh Gallagher. "Seven days and seven nights alone with MTV" in *The GenX Reader*. Douglas Rushkoff (ed.) New York: Ballantine Books, 1994. p. 188.

¹¹³ Rushkoff, *Media Virus*, p. 130.

¹¹⁴ Rushkoff, *Media Virus*, p. 130.

¹¹⁵ Douglas Rushkoff explores this acceleration of technology, information transmission and nonlinearity of social narratives in *Children of Chaos*. See: Douglas Rushkoff. *Children of Chaos: Surviving the End of the World as We Know It*. London: Harper Collins, 1997 (1996).

apparent. Technologies and societal infrastructures change, and as a result so must our ways of engaging and understanding them. The final section of this chapter focuses upon the mediascape of popular culture which is historically unique and specific to a post-1980s youth. Going one step beyond subcultural theory, I contend that Generation X is no longer simply an identity or subculture. It is a reading strategy – a specific literacy – that allows navigation through an ever-changing environment of technological progress and information overload.

Here's Looking At You, Kid

The teenpic is either loved or loathed. No theoretical prisoners are taken. No ambiguity is broached. I have several friends with whom I attend teenpics. They believe that they can leave their brains at home when I suggest the latest Hollywood high school offering for a Saturday night at a suburban cinema. Others would not be caught dead labouring through ninety minutes of immature orifice jokes and all-too-predictable prom night antics, preferring the 'meaningful' adult drama or a brooding French import of the film noir genre. These indicators of personal taste implicate a host of binarisms that demarcate the integrity and value of highbrow art from the vulgarity and banality of popular culture. When I tell someone that my doctorate focuses on youth cinema the response is often the raised eyebrow and a concerned or baffled 'why?' This dismissive question annoys me.

I am intrigued by the way popular culture intervenes and influences our lives, and find great disdain for the simplistic reasoning of those who dismiss it as mundane. There is more to the teen movie than meets the art critic's eye. Cultural studies methodologies provide the tools to unpick the politics of serious fun and grants significance to the disempowered. Context becomes important: the shopping mall, the locker room, the high school hallway. It informs, and is informed by, the youth who inhabit these spaces. As a microcosm of the wider community and precursor to adulthood, youth cinema articulates oppressive hierarchies of power and struggles to maintain identity and self-worth in an often hostile environment.

This chapter investigates youth in Hollywood cinema through the lens of cinema and cultural studies. It does not limit itself to those films specifically targeted at teenagers, but also includes films about youth. This chapter picks up and works through the argument presented in Chapter One. Just as ‘youth’ and ‘teenager’ are no longer fixed categories, it has become increasingly difficult to provide a singular rendering of youth cinema. The complexity of this evolving genre is tracked through a brief historical journey of the teenpic from the 1950s, and concludes in the present. Through the paradigm of the carnival, the chapter explores the unpopular politics of contemporary society’s perennial folk devil.

Chapter 2

Outlaws at the Border The Politics of Youth Cinema

When the causes of the decline of Western civilization are finally writ, Hollywood will surely have to answer why it turned one of man's most significant art forms over to the self-gratification of highschoolers.¹

~ Variety [Review of *The Breakfast Club*] ~

In 1997, I spent several months immersing myself in the celluloid culture of Los Angeles, California. Aside from the expected tourist experiences of star spotting on the boulevards and at premieres, I burrowed further into the cosmetically enhanced exterior of Hollywood. I had a brief stint as a 'professional' audience member for some of the worst and most rapidly axed shows on American television, and worked as an intern at an independent film company on the corner of Sunset and Gower Boulevard. Whatever there was to be learnt, experienced or found regarding motion pictures, I was under the impression that it could be located in the heart of cinema city where every second store boasted an impressive melange of movie-associated commodities. In a nation that had spawned the 1980s John Hughes phenomenon, I was convinced that there would be abundant documentation on the 'teenpic' as a financial institution and a cultural icon with its vivid representation of the hedonistic days (daze) of youth. When I arrived back in Australia in early 1998, my suitcase was bursting at the buckles with kitschy Americana souvenirs and screen paraphernalia. There was however, only one monograph on youth cinema to show for the countless hours spent scouring book stores.

¹ "Review of *The Breakfast Club*", *Variety*, 13 February, 1985. p. 19.

Jonathon Bernstein's *Pretty in Pink: The Golden Age of Teenage Movies* appeared promising.² Molly Ringwald – teen queen of 1980s youth cinema – graced the cover. The image was a promotional still from one of the films that had cemented her cinematic and cultural significance to a generation of youth.³ The title suggested the author's favourable inclination, as opposed to scathing rebuke, of the subject. The opening pages alluded to Bernstein's intentions to historically contextualise youth cinema and pay heed to its position in the wider film industry. It seemed he had produced a relevant and timely study – an engaging critique of a genre many would deem the slum of celluloid culture.

Bernstein's text is notable for several reasons. It does not discriminate against different 'types' of films within the genre. An extensive repertoire of movies is discussed, ranging from the gross-out, goofball style of *Porky's* to the gritty, hard-edged realism of *Kids*.⁴ No border is sacrosanct. Bernstein does not ignore the tropes of the genre. He revels in their idiosyncrasies and implausibility. Most importantly, film is not divorced from context. Bernstein is careful to construct an argument that melds the genre's rise and subsequent impact upon the megaplex market with changing patterns of youth consumption and representation. Despite all its merits, *Pretty in Pink: The Golden Age of Teenage Movies* errs towards a subjectivity that smells suspiciously like personal catharsis, rather than a critical account of this 'golden age' of motion pictures. This sensation becomes lucid when he backhands the subject. Bernstein jibes, "The eighties was the period when parents were away for the weekend

² Jonathon Bernstein. *Pretty in Pink: The Golden Age of Teenage Movies*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997.

³ The film was *Pretty in Pink*, from which Jonathon Bernstein's book title originates. *Pretty in Pink*. Directed by Howard Deutch. Written by John Hughes. Paramount Pictures, 1986.

⁴ *Porky's*. Directed and written by Bob Clark. Twentieth Century Fox, 1982.
Kids. Directed by Larry Clark. Written by Harmony Korine. Vidmark/Trimark, 1995.

for an entire decade, leaving the kids in charge of the movie industry. Suckers”.⁵ The author’s enthusiasm for the genre is matched by an almost compulsive need to debase it. His grievances ricochet haphazardly from the adolescent desires of an audience whom he identifies as “Mr. Dumb Horny 14 Year Old”, to the opportunistic studios pandering to this audience base, to the desideratum of an industry dominated by an aged population attempting (unsuccessfully) to recapture its lost youth.⁶ Conscious efforts to tackle relevant social issues, such as women’s changing roles, unfailingly derail into acerbic diatribes or dismissive statements. Bernstein’s monograph is not exempt from the ‘it’s just another teen movie’ knee-jerk reaction.

Returning to Australia with this one book on youth cinema was disappointing but enlightening. Two issues became glaringly apparent. Despite its popularity, youth cinema has yet to garner an equivalent body of investigative and analytical research. On the odd occasion when it is deemed worthy of critique, discussions become stymied by unresolvable debates: what criteria should be applied to evaluate this genre and its (de)merits? The result is an exhausted quasi-critique that has taken place entirely on the starting block. The exigency to pigeon-hole youth cinema has neglected to examine how bodies of youth are to be read, how the genre should be written about, and what meanings it holds for the audience. In order to address these issues, it is first necessary to provide a workable definition of what constitutes youth cinema. This chapter begins on the proverbial starting block and does not remain stalled in that position. This initial set-up provides the foundation from which to plunge into the murky waters below.

⁵ Bernstein, *Pretty in Pink*, p. 221.

⁶ Bernstein, *Pretty in Pink*, p. 4.

As with definitions of youth and Generation X, youth cinema conjures up a readily identifiable form, yet the boundaries remain elusive. While many would not hesitate to classify *American Pie* as youth cinema, the narrative of *River's Edge* would most likely elicit a less decisive verdict.⁷ The former follows the (mis)adventures of four friends who make a pact. Each must lose his virginity before their high school prom. The characters direct their energies towards devising strategies to woo potential females. In *River's Edge*, the bond of friendship is pushed to breaking point when Samson 'John' Tollet (Daniel Roebuck) boasts to his gang that he has murdered his girlfriend, Jamie (Danyi Deats). When he takes them to the site of her decomposing body, there are mixed reactions of revulsion, reverence and nonchalance. The film concludes with the dissipation of the collective and the teenage killer's death. It is a morbid picture of dead-end youth, immorality, desperation and exploitation. Although both films are rites of passage narratives that permit uneasy transition from youth to adulthood, the discrepancy of the frivolity of *American Pie* over the solemn tone of *River's Edge* articulates those borders that label and contain a text as being of the youth genre, or a digression and therefore not of the regular fare.⁸ These borders are problematically fluid and mobile.⁹ The task of solidifying them is at best an earnest

⁷ *American Pie*. Directed by Paul Weitz. Written by Adam Herz. Universal Studios, 1999.

River's Edge. Directed by Tim Hunter. Written by Neil Jiminez. Island Pictures, 1987.

⁸ The critical acclaim of *River's Edge* was bolstered by the fact that it was loosely based on the true events of a homicide in Milpitas, California in 1981. High schooler Anthony Jacques Broussard killed his girlfriend, Marcy Conrad, and boasted about it to his friends. It was at least one day before the incident was reported to the police (Howe, 1987).

Desson Howe. "*River's Edge*", *Washington Post*, 29 May, 1987.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/riversedgerhowe_a0b0c5.htm>
Accessed online on 9 January, 2003.

⁹ The fluid boundaries of youth cinema are exemplified in the film *Kids*. On promotional posters for the film, there is an explicit caution which reads, "Warning: This critically acclaimed film is for mature audiences only. Parental discretion is advised". Ironically, the director Larry Clark maintains that it is a teenage movie as it grapples with teenage issues, was written by a teenager and stars performers in their teens. Clark states:

Well, I always wanted to make the teenage movie that I felt America never made ... I knew my film had to be from the inside, so I called this kid writer I knew through skateboarding, and he came over and I told him what I wanted, and he said, 'I've been waiting all my life to write this', and he knocked out the screenplay in three weeks. I think when you see the movie *Kids*

endeavour to engage with the genre. At worst, it is a futile experiment that can decline into condescension. An example of the elasticity of the genre is the definitional ‘teenager’ in a film. It is a description which may refer to “a type, a mode of behaviour, a way of being” that defies biological age.¹⁰ This is illustrated by the roles played by Mike Myers (Wayne) and Dana Carvey (Garth) in *Wayne’s World*.¹¹ Both actors were in their late twenties and early thirties respectively at the time of casting. It was their embodiment of a sense of irresponsibility and naivety that qualified *Wayne’s World* as a teen film, and the principal characters as teenagers.

Age of viewership has often been employed as a marker to define audience type and the textual limits of youth cinema. This is an insufficient yardstick. Its awkwardness becomes apparent when nostalgia is involved, as is evident in *Stand By Me*.¹² A 1986 drama set in 1950s small-town America, the narrative traces the quest of four friends – Gordie (Wil Wheaton), Chris (River Phoenix), Teddy (Corey Feldman) and Vern (Jerry O’Connell) – as they set out to uncover a corpse that is rumoured to be buried in dense woodlands. On their journey, the quartet tell campfire stories, guffaw at immature jokes, divulge their innermost secrets, escape near-death on a train trestle, wade through a leech-infested river, and scuffle with a rival group of juvenile delinquents who try to claim the body’s discovery as their own. It is a boys’ adventure

that most of us – not all of us, but most of us – will say, ‘Yea, that’s the way we were, that’s the way kids are’ (2002).

Larry Clark. “*Kids*: Synopsis”. <<http://www.larryclarkofficialwebsite.com/KidsSynopsis.html>> Accessed online on 19 December, 2002.

¹⁰ Adrian Martin. *Phantasms: The Dreams and Desires of the Heart of Our Popular Culture*. Ringwood: McPhee Gribble Publishers, 1994. p. 66.

¹¹ *Wayne’s World*. Directed by Penelope Spheeris. Written by Mike Myers, Bonnie Turner and Terry Turner. Paramount Pictures, 1992.

Wayne and Garth are two men (their ages are never made clear to the audience) who establish their own cable channel, airing from Wayne’s basement. Their content is unashamedly inane. It celebrates its distanciation from the serious adult world, epitomised by the capitalistic studio executive (Rob Lowe) who attempts to take over the successful channel. As with Molly Ringwald, Lowe was one of the original Brat Pack of the 1980s wave of youth cinema.

told through the recollections of an adult Gordie (Richard Dreyfuss). Nostalgic inflections and the film's adaptation from a Stephen King novella broaden the scope of its viewership from adolescent youths to mature-aged patrons seeking a return to an irretrievable past. Sentimentality and the benefit of adult hindsight "serves to extract youth from the immediacy of toilet humour".¹³ The narrative is presented as an idealised collective memory for a middle-aged audience, rescuing the experience of youth from being read as silly and superficial.

Adrian Martin proposes a more pliable reworking of youth cinema.¹⁴ The genre is loosely defined by its oscillation between two poles:

At the one end is craziness, characterised by free-for-all fun, sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll ... But at the other end, and equally importantly is innocence, uncomplicated conflict with another human being, the unformed, impossible dream of a better world tomorrow.¹⁵

These extremities are not mutually exclusive but reside on a continuum. It is the ambiguous region in-between which encapsulates the liminal experience of youth cinema – that "intense, suspended moment between yesterday and tomorrow, between childhood and adulthood, between being a nobody and a somebody, when everything is in question, and anything is possible".¹⁶ Youth cinema poses a particularly

¹² *Stand By Me*. Directed by Rob Reiner. Written by Raynold Gideon and Bruce A. Evans. Based on a novella by Stephen King. Columbia Pictures, 1986.

¹³ Lesley Speed. "Tuesday's gone: The nostalgic teen film", *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Vol. 26 (1), 1998 (Spring). p. 26.

This can also be seen in the film *The War* (dir. Jon Avnet, 1994). Set in 1970s Juliette, Mississippi the film recounts the experiences of a family as they rebuild their lives after the Vietnam War. The narrative focuses mainly upon two siblings, Lidia (Lexi Randall) and Stu Simmons (Elijah Wood), as they adjust to the return of their father from a mental facility where he has undergone treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. While the film follows the prankster antics of the adolescents, which includes sending a group of thugs careening down a hill into a cesspool and a makeshift war to defend their tree-house from the same ruffians, the narrative's grounding in nostalgia renders it a film about youth for those who have already surpassed it. This is emphasised by Lidia's perspective as narrator. *The War*. Directed by Jon Avnet. Written by Kathy McWorter. Universal Pictures, 1994.

¹⁴ While Adrian Martin specifically calls his subject teen movies, I have expanded the parameters to youth cinema.

¹⁵ Martin, *Phantasms*, p. 67.

¹⁶ Martin, *Phantasms*, p. 68.

offensive aberration in film studies with its violation of binary logic. Meaning is generated by the flux and coterminous relation with opposition. Ambiguity becomes its logic. Youth cinema captures a moment where the overwhelming adrenaline rush of youthfulness overrides reason to formulate its own rules and logic. Youth cinema is affect incarnate.

Greater than the sum of a person's emotions or desires alone, Lawrence Grossberg roughly translates affect as a "feeling of life".¹⁷ It elicits a very real and salient response, yet is ephemeral in nature and specific to time, place and space.

Affect always defines the quantitatively variable level of energy (activation, enervation) or volition (will); it determines how invigorated we feel in particular moments of our lives. It defines the strength of our investment in particular experiences, practices, identities, meanings and pleasures. In other words, affect privileges volition over meaning.¹⁸

Affect describes our reaction to a stimulus – be it a scent, a picture, the opening guitar riff of a song or the memory of a childhood friend. Infused with worth, its meanings hinge on the vested interest brought to the text by the reader, rather than relying upon the author's pre-existing intentions. The sensation of ecstasy is a (personal and collective) immersion that not only marks the experience as relevant – it matters – but also signifies the construction of difference and identity.¹⁹ This dual function is illustrated at the conclusion of *Stand By Me*. An adult Gordie, now a successful writer, reminisces about his youth and the trek made to witness the dead body. A newspaper article detailing the recent fatal stabbing of Chris Chambers sparks his recollections.

Gordie: I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus does anyone?²⁰

¹⁷ Lawrence Grossberg. "Is there a fan in the house?: The affective sensibility of fandom" in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. Lisa A. Lewis (ed.) London: Routledge, 1992. p. 56.

¹⁸ Grossberg, "Is there a fan in the house?", p. 57.

¹⁹ Grossberg, "Is there a fan in the house?", pp. 57-58.

²⁰ Gordie in *Stand By Me*.

Gordie's look of resigned acceptance of Chris' tragic death and his own middle-agedness accentuate the instability and liminality of his youth. It is intensely personal, but simultaneously smoothed over by the passing of time and the much altered circumstances from which he recalls the events of that unforgettable summer of 1959. When Gordie's son (Chance Quinn) remarks to a friend that his dad "gets like that when he's writing" – referring to his obliviousness to his immediate surrounds – it is clear that newspaper clippings and passionate stories of youth passed from father to son will never sufficiently capture the emotional gravity and spectrum of Gordie's experiences.²¹ Words become a poor substitute. This prelude to youth cinema indicates that a more complex reading is required than has previously been granted. Although this thesis focuses upon post-1980s iconography in youth cinema, I backtrack to the genre's development in post-World War II. This expository flashback begins to sketch out the relationship between youth, consumption and popular culture, specifically film, from the 1950s.

On the Money: Youth as Consumer

The post-war period of the 1950s in the United States of America and Great Britain witnessed dramatic cultural and economic restructuring, resulting from greater disposable income, opportunities for upward mobility and freedom from wartime National Service. The sheer size of the youth populace – "that permanent demographic bulge – the hump in the census python" – was a major impetus prompting revision of marketplace demographics.²² Its revenue potential contributed to the surge of products and leisure services geared towards this newly emerged target

²¹ Gordie's son in *Stand By Me*.

²² Thomas Doherty. *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*. Boston, London, Sydney and Wellington: Unwin Hyman, 1988. p. 232.

market. In this opportunistic environment, the entertainment industry scurried to attract this new breed of consumer. It worked to “create the teenager” while exploiting them.²³ The burgeoning music scene in North America that introduced Bill Haley and His Comets, Elvis Presley and Pat Boone was accompanied by a mutual growth in film and televisual media that capitalised on the success of these musicians and the thriving leisure industry.²⁴ The association of youth with consumerism also “appeared as an emergent category in post-war Britain, one of the most striking and visible manifestations of social change in the period”.²⁵ It was manifest in the spectacular subcultures that would appear which signalled a highly specific pattern of consumption. The United Kingdom too observed its own home-grown genesis of revolutionary youth culture with the arrival of The Beatles in the 1960s.²⁶

Prior to the mid-1950s, the American cinema-going public was assumed to be heterogeneous and multi-generational.²⁷ The arrival of *Rock Around the Clock* (both movie and single) sparked uproar among adult audiences and ecstatic frenzy among teenagers.²⁸ A widening generational gap between youth (adolescents and young

²³ John Davis. *Youth and the Condition of Britain – Images of Adolescent Conflict*. London: Athlone Press, 1990. p. 166.

²⁴ The success of the 1955 single “Rock Around the Clock” by Bill Haley and His Comets was followed up with a movie of the same title. The musical starred the band members as themselves, in a fictional account of the group’s rise to fame. Bill Haley and His Comets were not the first proponents of the revolutionary rock and roll wave of hysteria, but they did prove to be the first significant ambassadors of the musical movement marketed directly to teenagers. Similarly, the early success of Elvis Presley as singer resulted in contractual agreements with major film studios to boost record sales through cinematic exposure (Doherty, 1988, p. 74).

Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, p. 74.

²⁵ Jeff Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts. “Subcultures, culture and class” in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds) London: Routledge, 1976. p. 9.

²⁶ For a further account of the political, economic and cultural movements of the ‘swinging sixties’ in the United Kingdom, see:

Christopher Booker. *The Neophiliacs: A Study of the Revolution in English Life in the Fifties and Sixties*. London and Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1969.

²⁷ Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, p. 1.

²⁸ Bill Haley and His Comets. “Rock Around the Clock”, single release. Decca, 1954. *Rock Around the Clock*. Directed by Fred F. Sears. Written by Richard E. Kent. Columbia Pictures, 1956.

adults) and their elders was apparent. Commodification required the increasing separation and specificity of this divide. As Thomas Doherty points out:

even as editorial writers, law enforcement officials, and parents were shoring up the barricades against teenagers the business community was welcoming their arrival at the gates. With good reason – there was a fortune to be made selling trinkets to the invaders.²⁹

What ensued was the development of the teenpic, geared directly for youths. James Dean's portrayal of Jim Stark in *Rebel Without A Cause* became iconic of martyrdom and misunderstood youth.³⁰ Stark's angst and disillusionment with middle-class society was a critical commentary of the breakdown of the nuclear family. It narrativised the loss of an American utopia through inter-generational conflict. In *Rebel Without A Cause*, it was the youths who were forced to make life-altering decisions and take responsibility for their actions. These did not take place within the familiar scenario of the family home but in the town streets, in chickie races, in brawls and knife fights. Teenagers who had previously played subsidiary roles in cinema had come into their own.

The same year *Rebel Without A Cause* was released in theatres, *Blackboard Jungle* was screened nationally in America.³¹ While the film focused upon a teacher's classroom struggles, it was the antics and dissonance exhibited by the unruly students that held greater interest. The hailing of a youth audience was clear from the featured song "Rock Around the Clock" in the opening and closing credits. Violent responses of some cinemagoers during screenings fuelled speculations of the immorality of this

²⁹ Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, p. 52.

³⁰ *Rebel Without A Cause*. Directed by Nicholas Ray. Written by Stewart Stern. Based on a novel by Evan Hunter. Warner Bros., 1955.

³¹ *Blackboard Jungle*. Directed and written by Richard Brooks. MGM, 1955.

new type of cinema.³² Conflicts with patrons, disputes with theatre staff and “trashing lobby displays, slashing seats, and, at drive-ins, speeding off with speakers” was seen as evidentiary of the arrival of the threatening juvenile delinquent.³³

The lucrative impact of teenage expenditure at the movies contributed to the development of commercially successful, formulaic narratives. These splintered into a multitude of genres grouped under the rubric of the teenpic or the youth film. From the onset, youth cinema was deemed by studios as crowd pleasers and solid money pullers. The familiarity of plotlines, character types and cinematic style satiated audience expectations, making these high concept films extremely marketable, exploitable and prone to heavy merchandising.³⁴ Its commercial viability and accessibility allowed the genre to flourish as a popular and distinctive means of entertainment. This was also the reason for its vilification as shameless commodification geared towards a viewership whose money was taken seriously, but they themselves were not.

Serious Fun: Popular Culture, Unpopular Politics

The problem with casting an impressive British actor like Helen Mirren in a teen-oriented American film is it raises expectations.

But the teen genre is not known for producing many intellectual gems, so it should not come as a great surprise that *Teaching Mrs Tingle* ... fails to deliver.³⁵

Sue Yeap

³² Adult concern was often alarmist and exaggerated. For example, conservative groups charged *Rock Around the Clock* with inciting impressionable adolescents to take to the cinema aisles, lobbies and the streets to dance in a hypnotic rock and roll craze in cities throughout America and Europe (Doherty, 1988, pp. 81-83).

Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, pp. 81-83.

³³ Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, p. 138.

³⁴ Justin Wyatt. *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994. pp. 19, 30.

Youth cinema has been largely ignored or derided in film studies. The exceptions to this are few and predictable – often serious dramas in the canon of cinematic ‘classics’. Large-scale consumption of exploitative teenpics by youths in the 1950s was sufficient evidence for critics and moral guardians to defame the “creative bankruptcy” of the genre, and the mindless viewing habits of its primary audience.³⁶ Youth cinema remains buried at the bottom of the cultural rubbish bin. This thesis takes on the task of exhuming the genre from the academic dead zone. I argue that the popularity and pleasure principles of the genre warrant critical engagement. Popular culture holds intense meaning for its readership.

Culture is not artifice and manners, the preserve of Sunday best, rainy afternoons, and concert halls. It is the very material of our daily lives, the bricks and mortar of our most commonplace understandings, feelings and responses.³⁷

Dismissing popular culture as banal has strategic implications. Defining it against high culture consolidates binarisms between the meaningless and meaningful, crude commodity and fine art. While the problematic boundary between culture and politics is increasingly recognised as illegitimate, the relationship between popular culture and politics has yet to attain a similar level of acknowledgement.³⁸ Tracing shifting relations of power in ephemera and that which is emotional is a daunting task as markers of scientific objectivity and ‘fine taste’ become redundant. Within the education system, the importance of maintaining pristine divisions has been repeatedly asserted. One example cited by Adrian Martin concerned the introduction of popular

³⁵ Sue Yeap. “Tale of a sour teacher fails acid test” (review of *Teaching Mrs Tingle*), *The West Australian: Arts and Entertainment*, 23 October, 1999. p. 112.

³⁶ Wyatt, *High Concept*, p. 14.

³⁷ Paul E. Willis. “Masculinity and factory labor” in *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*. Jeffrey C. Alexander and Steven Seidman (eds) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. p. 183.

³⁸ Pam Stravropoulos. “The politics of culture”, *Social Alternatives*, Vol. 15 (2), April 1996. p. 33.

The attack upon popular culture has often been transposed onto the questioned legitimacy of Cultural Studies. See:

Meaghan Morris. “A question of cultural studies” in *Back to Reality? Social Experience and Cultural Studies*. Angela McRobbie (ed.) Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997. pp. 36-37.

culture into secondary school curricula by the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) in the early 1990s.³⁹ Conservative, right-wing parties were swift to denounce this desecration of “cultural heritage”.⁴⁰ The article is important because it not only foregrounds the type of knowledge that is privileged, but also whom it privileges: who is speaking and who is silenced. The divide excludes various groups lacking the literacy to engage with ‘high cultured’ texts, relegating them to the periphery of power and credibility.⁴¹ This illiteracy functions as a “cultural marker for naming forms of difference within the logic of cultural deprivation theory”.⁴² While the asymmetrical distributions of cultural capital favour an elite minority, disenfranchised communities are able to use the disempowered sites of popular culture to negotiate their social position.⁴³ As Simon Frith and Jon Savage argue:

The ‘accessibility’ of popular culture ... describes the fact not that ‘everyone’ can understand it, but that everyone can use it, has a chance to be heard, to develop their own language, however difficult or *unpopular* what they say may be.⁴⁴

Popular culture permeates our everyday lives. Saturated with meaning and memory, it tells alternative narratives of social experience. Meaghan Morris provides a malleable definition of it as “a way of operating”.⁴⁵ This preferred description avoids reading popular culture as a fixed entity by emphasising the synergy between textual production and reading strategies, and how meaning mutates according to context.⁴⁶

³⁹ Adrian Martin. “In the name of popular culture”, *Metro*, No. 89, 1992 (Autumn). pp. 34-46.

⁴⁰ Martin, “In the name of popular culture”, p. 37.

⁴¹ The privileging of works by William Shakespeare in secondary and tertiary education curriculum exemplifies this point. The Bard is generally accessible to a literate minority, comprised predominantly of English Literature and classical Theatre elites.

⁴² Henry Giroux. “Introduction: Literacy and the pedagogy of political empowerment” in *Literacy: Reading the Work and the World*. Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (eds) London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987. p. 3.

⁴³ Tara Brabazon. *Ladies Who Lunge: Celebrating Difficult Women*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2002. p. x.

⁴⁴ Simon Frith and Jon Savage. “Pearls and swine: Intellectuals and the mass media” in *The Clubcultures Reader: Readings in Popular Cultural Studies*. Steve Redhead, Derek Wynne and Justin O’Connor (eds) Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997. p. 15. Italics in original text.

⁴⁵ Meaghan Morris. “Banality in cultural studies” in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Patricia Mellencamp (ed.) Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. p. 30.

⁴⁶ Anne Cranny-Francis. *Popular Culture*. Geelong: Deakin University Press, 1994. pp. 8-9.

As Anne Cranny-Francis states, “this definition makes explicit the fact that texts are consumed (read, viewed, heard) in many different ways and that individual consumers are positioned in many different ways by and in relation to texts”.⁴⁷ Popular culture produces a diversity of narratives and subjectivities as it is not confined to laws of order(liness) and orthodox logic. Cinema and music function as particularly effective mediums for relaying unpopular politics. Coded in a specific visual and aural lexicon, they filter into our daily consciousness. ‘Standards’ and criteria must be established to curb and discredit their uncontrollable, multiplying meanings. Where excess threatens to overwhelm logic and reason, the more drastic the response to maintain boundaries. This cultural rejoinder was exemplified by the attacks against 1980s youth cinema, when Hollywood churned out an inordinate number of films considered shallow and obscene. The genre lacked the subtleties and restraints of more ‘classical’ productions.

Whenever a quorum of cineastes and semioticians gathers to discuss and dissect the great eras of moviemaking, the eighties rarely elicit celebratory cheers and group hugging ... It was a time dedicated to catering to the basest whims. It was a time when substance abuse, sadism, promiscuity and voyeurism were promoted as desirable character attributes. It was a time when movies were made for kids, and dumb kids at that.⁴⁸

If youth cinema had been regarded an aberrant offshoot of mainstream cinema in the 1950s, by the 1980s it was deeply reviled. Post-Vietnam and influenced by the capitalist ethos of the Reagan and Thatcher governments, the decade became synonymous with an almost solipsist view of the world and the emphasis upon immediate gratification.⁴⁹ This found expression in youth cinema with its focus upon

⁴⁷ Cranny-Francis, *Popular Culture*, p. 9.

⁴⁸ Bernstein, *Pretty in Pink*, p. 2.

⁴⁹ This obsession with the accelerated times of the 1980s was not only prevalent in cinema and television, but also manifested itself in literature. Authors such as Douglas Coupland, Bret Easton Ellis, Katherine Texier and Susanna Moore were dubbed blank fiction writers. Their novels often explored the hyper-consumerist culture of the decade, focusing on urban youth and their reactions of disillusionment, confusion and a sense of marginality in a world of fast cars, fast money, fast drugs and fast youth (Annesley, 1998, p. 2). Blank fiction spoke in “the commodified language *of its own period*” (Annesley, 1998, p. 7. Italics in original text).

the materialism of white, suburban America. The immediacy of the fast life – of living in and for the moment – manifested itself narratively but also stylistically. In a scene from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, Ferris (Matthew Broderick) gate-crashes a parade, mounts a float and then lip-syncs to Wayne Newton's "Danke Schoen" to a crowd of adoring onlookers.⁵⁰ Inspired by the moment, a group of youths begins to dance in the streets. It is an impromptu act, but also a perfectly choreographed sequence that flaunts its lack of realism. The promotional slogan of the film appropriately reads, "Leisure Rules. One man's struggle to take it easy". *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* accentuates an underlying principle of the youth film – the investment in the liminal experience and celebration of the surface.

The degree of seriousness and realism is commonly utilised to measure the virtues of cinematic texts and to maintain "fiercely patrolled aesthetic parameters".⁵¹ This lends itself to a more favourable review of a film such as *Mask* over the "gum-popping, cigarette-puffing, ass-grabbing" narrative of *The Breakfast Club*.⁵² *Mask* is a biographical drama of a teenage boy with a congenital facial deformity. Set in the gritty milieu of a working-class neighbourhood, the film strives for narrative believability over excess. When Roy L. 'Rocky' Dennis (Eric Stoltz) dies at the conclusion, the sombre tone of the film is reinforced. There is no fairytale ending. On the other hand, *The Breakfast Club* employs slapstick comedy and a dose of the make-believe to portray a day in the lives of five students serving weekend detention.

James Annesley. *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. pp. 2, 7.

⁵⁰ *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. Directed and written by John Hughes. Paramount Pictures, 1986.

Wayne Newton. "Danke Schoen", single release. Arranged by Jimmie Haskell. Capitol Records, 1963.

⁵¹ Iain Chambers. *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture*. Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 1984. p. 21.

⁵² *Mask*. Directed by Peter Bogdanovich. Written by Anna Hamilton Phelan. Image Entertainment, 1985.

The Breakfast Club. Directed and written by John Hughes. Universal Pictures, 1985.

Throughout the day, they harass the supervising teacher, share puerile jokes, smoke marijuana, run amuck in the empty hallways and dance in the library (the music magically emanates from an unknown source). Eventually, the students reconcile their differences and form new alliances. Armond White laments, “John Hughes’ confessional comedy *The Breakfast Club* is so obviously, miserably fake – the characters don’t even talk like teenagers. (And who ever heard of Saturday detention?)”.⁵³ This critique seethes with malice for the genre and the hordes that support it. The films are rebuked as vulgar indulgences of the preoccupations of youth.⁵⁴ Similarly, Elayne Rapping’s overview of Hollywood youth cult films from the 1960s to the 1980s betrays her elitist position.⁵⁵ Rapping praises the rarefied “pure art” of *Badlands* while berating *Reckless* and *American Graffiti* as “too absurd to discuss”.⁵⁶ Although the author acknowledges the phenomenal success of *American Graffiti* and how it would become the benchmark for youth cinema in following decades, these observations are accorded minimal importance in her final assessment. There is little consideration of why the film resonated so deeply among its primary audience. Such narrow critiques exemplify a 1960s mentality that cordons off those “‘precious’ films from that hideous, amorphous ‘mass’ of objects branded teen movies”.⁵⁷ This litmus test is clearly outdated. The thesis pries open a space in which to ponder the popularity of the genre. In order to achieve this, it is imperative to look beyond the acid tests of old which delineate the serious from the unserious, art from

Armond White. “Kidpix”, *Film Comment*, Vol. 21 (4), 1985. p. 9.

⁵³ White, “Kidpix”, p. 9.

⁵⁴ White, “Kidpix”, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Elayne Rapping. “Hollywood’s youth cult films”, *Cineaste*, Vol. 16 (1-2), 1987-88. pp. 14-19.

⁵⁶ Rapping, “Hollywood’s youth cult films”, p. 17.

Badlands. Directed and written by Terrence Malick. Warner Bros., 1973.

Reckless. Directed by James Foley. Written by Chris Columbus. Warner Bros., 1984.

American Graffiti. Directed by George Lucas. Written by George Lucas, Gloria Katz and Willard Huyck. Universal Studios, 1973.

⁵⁷ Adrian Martin. “The teen movie: Why bother?”, *Cinema Papers*, Vol. 75, September 1989. pp. 12, 14.

pulp, the real from the fictive. In order to understand the liminality of youth cinema, we must look to the representational politics of the surface where it exists.

Reading the significance of the surface can be stymied by the assumption that it is trivial, lacking the credibility of depth and therefore truthfulness. In *Border Dialogues: Journeys in Postmodernity*, Iain Chambers contemplates the polarities of the real and the unreal through Nietzschean and Marxist discourses.⁵⁸ A Nietzschean approach assumes that “behind the mask there is nothing”.⁵⁹ Encapsulated by the declaration that ‘God is dead’, truth and reality do not exist. In opposition, classical Marxism demands “‘real’ relations of the social world” and authenticity – an original – for production and progress.⁶⁰ These paradigms become insufficient when grafted onto popular culture, and specifically film. The fictive surface of youth cinema becomes a theoretical conundrum in Marxist theory, while a Nietzschean perspective nullifies its representational politics. Neither is able to satisfactorily account how cinema transforms the intangible into a shared, ‘concrete’ trace of experience.

Chambers advocates a dialogue at the border – a reading of the space between that which is represented and that which is not. There is neither a rejection of discourses of (un)truth, nor a slavish adherence to them. The importance of “the encounter with the languages and discourses that orbit around it” replaces the search for metaphysical truth(s) in the tangible object.⁶¹ The medium is not the message. It is the messenger.

What emerges is not ‘authentic’ to any single point of origin, explanation or metaphysical axiom, but seeks rather to be authentic to a particular set of historical circumstances and associated possibilities: to the complex fabric of social and

⁵⁸ Iain Chambers. *Border Dialogues: Journeys in Postmodernity*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.

⁵⁹ Chambers, *Border Dialogues*, p. 4.

⁶⁰ Chambers, *Border Dialogues*, p. 3.

⁶¹ Chambers, *Border Dialogues*, pp. 5, 8.

historical experience, to the (con)temporary, that is mortal, hence unique, set of conditions in which we act and make sense of our lives.⁶²

It is the “shadowy traces, images of a composite world, languages of potential sense” that Chambers sees as the final bastion to be conquered.⁶³ The search for the authentic becomes void. By accenting the point of electric connection between text, reader and producer, every text, memory and moment becomes a potential site of struggle and meaning. Chambers’ proposition is not a popular one. In the negotiation of the spaces in-between, the author sanctions a middle-ground for outlaws at the border. Imagined boundaries become transparent and give way to a messy melding of dominant and subordinate discourses. This permits the marginalised to assert the “power to discomfit ... to pose a threat”.⁶⁴ Absolute truth gives way to fragmented subjectivities and a plurality of valid, interpretative possibilities. The surface is more than skin deep.

Pumping Up the Volume: Laughing to Be Heard

Doesn't this blend of blindness and blandness wanna make you do something crazy? Then why not do something crazy? Makes a helluva lot more sense than blowing your brains out. You know, go nuts, go crazy, get creative. Got problems? You just chuck 'em, nuke 'em. They think you're moody? Make 'em think you're crazy. Make 'em think you might snap! They think you got attitude, you show some real attitude. Ah! I mean, go nuts! Get crazy! Hey, no more Mr Nice Guy!⁶⁵

Happy Harry Hardon

The cinematic page is opened in the middle of suburbia. It is late at night. Parents watch television, read their books and discuss their children's futures. A teenage audience tunes into the radio and is captivated by the voice emanating from it.

⁶² Chambers, *Border Dialogues*, p. 6.

⁶³ Chambers, *Border Dialogues*, p. 8.

⁶⁴ Dick Hebdige. *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*. London and New York: Comedia, 1988. p. 18.

⁶⁵ *Pump Up the Volume*. Directed and written by Allan Moyle. New Line Studios, 1990.

Somewhere on a low frequency radio channel a phantom disc jockey declares his, and every person's, right to 'go nuts, go crazy, get creative' in violent response to social expectations that straitjacket their youth, and expect them to keep on smiling. All hell is about to break loose. No more Mr Nice Guy.

The words of DJ Happy Harry Hardon (Christian Slater) provide an anarchic set of instructions to a disempowered group rebelling against systemic oppression. Society needs a metaphoric hypodermic needle jab to the senses, and the teenagers are the ones to which Harry Hardon confers the task. When one girl exclaims "Hallelujah!" to the DJ's suggestions, it becomes lucid that Harry Hardon has surpassed the role of pirate DJ. He is their modern-day messiah, a martyr with a mission. What ensues is mayhem. Paige Woodward (Cheryl Pollak), the model student bound for Yale, 'chucks' her hair drier, cosmetics and pearls in the microwave and 'nukes' them. Teenagers all over the district stand up, scream out and dance in angry celebration to a common tune from Harry Hardon's musical repertoire. A crowd gathers at the local open field, culminating in a frenzied atmosphere akin to a freakish carnival. It is the middle finger salute to authority.

It is tempting to read *Pump Up the Volume* as innocuous teen entertainment riddled with seditious pimple-faced adolescents, villainous authoritarians and a storyline laced with insanity. It cannot claim to be an epic tragedy, nor can nostalgia be used as a trump card to elevate it above "shallow teenage escapism".⁶⁶ *Pump Up the Volume* unapologetically oozes 'cool' with its attractive cast, a hip soundtrack and self-aware repartees. While it has a dark edge, the film revels in the anarchy of (having and

⁶⁶ White, "Kidpix", p. 13.

creating) fun – providing the convenient arsenal for its trivialisation. R. L. Rutsky and Justin Wyatt argue for a more considered reading by reclaiming ‘fun’ from its otherwise derogatory, depoliticising connotations.⁶⁷ They state that it “makes fun of that which takes itself *too* seriously of that which cannot laugh at itself. In its essence, then, fun is parodic, ironic”.⁶⁸ Fun performs the politics of the absurd, the hedonistic and the profane. It requires a theoretical framework to reconfigure the flitting nature of fun into a more tangible political intervention. Two potential paradigms are sketched and critiqued – Jean Baudrillard’s theories of the simulacra and Mikhail Bakhtin’s reading of the carnival. While this may appear an odd coupling, the rationale stems from their theoretical investment in the surface and presentist discourse. They provide roadmaps for tracking ephemera.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard conceptualises postmodern society as “*artificially resurrected under the auspices of the real*” in which the world is a simulation, and truth a hallucination.⁶⁹ If one were to conceive of this concept as an anatomical paradigm, the internal organs such as the heart, lungs and spleen would constitute truth and the real. The representation of truth would be composed of the body fat and tissue encircling and containing these organs. The simulacrum is the ever-changing epidermis that forms and is rapidly shed. Its existence relies on the duplication of signs, a representation of a representation.⁷⁰ The origins of the real become lost in a facsimile reproduction and transmission of meaning. The simulacrum revels in the free-floating and relativism, anchored to no precise place or source. In

⁶⁷ R. L. Rutsky and Justin Wyatt. “Serious pleasures: Cinematic pleasure and the notion of fun”, *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 30 (1), 1990 (Fall). pp. 3-19.

⁶⁸ Rutsky and Wyatt, “Serious pleasures”, p. 10. Italics in original text.

⁶⁹ Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994. p. 8. Italics in original text.

⁷⁰ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 27.

this seductive model, the idea of a singular truth is ruptured. Truth has reached “vanishing point”.⁷¹ Binarisms of oppositional thinking collapse between object and subject, Us and Them. It is a Baudrillardian dystopia that morbidly celebrates the precipitation of the “death of humanism” through the implosion of human and technology that marks the postmodern society.⁷² The hyperreal replaces the real as the appropriate literacy and metaphor to denote life and experience.

This application of simulacra finds particular resonance within the aesthetic style of youth cinema. Heightened emotions and often improbable narratives draw attention to the artifice of the text, rupturing the comfortable distance between spectator and screen image and the myth of reality unravelling before us. In *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, Ferris often speaks direct to camera. This confrontational technique exposes the contrived nature of the text by effacing the anonymity of the audience. In *Heathers*, exaggerated acting and garish colour schemas in the mise-en-scene intentionally emphasise its superficiality.⁷³ With its popular culture references and MTV-stylings – the slick editing, a danceable soundtrack and impressive visuals – *Reality Bites* is an homage to a generation of youth whose truisms are poached from a wider recycled cultural collage.⁷⁴ This produces a myriad of hyperrealities which disseminate, mutate and create chaos. In *Pump Up the Volume*, “Truth is a virus” is graffitied on a high school wall. It has already become a self-fulfilling prophecy by the time Harry Hardon is arrested at the film’s finale. Teenagers throughout the country begin to set up their own radio channels to query the legitimacy of previously accepted ‘social truths’.

⁷¹ Jean Baudrillard. *America*. Translated by Chris Turner. London and New York: Verso, 1988. p. 10.

⁷² Kim Toffoletti. “Media implosion: Posthuman bodies at the interface”, *Hecate*, Vol. 29 (1), 2003. p. 159.

⁷³ *Heathers*. Directed by Michael Lehmann. Written by Daniel Waters. Anchor Bay Entertainment, 1989.

⁷⁴ *Reality Bites*. Directed by Ben Stiller. Written by Helen Childress. Universal Pictures, 1994.

Baudrillard's propositions offer the freedom of infinite meaning to read the glossy surfaces of texts, but it is a temporary palliation. The search for an original self and meaning can only yield reflections of vacant signifiers, where signs become the "empty form of resemblance, the empty form of representation".⁷⁵ Herein resides the dilemma posed by Baudrillard's scheme of a world where the only reality is a hyperreal one. In this narcissistic noose, identity politics reaches a crisis point. It has been effaced by countless reproductions – the shimmering, depthless image on a television screen; the replicant Mona Lisas that are more 'real' than da Vinci's own painting. It can be bought from a street market stall, brought home and mounted in the living room. Mona is no longer just a 'legend' thousands of miles away in Paris' Louvre Museum. She lives in the lounge room. There is no relevance beyond the moment as encapsulated by Baudrillard's assertion that history is a myth.⁷⁶ Baudrillard's theory not only lacks depth but also temporal progression. It is tantamount to standing on a precipice. The view of the unbounded horizon is spectacular, but the step forwards is fatal. These shortcomings highlight the need for a model of, and for, time that transcends the immediate present. I turn to the logic of the carnival as theorised by Mikhail Bakhtin for this temporal corrective.

In his study of the writings of French writer François Rabelais, Mikhail Bakhtin observed the role of carnival and the grotesque in medieval European folk culture.⁷⁷ Carnival festivities in the marketplace contrasted the rituals and protocols of official ceremonies and culture. The latter was distinguished by its ecclesiastical, feudal and austere tone that demanded its citizens to exist in a state of religious awe, fear and

⁷⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 45.

⁷⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 47.

⁷⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984 (1965).

humility – the only acceptable expressions of the true, holy and meaningful.⁷⁸ Social responsibilities were aligned with the principles of sin, suffering, atonement, asceticism and sombre providentialism.⁷⁹ It was an ideology based on restraint. Official culture maintained stringent divisions between the sanctimonious and sinful, the privileged and plebeian, pious containment and desecrating release in the name of social and cosmic order.

Carnival established, for a brief time, an order based on festivity, satire and counter-representation. Marketplaces teemed with the glorious pandemonium of masquerades (men dressed as women, women as men, people as grotesque figures), open-air amusements (giants, dwarves, jugglers and trained animals), grand feasts, public humiliations and mock scenarios in which sacrosanct rituals were farcically mimicked.⁸⁰ Through inversion, “binary oppositions coding the organizational structure of society are deliberately distressed”.⁸¹ Excessive investment in carnival, from the point of conception to the end of festival, constructed a second lived reality which became an entity in itself.⁸² Anchored in existing relations of power, carnival was no mere flight of fantasy. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White state, “Symbolic polarities of high and low, official and popular, grotesque and classical are mutually constructed and deformed in carnival”.⁸³ Carnival cuts through the taken-for-granted categories of official culture and fixed social identity.

⁷⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin. *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov*. Edited by Pam Morris. London: Arnold, 1994. pp. 197, 208.

⁷⁹ Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader*, p. 208.

⁸⁰ Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe. *Italian Journey*. Translated by W. H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982. pp. 451-52.

Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader*, pp. 196, 200.

⁸¹ Allon White. *Carnival, Hysteria, and Writing: Collected Essays and Autobiography*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993. p. 170.

⁸² Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader*, p. 198.

⁸³ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca: Cornell University, 1986. p. 16.

While it appeared as hysterical bedlam and ungodliness, the uniqueness of the event was its sanctification by the general public, from the lowest caste to the nobles. Carnival endorsed open communication by suspending hierarchical rank, prohibitions, privileges and norms.⁸⁴ Merriment was concomitant with the expression of derision for the hierarchies of power outside of the festival timeframe. In its utopian and euphoric vision, Bakhtin regarded the carnival as the public's opportunity to corrode state power and official discourse that would otherwise be prohibited under normal circumstances.⁸⁵ Bakhtin's analyses have not gone without challenge. Critics argue that Bakhtin grossly underestimates the carnival as a ruse for discipline. Terry Eagleton states that it is "a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art".⁸⁶ While inversion reorders binary oppositions, the terms themselves cannot be altered.⁸⁷ Asymmetrical structures of power are preserved.

I do not isolate the theoretical limitations of Bakhtin's carnival to debase its relevance, but to emphasise it as a negotiative reading strategy in understanding (post) youth cinema. I am interested in its potential to generate alternative narratives and spaces in political agendas. While Stallybrass and White are wary of essentialising carnival as an act of resistance, they concede that "given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as *catalyst* and *site of actual and symbolic struggle*".⁸⁸ Stuart Hall looks beyond carnival inversions by refocusing attention to its transformative possibilities.

⁸⁴ Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader*, p. 199.

⁸⁵ John Docker. *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. p. 172.

⁸⁶ Terry Eagleton. *Walter Benjamin: Or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*. London: Verso, 1981. p. 148. Italics in original text.

⁸⁷ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 56.

it is precisely the purity of this binary distinction which is transgressed. The low invades the high, blurring the hierarchical imposition of order; creating, not simply the triumph of one aesthetic over another, but those impure and hybrid forms of the 'grotesque'; revealing the interdependency of the low on the high and vice versa, the inextricably mixed and ambivalent nature of all cultural life, the reversibility of cultural forms, symbols, language, and meaning; and exposing the arbitrary exercise of cultural power, simplification, and exclusion which are the mechanisms upon which the construction of every limit, tradition, and canonical formation, and the operation of every hierarchical principle of cultural closure, is founded.⁸⁹

The transgression of tightly policed borders enables the formation of communities and new means of public intervention. This carnival community is volatile, but also signifies the act of becoming, continual change, renewal and awareness.⁹⁰ The (pro)creative aspect is prevalent in the feasting imagery described by Rabelais. Images of eating and drinking are a joyous and shared occasion. The reaping of the land's produce symbolises humankind's struggle with, and eventual conquering of, the land.⁹¹ Death does not signify the end, but rebirth. This is exemplified by the open body of the grotesque. It is "never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body".⁹² Its orifices, convexities and protuberances are neither hidden nor debased, but glorified. The grotesque body is in a state of constant rejuvenation and formation. It has no finality. These aspects of carnival find resonance in the rebellious revelries characteristic of youth cinema. Subverted models of propriety and the libidinal energy of carnival find their equivalent in the excessive, liminal experience of youth.⁹³ This affiliation is activated through a case study of *Pump Up the Volume*.

⁸⁸ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 14. Italics in original text.

⁸⁹ Stuart Hall. "For Allon White: Metaphors of transformation" in *Carnival, Hysteria, and Writing: Collected Essays and Autobiography*. Allon White (author) Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993. p. 8.

⁹⁰ Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader*, p. 199.

⁹¹ Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader*, pp. 227, 229.

⁹² Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader*, pp. 233-34.

⁹³ Hall, "For Allon White", 1993. p. 7.

Like the subjects of carnival, the adolescents depicted in *Pump Up the Volume* exhibit certain grotesque characteristics. They are (incomplete) bodies in the act of becoming – gangly limbs, adolescent hormonal imbalances and sexual impulses. These changes are defined as grotesque and deviant, and become the source of friction between the teenagers and authority figures. When the youth revolt, they forge a space, a modern-day marketplace, where their bodies become notably visible. At the film's conclusion, teenagers assemble en masse at the field. Regardless of social standing, economic stature and race, they join together in united protest and revelry. They dance and scream profanities under the auspices of Harry Hardon. There is nothing trivial about this scenario. There is method to this madness.

The nom de plume of Happy Harry Hardon parodies the local high school's name – Hubert H. Humphrey High School. The DJ hijacks this sign, inverts it and makes a travesty of it. A new meaning for the abbreviated HHH is produced. When the DJ professes on air that he is not 'real', that he is a performed alter ego, the response of his listeners is revealing. The confession of a superficial self does not compromise his position but solidifies it. Harry Hardon becomes an icon and messenger to the confused adolescents. His words bear more relevance and sense than the misguided advice of teachers and parents.

In *Pump Up the Volume*, carnival laughter performs the dissonance of the youth. It is a laughter founded on the debasement of official discourse. In one scene, two students wire a boom box to the school's loud speaker system. It broadcasts a mock-up of the voice of a hypocritical school guidance councillor that has been remixed and dubbed into a rap version, speaking the language of the student body. It is also a laughter

redirected to the self that renders it ambivalent. This is witnessed when Harry Hardon laments the suicide of one of his listeners the preceding night. The tragedy is turned upon itself when the DJ, realising there is nothing to be gained from wallowing in self-pity, subverts it into a comic situation. His obituary turns to the subject of “shit[ting] your shorts” before death and coarse jokes about heaven. The humorist turn is a simple yet unpredictable act(ion). It is a case of laughing in the face of, and in spite of, danger.

Carnival laughter is a unifying action that indicates the positive inclusion in a community.⁹⁴ This spasmodic release is an individual expression that is bound to a wider populace. In *Pump Up the Volume* when the teenagers take to destroying private and public property, wild dancing and revolt against the disciplinary institutions of school and family, a distinctive community is formed. This is not a youth culture based upon exclusion. Jock athletes congregate with punks at the field. The separate cliques of the high school are transformed into a collective student body which is contrasted with the adult world. When a young English teacher, Miss Emerson (Ellen Greene), presents the incensed viewpoints of the students to her colleagues and questions authority, she is jeered at and fired. This is no carnival response. Maintaining strained power relations, it is destructive and ignorant.

In *Pump Up the Volume*, the youth create a collective space to express their grievances and protest. Their visible bodies and loud voices become marked signs of disruptive transgression, but also the sites of diverging narratives of social experience. In the

⁹⁴ Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader*, p. 200.

closing scene, the DJ's final words are "Talk hard!"⁹⁵ It is a fitting decree for a generation doggedly forced into silence. These words are reappropriated by his listeners, who produce their own interpretation of what it means to go crazy and get creative. Their symbolic struggle has metamorphosed into action. As they 'talk hard', they also keep on dancing and laughing long after Harry Hardon has gone. The carnival is not yet over.

Beneath the translucent surface of youth cinema, the workings of serious fun refute a uni-dimensional interpretation. This chapter continues to build up a framework of analysis in which to read the politics of popular culture and the pedagogic function of cinema. It has argued for a more open approach to the study of cultural texts and the recognition of affectivity, liminality and excess as markers of significance. From the intensity of personal investments, we trace the summoning of a popular cultural community.

⁹⁵ Harry Hardon in *Pump Up the Volume*.

Taking Out the Trash

A Stroll Down (Popular) Memory Lane

Youth is fleeting. Once gone, subjective recollections and tangible artefacts – be it a record, photos or fashion – must suffice as the testament of earlier times. I find watching the teen movie a highly cathartic experience. It is therapeutic taking a clichéd stroll down memory lane. With its archetypes and often formulaic scenarios, its familiarity blurs the line between our own lived youth and the projected one on the silver screen. Both share a limited storage space. In cinema, the metamorphosis from teenager to young adult must be squeezed into ninety minutes. Our personal memoirs of yesterday must also be carefully chosen because the past, in its entirety, is overwhelming. There is a politics to what is (physically or psychologically) recorded and intentionally left out of these annals. This chapter explores the socio-political implications of the selectivity of authorised history, which conveniently forgets and writes over the narratives of the iconised and disempowered. When this denial into (a) history leaves little or no vestige of an existence, popular memory can intersect to negotiate and validate its remembering.

Nostalgia is a powerful tool of commerce and cultural construction. As we meet the mid-point of this decade, the past is dredged up to buffer current social and political unrest.¹ A chapter on popular memory in teen cinema *needs* to regress to the 1980s heyday of the genre. One of the seminal figures in this period was Molly Ringwald. The ingénue of three of the decade's most successful films about youth, she was a

¹ An example of this was the surge in nostalgic recreations of past wars in cinema and television after the events of September 11, 2001. See:

Hollywood heavyweight by the time she was eighteen years of age and the quintessential teen queen. Her career began to descend into obscurity in the late 1980s, coinciding with her attempt at breaking into what many considered ‘more adult roles’. Ringwald is the perfect specimen of the cultural body as a repository of an era, its myths and its appropriation as a disembodied text that fills a space in frozen time. Whether Molly Ringwald remains trapped in a nostalgic necropolis – destined to be a teenager for eternity – has less to do with her choice of post-youth starring roles than it does our own preoccupations and anxiety with the present.

Henry Giroux. *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear*. New York and Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. p. 17.

Chapter 3

Going Nowhere?

Popular Memory and Youth Cinema

Don't you forget about me
Don't, don't, don't, don't.¹

~ Simple Minds ~

History is selective, an ideological compression of the past. It speaks the stories of the culturally, socially and politically privileged. I investigate the role of popular memory in validating subsidiary narratives of personal and shared experiences that would otherwise remain silent or invisible. Such a paradigm has profound uses for the analysis of film. This chapter establishes a theoretical and conceptual foundation in which to examine cinema as a type of moving memory. The study then concludes with a case study of Molly Ringwald – an icon of 1980s youth in America – whose relevance in popular memory illustrates the politics of remembering (and forgetting).

In *Going Going Gone: Vanishing Americana*, Susan Jonas and Marilyn Nissenson pay homage to a compendium of objects and ideas – those “quintessential aspects” of mid-twentieth century life in America that have become extinct in contemporary society.² From the disappearing acts of the automat and soda fountains to the abolition of the military draft, and from the obsolescence of women’s white gloves to the notion of wedding-night virgins, the book offers a eulogisation of a past. In spite of its assertions that change is a natural consequence of modernity and technologisation, it

¹ Simple Minds. “Don’t You (Forget About Me)”, *The Breakfast Club* album. Virgin Records Ltd, 1985.

² Susan Jonas and Marilyn Nissenson. *Going Going Gone: Vanishing Americana*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994.

still remains tinged with a romantic hue of nostalgia that longingly lingers in yesterday. It is a very specific type of past that is rendered visible and memorable. While DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane), the pollutant effects of landfills, the fears of contracting poliomyelitis and the constant threat of the Red Menace are mentioned, segregated schools and separate drinking facilities for ‘coloureds’ and whites were not.

This collation of black and white photographs certifies an imagineered society that is distinctly white, working to middle-class and heterosexual, and where the Other has become the unspoken and unseen.³ Here, Americana is emblematic of a community “bleached of negative connotations”.⁴ Couched in a discourse of industrialisation, social and scientific advancement, a privileging of the “history of *events*” replaces the personal memory of experience as the impetus and rationale for historical periodisation.⁵ Verification of a quantifiable past lends credence to the establishment, stability and maintenance of a streamlined sense of identity of community, society, state and nation. As Zygmunt Bauman states, “Identity sprouts on the graveyard of communities, but flourishes thanks to the promise of the resurrection of the dead”.⁶ This resurrection of the dead conjures the ghosts which reiterate and reinstate the prevailing historiography. Snippets of time and space are collected, sifted through and

³ For instance, only six of the 134 photos in the book feature a citizen of colour. In those rare instances, such individuals are marginalised either visually (off-centre) or do not function as significant figures in their own right. Perhaps the most prominent figure is the character of Mammy, Scarlett O’Hara’s nurse, from the film *Gone With The Wind* (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939). In an essay on paper dolls and costumes, the image of Mammy reinstates the black (female) body as the subordinate who is dressed in the civilising uniform of the slave. It recalls a romantic vision of dashing landowners, elegant debutantes, faithful servants and palatial plantation houses of the confederacy.

Gone With The Wind. Directed by Victor Fleming. Written by Sidney Howard. Based on a story by Margaret Mitchell. Warner Bros., 1939.

⁴ David Studdert. “Bondi, Baywatch and the battle for community”, *Arena Magazine*, Issue 42, August-September 1999. p. 28.

⁵ Jacques Le Goff. *History and Memory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992. p. 2. Italics in original text.

sorted. Those unresolvable and problematic sections are discarded to arrive at a contained narrative that embeds the agenda of the history-building process into the imago of the *natural* unfolding and progression of time. Political domination is only possible through “historical definition”.⁷

While the tangible artefacts encased in books, museum exhibits, archived documents and the records from authority figures and dignitaries lay claim to the truth of heritage and history, it is the throwaway slivers of the past that never enter the realm of officialdom that elucidate the struggles and paradoxes which shape the organisation of society and knowledge. It is from the “dustbin of history” that alternative modes of (re)visioning the past must be extracted to challenge the notion of a monopolistic, singular truth.⁸ There is a politics to forgetting and remembering.

Taking Out the Trash: The Politics of Popular Memory

The power of history and – its reified, neoliberal cousin – heritage is its claim to a reality in which evidence can be produced, and events verified and monitored along a continuum that abruptly concludes at the present. Fact becomes the paramount element in the approval or disapproval of the past. History positions the temporal and spatial into orderly, efficient compartments where it “clarifies, tidies, and elucidates”.⁹ What is inevitably lost in this lockdown is the fundamental basis of time, its ephemerality. The product of this absence is a dead history that is permanently etched in relics and monuments, stored in dusty vaults where the clock has stopped. In its

⁶ Zygmunt Bauman. “Space in the globalising world”, *Theoria*, June 2001. p. 17.

⁷ Popular Memory Group. “Popular memory: Theory, politics, method” in *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics*. Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwarz and David Sutton (eds) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982. p. 213.

⁸ Greil Marcus. *The Dustbin of History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995. p. 13.

fixed state, these histories occupy the centre and prohibit dissent from those on the fringes who are pushed so far to the edges that they disappear altogether.

History is written as we speak, its borders are mapped long before any of us open our mouths, and written history, which makes the common knowledge out of which our newspaper reports the events of the day, creates its own refugees, displaced persons, men and women without a country, cast out of time, the living dead: are you still alive, really?¹⁰

It is these citizens of refugee status, the living dead, whose experiences are erased from the past the very moment they are surpassed by time. This denial of entry into a history leaves little or no vestige of their existence. It relegates their subsistence to the domains of myth, heresy, rumour, fiction and folklore where they remain stigmatised as story – never a sanctioned truth. The inability to tether identity to a validated past erases disenfranchised groups from their own histories, perpetuating their silenced voices and dislocation from the cultural memoryscape. At its most destructive, it enacts a type of “cultural genocide”.¹¹ However, as has been maintained throughout this thesis, the use of disempowered sites (borne out of necessity) by disempowered groups allows a renegotiation of space and their social position within it. This enables subordinated narratives to intersect with dominant ones.

A music journalist, trained in the accepted protocol and literacy of the profession, publishes books or articles that become an endorsed account of a rock concert. It is popular memory that confers a relevance to the musings and experience of the fans on the stadium floor. Unlike authorised history, which decentres the intangible or immeasurable, popular memory embraces discarded sources of information. Statistics of crowd numbers are incapable of capturing an equivalent, or even remotely

⁹ David Lowenthal. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. p. 234.

¹⁰ Marcus, *The Dustbin of History*, p. 17.

vicarious, representation of what that event meant.¹² There is no trace of the liminality, the sound, the fury and the passion. History handles excess awkwardly.

The truthfulness of a narrative is less contingent upon its correspondence to the actualities of an objective world than upon “its ability to describe a possible world that one lives and experiences”.¹³ A sensory history permits recollections of the past that are not simply surgically retrieved from a repository, but can be *felt*. It is manifested in the physical sensation during the act of remembering. There has been the tendency to reduce history to logically-derived outcomes of past events. The result is that it can be quantitatively measured, determined and therefore reliably predicted in the future. It accords a scientific precision where experience is displaced “as far as possible outside the individual: on to instruments and numbers”.¹⁴ When it is relocated onto the individual, the authority granted by certainty and verification becomes suspect, and accepted truths begin to fray at the edges. The paragon of assumed unity, a shared ‘communal’ identity, reveals itself to be the by-products or after-effects of “feverish boundary drawing” rather than of organic, natural origins.¹⁵ When the illusion of a

¹¹ V. Lal. “Unhitching the disciplines: History and the social sciences in the new millenium”, *Futures*, Vol. 34, 2002. p. 12.

¹² For instance, in relation to the notoriety of the Hacienda club in Manchester in the 1980s, dominant recordings of this site tend to be event-focused, relaying changes in club policy, court room dramas and illegal activities occurring within the venue. Where memories attempt to provide alternative narratives of experiences at the Hacienda, these have been regarded as less credible and consigned as subhistories in popular culture and youth culture. An example of this experiential recount is Steve Redhead and Hillegonda Rietveld’s description of Friday nights at the Hacienda as being:

as though a goal was being scored for four hours on end; it was ‘steaming’. There was a chaotic noise of Acid House and Techno drumbeats, whistles and ecstatic shouts. Egos melted in the sweltering, frenzied heat of a mass of sweating bodies (1992, p. 72).

The immeasurability of the ‘steaming’, the chaotic noise and melting of egos in an environment as high on narcotics as it was on adrenaline presents an uncontrollable, variegated version of the Hacienda that cannot be allowed to enter dominant historical discourse. Popular memory of the club is excessive. It threatens to spill out of the narrow container that history has forced it into.

Steve Redhead and Hillegonda Rietveld. “Down at the club” in *The Hacienda Must Be Built!* Jon Savage (ed.) Woodford Green: International Music Publications, 1992. p. 72.

¹³ Lisa Roberts. *From Knowledge to Narrative*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997. p. 135.

¹⁴ Giorgio Agamben. *Infancy and History*. London: Verso, 1993. p. 17.

¹⁵ Bauman, “Space in the globalising world”, p. 17.

centrifugal stability and hegemonic mask becomes transparent, relations of power are at their most volatile and vulnerable. Popular memory, with its gravitation towards the intimacy of an experience, is the anathema to empiricism.

The messiness of popular memory starkly contrasts the neatness of chronological narrative with its apparatuses of methodology, historiography, footnotes and primary sources. In popular memory, time and space are living entities that are capable of change and negotiation. It gives validity to evanescent moments that are inevitably lost in the translation of experience to historiography where there is no adequate, nor appropriate, linguistic modality for its expression.

In *The Clock of the Long Now*, Stewart Brand employs the analogy of the freefall of skydiving to question the truism of the absolutism of time.¹⁶ In a dialogue with a Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Rosalind Picard wrote to Brand that:

Skydivers who mount cameras on their heads to capture the events in the air have to shoot at twice the speed at which they plan to play the video. This is necessary for things to look “normal”. The brain, emotionally high on adrenaline, runs much faster during freefall than when viewing the video afterward.¹⁷

Brand argues that memory is sensory, moving faster than our current thoughts can process. The industrial time imposed on the working body lacks a perfect synchronisation with the time that memory imposes on our recollection of events. The ‘Long Now’ testifies to the myth of the immutability of time. Its multiple dimensions are interlocked with corporeal interpretation and sensation. Time speeds up, slows down and does not conform along a unidirectional axis. Extending this concept of the

¹⁶ Stewart Brand. *The Clock of the Long Now*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.

¹⁷ Rosalind Picard quoted in Brand, *The Clock of the Long Now*, p. 24.

freefall, the adrenaline and energy invested into what may seem an insignificant, transient moment accords the Long Now with a type of tactile trace.

Too often, history has been equated solely with unchangeable facts of a past with severed links to the present. The future too is not exempt from the immutability of history. It no longer represents infinite possibilities, but is a narrative that is already written, projected and awaiting its fulfilment. This is not to imply that communities ignore what has gone before them. From the nation state to a sporting association, communities depend on the mapping of a “symbolically serviceable” past to derive an explanation of *where* they are now – the final destination – in a linear narrative.¹⁸ The image banks of the past do not function as storage systems or passive receptacles, but rather partake in the dynamic, reciprocal shaping of current times.¹⁹ In order for the past to be politically viable and to enable a praxis of resistance, it must be brought forward in time. If, as has been imagined in historiography, the past, present and future constitute separate end points of a disconnected temporal bridge, it is the mire of memory that swirls beneath. It is the incubus of the in-between that is offensive and dangerous to empiricism. Popular memory operates in these interstices, hovering in that area of overlap of the tripartite dimensions of time.

Hayden White states, “the relativity of the representation is a function of the language used to describe and thereby constitute past events as possible objects of explanation and understanding”.²⁰ As a result, the search for a singular truth is problematic, if not futile. Although history is composed of competing narratives vying for the coveted

¹⁸ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 228.

¹⁹ Raphael Samuel. *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture. Vol. 1 of Theatres of Memory*. London: Verso, 1994. p. x.

position of authenticity, not all occurrences are subject to a philosophical, cyclical banter yielding a ‘perhaps it happened, perhaps it did not’ stance. The reality of tragedies, such as mass genocide and civil war, should not be disputed. To do so would be irresponsible and unethical. Events *do* occur. It is in the variances of how that same event can be written, retold and forgotten that most effectively illuminates discourses of power and subordination in popular and populist memories. Those interpretations which enter officialdom or are swept into the dustbin of history are not arbitrary and innocent.²¹

Popular memory allows for the enunciation of alternative narratives, myths, flows of time and rememberings of space that are squeezed out of official history. By bridging the memory gaps, it reinserts those made “invisible, silent, or despised” by modernity into the landscape of the Now.²² Popular memory makes possible the revision, rewriting and reinterpretation of previously untouchable truths of societal antiquity generated by (nationalist) myth. It is the fluidity of memory (individual and collective) that becomes paramount for the disempowered to negotiate an identity from

²⁰ Hayden White. “Historical emplotment and the problem of truth” in *The Postmodern History Reader*. Keith Jenkins (ed.) London: Routledge, 1997. p. 392.

²¹ To illustrate the relativity of representations of historical occurrences, I will use the events of June 4, 1989 in Tiananmen Square, Beijing. After several weeks of peaceful protest largely by university students, martial law was implemented to dissipate the pro-democracy demonstration. The reality was that violent force was employed to remove the temporary tent city, resulting in the crushing of protesters under the tracks of tanks and death by gunfire. The descending of national and international media onto the city culminated in a melange of reportage. It ranged from the criticism of social chaos created by disrespectful youth who had desecrated one of the country’s most sacred cultural (and political) sites by transforming it into a virtual cesspool of stinking bodies and human excrement, to outcries that the basic human right to free speech had been violated. It is the former that has been entered into government proceedings as authorised history. The latter exists as unauthorised speculation and ‘perspectives’. It is regarded the folklore of defectors and their sympathisers. See: China News. “Tiananmen Square uprising: A perspective”. <http://www.sinomania.com/CHINANNEWS/tiananmen_perspective.htm#body> Accessed online on 23 April, 2003.

²² Judy Giles. “National countermemories: Narratives of gender, class, and modernity in women’s memories of mid-twentieth century Britain”, *Signs – Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 28 (11), 2002 (Autumn). p. 24.

their fragmented and fractured subjectivities.²³ Popular memory does not leave the past behind, but wedges it into the discursive and ideological framework of the present and future, where remembering becomes political.

Going, Going ... But Not Gone: The Representational Politics of Cinema

With the rapidly transformative effects of technology, the process of establishing history has undergone significant alterations, not only with regards to how it has been recorded, but also what has been recorded. The outdated mode of quill, ink and paper to aggregate facts and figures has given way to a wider array of visual and aural formats, most notably photographs, video footage and oral interviews which offer a palpable “pottery shard” of an existence.²⁴ Jon Savage warily comments, however, “there’s a whole history being constructed here, but I’m not sure that it’s mine”.²⁵ Savage’s observation confirms the paradox that certain artefacts and accounts are accepted as telling the indisputable truth of a community or historical event, but are not necessarily recognised and identified with. The hegemonic nature of dominant narratives is deceptively shrouded under the cloak of common knowledge, and (more dangerously) commonsense. This has the damaging effect of quashing dissonant or differing viewpoints. The question that needs to be asked is: Whose story is being told? What is at stake is not simply that marginal narratives remain silenced, but that they are not validated when they do surface.

²³ Giles, “National counter-memories”, p. 24.

²⁴ Jon Savage. *Time Travel*. London: Vintage, 1997. p. 2.

²⁵ Savage, *Time Travel*, p. 2.

Evidence purports that something did happen. However, the direct transcription of artefact to fact (and vice versa) cannot always account for the more personalised renditions of an event. The need for a more flexible paradigm that deals with the proto-linguistic – the sensory – must entail the integration of a representational politics into (re)constructions of the past where objects and events are permitted multiple narratives. Here, I focus on cinema as a form of ‘interpretative truth’.

The role of cinema in contemporary society is bound to popular memory and collective consciousness. Film refutes the disappearance of an experience, challenging the charge of absence and silence. While it is the non-fictional form of the documentary, with its supposedly God-like channelling of trustworthy information that qualifies for inclusion into history, it is the narrative filmic form that relays a popular memory where the residues of time can be found.²⁶

As a visual document, cinema occupies a position similar to that of the oral narrative within traditional historiography, which renders it as somewhat unreliable. Oral narratives move away from the “myth of objectivity” towards the importance of subjectivity and shifting positionalities of the text and readership.²⁷ Narratives are recognised as cultural constructions rather than commonsensical givens. The blurring of boundaries between private recollection and public history, and fact and fiction grants “cultural patterns of fantasy and denial” relevance in recounting the past.²⁸

These collective memories, fears and yearnings are often not recognised in official

²⁶ Within the genre itself, documentary operates within a hierarchy. Credibility is determined by factors such as the style of presentation, the topic under observation and the encouraged emotional reaction of the audience.

²⁷ Sherna Berger Gluck. “Reflections on oral history in the new millenium”, *Oral History Review*, Vol. 26 (2), 1999 (Summer/Fall). p. 4.

²⁸ Giles, “National counter-memories”, p. 24.

histories as they are consigned as expressions of unquantifiable individual subjectivity that are emotionally, rather than rationally, wrought. The rationale for this demarcation is not simply 'scientific' or for logic's sake. It maintains a legitimate division between those who maintain power and the oppressed. It can be clearly seen in police states where governmental ideologies are imposed, often through coercive measures, as certified truth and as the voice of public opinion, even though this may not be the case.²⁹

Writing in relation to the skewed visual representations of indigenous Americans, Dean Rader puts forth a convincing argument for the role of language, the power of words and their attached symbolic meanings as a form of engagement and defiance against misguided tropes that circulate as the normative.³⁰ In Rader's case, contemporary American Indian poetry functions as a weapon, a necessary linguistic resistance that protects cultural identity and sovereignty where physical resistance is not possible.³¹ Language performs the contradictions of simplified images of their aboriginality and their current statuses as modern savages who are acknowledged, but remain exiled to the fringes of a colonised, western civilisation.³²

Relocating the sites of cultural colonialism from "the empty expanse of the West to the empty expanse of television and movie screens" has continued to erect identities *for*

²⁹ Although memories are forged out of struggle and are open to contestation, they nevertheless point "to the power and pervasiveness of historical representations, their connections with dominant institutions and the part they play in winning consent and building alliances in the processes of formal politics" (Popular Memory Group, 1982, p. 207).

Popular Memory Group, "Popular memory", p. 207.

³⁰ Dean Rader. "Word as weapon: Visual culture and contemporary American Indian poetry", *MELUS*, Vol. 27 (3), 2002 (Fall). p. 148.

³¹ Rader, "Word as weapon", p. 148.

³² Rader, "Word as weapon", pp. 147-48.

native Indians, not *by* them.³³ Identity has been shaped in such a way that it bears no resemblance or connection whatsoever to their own memories of a self history. This is encapsulated by Rader's statement, "No Chippewa carries [John] Wayne's cultural currency because no Chippewa occupies the space of Wayne in contemporary visual culture".³⁴ Literacies for engagement with the iconography of the fringe-dwellers has become lost over time through the discrediting of private and collective sources of information and cultural practices and expressions, such as poetry, fictional stories and religious and spiritual exegeses. Oral narratives and popular memory reclaim these floating signifiers, imbining them with a cultural currency. This intersection of the private and public, the actual and mythic, permits the voices of those outside professional, academic and authorial circles who "control access to the means of public-action" a way to contribute to social narratives.³⁵ Oral narratives and a more personalised memory reinstate the spoken (as opposed to the written) and the transitory with significance. Without this validation, their presence would otherwise dissolve into nothingness in authorised history. Interviews, the stories passed down from one generation to the next, and the musings in a diary become meaningful and salient. The inscription of memory becomes paramount to the construction of experience, rather than as a side effect of experience.

In the monograph *Metaphors of Memory*, Douwe Draaisma maps the scientific journey to simulate the human mental activities of recording and recalling memories, using mechanical aids.³⁶ Beginning with the camera obscura almost five centuries ago, this apparatus – with its hole in the wall as a makeshift lens, mirrors and prisms – projected

³³ Rader, "Word as weapon", p. 149.

³⁴ Rader, "Word as weapon", p. 154.

³⁵ Popular Memory Group, "Popular memory", p. 207.

³⁶ Douwe Draaisma. *Metaphors of Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

images onto the surfaces of a darkened room that revealed an instantaneous, moving moment in time. “The camera obscura had no memory” as it could not preserve the moment.³⁷ It lacked durability and showed the fleeting and fragile nature of experience. History eluded it. It was not until the late seventeenth to early eighteenth century that the alliance of optics and chemistry enabled photography to achieve what had previously escaped the capabilities of the camera obscura. With early experimentation utilising an assortment of chemical mixtures that produced lasting (but rudimentary) impressions that approximated the contours of an object, to the later refined processes that recorded an almost perfect likeness of its subject, the photograph presented a breakthrough in mechanical memory. The ephemeral was mobilised in a permanent reproduction of a version of that moment.³⁸ Photography was proclaimed an invention of marvel, defined by Oliver Wendell Holmes as “*the mirror with a memory*”.³⁹ It was the discovery of cinema by the Lumiere brothers that advanced the idea of co-imbricating dimensions of time. Borrowing from the fundamentals of its progenitors, cinema permitted not only the preservation of images, but allowed them to move and be animate. It was a combination of stasis and movement that most closely resembled the notion of a memory trace.⁴⁰

Draaisma’s account of technological and photographic development provides an entry point into the metaphysical nature of the seeing-eye and mechanics of the camera as a metaphor for memory. Draaisma states, “impressions cannot see themselves, photographs cannot view themselves. Traces require a consciousness that interprets

³⁷ Draaisma, *Metaphors of Memory*, p. 109.

³⁸ Draaisma, *Metaphors of Memory*, pp. 110-19.

³⁹ Oliver Wendell Holmes. “The stereoscope and the stereograph” in *Classic Essays on Photography*. Alan Trachtenberg (ed.) New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980 (1859). p. 74. Italics in original text.

⁴⁰ Draaisma, *Metaphors of Memory*, p. 134.

them”.⁴¹ Cinema invites interpretations to make sense. It does not present a flawless impression that can be placed directly over a period, a space, a person or a group. It requires a narrative to give the metaphysical neutrality of this space and time meaning, within the diegetic filmic world and the nondiegetic environment of the audience.⁴² The popular memory of cinema is not a repository to be accessed and perfectly recalled, but must be actively reinterpreted. Unlike lifeless, cold monuments and associated commemorations that litter the shelves, glass cabinets and memorial sites of history which “underscore the power of dead-body politics in the reworking of memory”, cinema relies on the incomplete and disparate subjectivities of its actors and agents to construct memory and identity.⁴³ While the delayed, or even second-hand, memory of an experience may be regarded a weak proxy of a lived one, the precise moment when the emotive triggers off a *felt* remembering is when the past is retrieved and invested in the present (and future).

If the role of cinema has been appraised as a less than reliable source for academic writings of history, the role of youth cinema has received even greater adverse criticism, being branded as frivolous, lacking integrity and as pure entertainment fodder for ‘the masses’. I argue that it is the very nature of its serious fun that makes the genre so slippery, unable to be pinned down and restrained. The ability to reinvoke popular memories of the liminality of an event or era – be it the swinging 1960s of The Beatles, Woodstock and psychedelia, or the 1980s of Madonna and McDonalds – functions as a filler of the memory gaps in authorised historiography, where the adage of ‘gone but not forgotten’ stands steadfast. While dominant

⁴¹ Draaisma, *Metaphors of Memory*, p. 125.

⁴² Brian S. Osborne. “Landscapes, memory, monuments, and commemoration: Putting identity in its place”, *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, Vol. 33 (3), 2001. p. 42.

⁴³ Osborne, “Landscapes, memory, monuments, and commemoration”, p. 55.

discourses have recorded and catalogued youth in high art and literature as little adults in medieval times, through to the deviants of contemporary society (as evidenced by the burgeoning reportage of moral and social panics), the freezing of youth into an age and clearly demarcated slot in time has served to contain them in the past, codifying a singular reading.⁴⁴ This denies them a position of resistance. The dead cannot speak for themselves. Inertia becomes the cause for their demise.

I propose that it is the affective threads in cinema – its ability to respark certain corporeal responses that reconnects the past to the present tense – where fact becomes less important than the form (and formation) of representations and narratives.

Cinema, as a very real and tangible artefact, does not merely attest that *something* was once there. If power exists on a landscape, the diegesis of the teen film grants youth a time and space which can be named and claimed as their own. It performs struggles which speak in the literacy of the disempowered. It is the periphery “where the disorders of the centre are most manifest and where the future must be found”.⁴⁵

Cinema provides an ideal medium for re(p)laying nostalgic preoccupations that, intentionally or not, implicate the present through longing for the past. A regression to ‘better times’ acts to distance the difficulties that plague the Now – occupied by the disorderliness of youth – from the problems that were evident back Then. The greater the imperfections of the centre, the more layers of concealing make-up it requires, and the more urgent its efforts are to demonise those on the fringes.

Cinema enables the short-circuiting of dominant narratives by appealing to affective responses to achieve not only meaning, but a sense of meaningfulness. When a song,

⁴⁴ By literature, I refer not only to official recordings of youth in disciplines such as legal studies and

an item of fashion, the graffiti on a wall or the local street-corner hangout *means* more than the contents of a published register of events and invokes a collective consciousness, then history loses its command over the past. Historical facticity becomes permeable.⁴⁶ Identity no longer becomes imposed, but a negotiated construction that considers both the narrativising of experience and events. The rules of coercive interplay between history and identity become less relevant, and begin to buckle under the weight of memories liberated from the past.

What follows is a case study of one of the foremost figures in 1980s pre-Generation X cinema – that of American actor Molly Ringwald. In locating the politics of popular memory upon the cultural body of Ringwald (and her onscreen personas), the relation between youth, cinema, time and (the lack of) history will be investigated. Inherent in the politics of the remembering and the forgetting of Ringwald is a struggle over the identity of youth, and the articulation of the 1980s as a decade marked by a simultaneous mood of apathy and acceleration. Where is Molly Ringwald now? And does anyone really care?

sociology, but also fictional narratives and the pulp non-fictions of newspapers and magazines.

⁴⁵ Patrick Wright. *A Journey through the Ruins*. London: Flamingo, 1992. p. 357.

⁴⁶ The notion of shared memory as being “frequently impervious to historical facticity” is derived from an article by Lynda Boose, who argued that national and cultural myths and memories can override the actuality of events (2002, pp. 82-83). Specifically, the article proposes one explanation of how acts of rape and coercion carried out on a mass scale by Serbian militia were justified during the Bosnian War in the early 1990s. Boose states that the image of impalement as a torture tactic has remained a cauterised ‘truth’ of Turkish brutality against the Serbs, which contributed to the rampant violation of the bodies of ‘the enemy’. The origin of this nationalist narrative paradoxically originated from a single source, a 1945 novel by Ivo Andric called *The Bridge on the Drina*. In this fictional story set in the sixteenth century, a Serb peasant temporarily delays the construction of a Turkish bridge at Visegrad. This results in his death via impalement, which is graphically described in the novel. Valorised as a national hero, despite the invented scenario and character, this iconography has remained in the cultural memory where myth has superseded the facts to become its own truth. I draw upon the article as an extreme example of the power that a shared (in this case, cultural) memory can have upon public consciousness.

Lynda E. Boose. “Crossing the River Drina: Bosnia rape camps, Turkish impalement, and Serb cultural memory”, *Signs – Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 28 (11), 2002 (Autumn). pp. 82-83.

Remembering Molly: Moving Memories

Before there was Molly Ringwald, there was her precursor – Sandra Dee. Starring in films such as *The Reluctant Debutante*, *Tammy and the Doctor* and *Gidget*, the actor epitomised the sexually pristine girl-next-door.⁴⁷ She was a perfect specimen of a shiny, 1950s America that prided itself on its new-found stability after the ravages of World War II.⁴⁸ Dee's projected image was a façade that concealed a traumatic private life scarred by incest from the age of eight, alcoholism, anorexia, ill health and a troubled adult life.⁴⁹ While Dee's later roles would cast her as the sexual tease or nymphet in films such as *If A Man Answers* and *Take Her, She's Mine*, the Dee mythology of the chaste adolescent stubbornly persisted.⁵⁰ Despite the eventual leakage of Dee's personal life into the media and her overt sexual performances in motion pictures, it is her embodiment of cultural contradictions that poses a particularly uncomfortable subject which has been left out of history.

⁴⁷ *The Reluctant Debutante*. Directed by Vincente Minnelli. Written by Julius J. Epstein and William Douglas Home. MGM, 1958.

Tammy and the Doctor. Directed by Harry Keller. Written by Oscar Brodney. Universal Studios, 1963.
Gidget. Directed by Paul Wendkos. Written by Gabrielle Upton. Based on a novel by Frederick Kohner. Columbia Tristar Pictures, 1963.

It is important to note that the Gidget franchise was firmly entrenched in conservative patriarchal relations that restricted (teenage) female agency. Ilana Nash writes, "No matter which path [Gidget] follows, her journey inevitably leads her back to the grasp – and the embrace – of the father. You see, she has absolutely nowhere else to go" (2002, p. 355).

Ilana Nash. "'Nowhere else to go': Gidget and the construction of adolescent femininity", *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 2 (3), 2002. p. 355.

⁴⁸ See:

Georganne Scheiner. "Look at me, I'm Sandra Dee: Beyond white teen icon", *Frontiers*, Vol. 22 (2), 2001. pp. 87-106.

⁴⁹ Sandra Dee. "Learning to live again", *People Weekly*, Vol. 35 (10), 18 March, 1991. Accessed on Expanded Academic Database 29 April, 2003.

⁵⁰ *If A Man Answers*. Directed by Henry Levin. Written by Richard Morris. Based on a novel by Winifred Wolfe. Universal Pictures, 1962.

Take Her, She's Mine. Directed by Henry Koster. Written by Henry Ephron and Phoebe Ephron. Twentieth Century Fox, 1963.

Georganne Scheiner points out that the Tammy films which propelled Dee into the public eye as the innocent were aberrations, unrepresentative of a career in which the actor was portrayed more often than not as a problematic youth with sexual innuendo inflected in her performances (2001, pp. 90, 92).

Scheiner, "Look at me, I'm Sandra Dee", pp. 90, 92.

Dee can be read as a kind of “cultural body” because of what she reveals about the particular historical period that produced her. She embodies the cultural contradictions of the 1950s.⁵¹

Frozen as the eternal, archetypal virgin, Dee functioned as myth. Roland Barthes defines myth as a semiological system of communication – “speech justified *in excess*”.⁵² It naturalises history through the distortion (not concealment) of the meaning of a sign.⁵³ According to Barthes, the “function of myth is to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a haemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence”.⁵⁴ Emptied of meaning, Sandra Dee as signifier was filled with the ambitions of a society which desperately clung to the images of the smiling nuclear family, the white picket fences, the development of housing estates and the glow of a new America, to stave off the relatively recent memories of post-war depression. The perseverance of this 1950s icon is even more telling in terms of why Dee is needed in history. The figure of Sandra Dee perpetuates a wider social myth of the golden era of the 1950s *then*, and is a reminder of how idyllic society could be *now* had it not been for the disruptive effects of 1960s liberalism.⁵⁵

Dee’s body was never her own. It was a tool for social critique. The nostalgic saturation of Dee broke the past from the present, creating a generational divide where the former morphed into a more sensible, exotic and pleasant place to reside in. History appropriated Dee as a disembodied text that filled a space, but was never permitted to actually occupy it by mythologising her existence. She reassures that the

⁵¹ Scheiner, “Look at me, I’m Sandra Dee”, p. 88.

This romantic idealism was promoted through the glamorous star system of classical Hollywood cinema.

⁵² Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. London: Jonathon Cape, 1972 (1957). pp. 109, 130. Italics in original text.

⁵³ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 129.

⁵⁴ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 143.

glorious 1950s of stately elms, drive-in movies and gas station attendants really did happen. As Georganne Scheiner comments, the “Dee trope is the repository of a lie”.⁵⁶ The story of a dysfunctional middle-aged woman who was lonely, depressed and psychologically damaged has no place in favoured narratives. The neighbourhood was not large enough for the Beavers and unstable Dees of the era. The Sandra Dee of the Now never existed. She was erased by the perpetual image of a beautiful, innocent, young girl who replays in time and history like a broken record on a continuous loop. America’s little darling was never allowed to grow up because such a recognition rips away Dee’s ideological bandaid, revealing the realness of social, cultural and political psychoses and flaws. Echoing Giorgio Agamben’s assertion that “[t]he real subject of history is the State”, it was never really *about* Sandra Dee.⁵⁷ Although she may have entered anthologies of cinema, commemorated as a figure of the times, the erecting of a metaphoric memorial of Tammy appears more as an early tombstone in hindsight. Like a preserved specimen, Dee’s visage remains in public consciousness as an embodiment of a still-life spectre, disconnected from the present and buried in a necropolis of nostalgia. Although her career was going somewhere, Dee herself was going nowhere.

While Sandra Dee was the pinup girl for the 1950s, the 1980s belonged to Molly Ringwald who was one of the leading actors in American youth cinema. Born in Sacramento in 1968, Ringwald began her career at age four when she “belted out a

⁵⁵ This disruptive liberalism includes the sobering realisation of the consequences of American involvement in the Vietnam War, the reactionary sexual revolution, protests against the government, and the Watergate affair which was the sledgehammer to public confidence in the early 1970s.

⁵⁶ Scheiner, “Look at me, I’m Sandra Dee”, p. 102.

Scheiner provides a comprehensive discussion of the Dee myth through fan magazines and media reports.

⁵⁷ Agamben, *Infancy and History*, p. 99.

blues standard” on a Californian State Fair stage.⁵⁸ Under the guidance of her father, a blind jazz musician, she recorded an album at age six.⁵⁹ A regular in theatre productions and with guest performances on television, Molly Ringwald had acquired an impressive body of work by the time she was in her early teens.⁶⁰ At age fourteen, the actor won a crucial part in Paul Mazursky’s *The Tempest*, which earned her a Golden Globe nomination and acclaim, but most importantly it captured the attention of the filmmaker John Hughes.⁶¹ In collaboration with Hughes (in the capacities of director, producer and scriptwriter), their joint ventures churned out in succession three seminal films about, and for, youth. They were *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Pretty in Pink* (1986).⁶² These films would hail Ringwald as the quintessential teen queen onscreen and offscreen.⁶³ The actor became a household name for a youth market that crowned her the “model modern teenager”.⁶⁴ During her three year reign at the multiplex, the ‘Molly Ringwald phenomenon’ escalated to the heights of Shirley Temple and her forerunner, Sandra Dee, instigating a constant media feeding frenzy. Her image saturated billboards, magazine covers, cinema and

⁵⁸ Todd Gold. “Molly Ringwald – The sweet smell of success”, *Cosmo Magazine*, 1984. <<http://www.mollyringwald.co.uk/article15.html>> Accessed online on 29 April, 2003.

⁵⁹ Richard Corliss. “Well, hello Molly! Meet Hollywood’s new teen princess”, *Time*, Vol. 127, 26 May, 1986. Accessed on Expanded Academic Database 9 April, 2003.

⁶⁰ Corliss, “Well, hello Molly!”.

⁶¹ *The Tempest*. Directed and written by Paul Mazursky. Columbia Tristar Pictures, 1982.

⁶² *Sixteen Candles*. Directed and written by John Hughes. Universal Pictures, 1984.

The Breakfast Club. Directed and written by John Hughes. Universal Pictures, 1985.

Pretty in Pink. Directed by Howard Deutch. Written by John Hughes. Paramount Pictures, 1986.

⁶³ Ringwald’s status as the 1980s teen queen was anchored not only to her formidable presence onscreen and clout within the filmmaking industry, but also her reputation as a redhead with a quick temper in her personal life. In one interview, the actor openly admitted, “I really have a temper ... I’m a big door slammer, and I hang up the phone a lot” (Hutchings, 1986). In another interview, Ringwald confessed, “my moods are like up and down. I cry at the drop of a hat” (Jarvis, 1984).

Molly Ringwald quoted in David Hutchings. “Molly Ringwald goes to the head of the teen class with *Pretty in Pink*, but she’d rather play grown up”, *People Weekly*, Vol. 25, 24 March, 1986. Accessed on Expanded Academic Database 9 April, 2003.

Molly Ringwald quoted in Jeff Jarvis. “*Sixteen Candles* sweet teens graduate to stardom by acting their own ages”, *People Weekly*, Vol. 21, 4 June, 1984. Accessed on Expanded Academic Database 9 April, 2003.

⁶⁴ Corliss, “Well, hello Molly!”.

television screens, and spilled onto the streets with devoted fans, the ‘Ringlets’, imitating Ringwald’s punk-flapper fashion and flaming mop top.⁶⁵

Sixteen Candles was the simple tale of a teenager whose sixteenth birthday is forgotten by her family. It proved hugely successful financially, marking Ringwald’s debut into teendom in the lead role as the distraught Samantha Baker. The balance between the goofball, comic nature of the film and its sensitivity to the plight of misunderstood youth struck an emotional chord with its principally teenage viewership. Hughes secured an audience for future projects. Ringwald was accorded instant fame, metamorphosed into an adolescent ingénue whose name alone was a “bankable box-office attraction”.⁶⁶

She breezes into Chicago’s highest-snoot restaurant, Le Perroquet, in a flowing white antique dress, with a grey derby covering her orange-unto-red ringlets ... Annie Hall goes uptown. Even in this room of minks and plastic money, heads turn when she enters. She is a presence, a star. But she is only 16 years old, just a kid.⁶⁷

The Breakfast Club took as its premise a torturously boring day of Saturday detention, bringing together five characters from the separatist echelons of the high school hierarchy. The tropes of the “brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess and criminal”, as described by the character of Brian (Anthony Michael Hall), are interrogated and surrendered.⁶⁸ Façades are broken down and confessions made over the course of the day. By the film’s conclusion, each character has undergone a revelation. Each becomes committed to building a more egalitarian school community. In the role of the prom queen Claire Standish, Molly Ringwald’s portrayal of the vulnerability of youth solidified her as an icon of her times (and age). *The Breakfast Club*’s welcomed

⁶⁵ Corliss, “Well, hello Molly!”.

⁶⁶ John Hughes quoted in Corliss, “Well, hello Molly!”.

⁶⁷ Corliss, “Well, hello Molly!”.



Figure 1: The confessional high school drama of *The Breakfast Club* (1985). Claire (Molly Ringwald), Brian (Anthony Michael Hall), Andy (Emilio Estevez), Allison (Ally Sheedy) and Bender (Judd Nelson).

reception at the movies hailed the arrival of a new generation of talented actors dubbed the Brat Pack, but also testified to the dynamism of the Hughes-Ringwald partnership.

The last of the Hughes-Ringwald triptych was *Pretty in Pink*, the vehicle to showcase Ringwald's acting prowess and celebrity power. Although promotional material alluded to the onscreen chemistry and rising talent of its youthful cast, it was Ringwald's name in the credits that filled the cinemas and her performance that would indelibly become synonymous with the film.⁶⁹ As a student on the outskirts of the popular school circle and from a working-class background, Ringwald's character of Andie Walsh continued to weave a strong theme of stubborn determination, confusion and optimism that had become her trademark in the Hughes oeuvre. She was the actor "who made teen-angst the boom industry of the 80s".⁷⁰ The trials and tribulations of teendom attained a seriousness and social validity that had been immortalised in the

⁶⁸ Brian in *The Breakfast Club*.

⁶⁹ At the time of production, Ringwald was the most established and recognisable of the young actors in the cast.

⁷⁰ Chris Parry. "Molly Ringwald – A cut above", *The Hartford Courant*, 26 August, 2001. <<http://www.mollyringwald.co.uk/article8.html>> Accessed online on 29 April, 2003.

1950s films of James Dean, but had become diluted with a spate of lewd teen film predecessors in the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as *National Lampoon's Animal House*, *The Joy of Sex* and *Revenge of the Nerds*.⁷¹

The popularity of the Hughes-Ringwald films stemmed from their acknowledgement of issues that appealed directly to young people and their representations of the frailty of youth. The narratives addressed “high school insecurities, prom politics, graduation anxieties and popularity”.⁷² They juxtaposed the struggling working class with the progeny of wealthy Baby Boomers, and explored the guilt and pain associated with hallway harassment. The movies presented a mixture of the liminality and craziness typical of the youth genre, grounded in the familiar experiences of “teendom’s silent majority of average, middle-class suburban kids”.⁷³

for Hughes the bell is always ringing on the first day of class. “He has an incredible memory – visual, audio, emotional – of his own high school years”, notes James Spader, who played the deliciously haughty preppie Steff in *Pretty in Pink*. “He’s very much in touch with the adolescent part of himself”, [Ally] Sheedy says. It’s a golden touch.⁷⁴

The symbiosis between the films’ characters, their situations and the audience members propelled the performers as the archetypal teenagers, enabling Molly Ringwald to reach the zenith of her stardom. At her pinnacle, Ringwald had become the poster girl for a generation of youth and exerted impressive influence within the film industry. At eighteen years of age, she had signed a lucrative contract with United

⁷¹ *National Lampoon's Animal House*. Directed by John Landis. Written by Harold Ramis, Douglas Kenney and Chris Miller. Universal Studios, 1978.
The Joy of Sex. Directed by Martha Coolidge. Written by Kathleen Rowell. Based on a book by Alex Comfort. Paramount Pictures, 1984.
Revenge of the Nerds. Directed by Jeff Kanew. Written by Jeff Buhai, Tim Metcalfe, Miguel Tejada-Flores and Steve Zacharias. Twentieth Century Fox, 1984.

⁷² David Daley. “How could we forget?”, *The Fargo Forum*, 8 April, 1999.
<<http://www.mollyringwald.co.uk/article2.html>> Accessed online on 29 April, 2003.

⁷³ Corliss, “Well, hello Molly!”.

⁷⁴ Corliss, “Well, hello Molly!”.

Ally Sheedy was cast in the role of Allison, the recluse, in *The Breakfast Club*.

Artists that allowed her the freedom to virtually control development of her own projects.⁷⁵ Hughes himself wrote scripts specifically for the actor, “tailor[ing] the characters to her precocious range of emotions”.⁷⁶ In an interview with Hughes conducted by Ringwald, the pair discusses the origins of their third film together.

Ringwald: How did you write the story of *Pretty in Pink*?

Hughes: You told me about the Psychedelic Furs’ song.

Ringwald: About “Pretty in Pink”? I just love that song.

Hughes: And the title stuck in my head. I thought about your predisposition toward pink. I wrote *Pretty in Pink* the week after we finished *Sixteen Candles*. I so desperately hate to end these movies that the first thing I do when I’m done is write another one.⁷⁷

Regarded as a “Hollywood heavyweight”, Ringwald had earned an estimated one million dollars for her three films with Hughes (considered a hefty sum for such a young performer in the mid-1980s) and was predicted to profit even more for her future ventures.⁷⁸ She was not an untouchable figure that young people merely emulated or desired, but one within who they saw inflections of their own growing (up) pains. Sought after by some of the industry’s most influential personalities, it seemed the actor was destined to continue her successful career into the 1990s.

Molly Ringwald could do no wrong – that is, until she grew up. First, she lost her virginity, became pregnant and then was blissfully wed. I am referring to the films *The Pick Up Artist* (1987), *For Keeps* (1988) and *Betsy’s Wedding* (1990) respectively.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Hutchings, “Molly Ringwald goes to the head of the class with *Pretty in Pink*”.

⁷⁶ Corliss, “Well, hello Molly!”.

⁷⁷ Molly Ringwald. “Molly Ringwald interviews John Hughes”, *Seventeen Magazine*, 1986. <<http://www.mollyringwald.co.uk/seventeenint.html>> Accessed online on 29 April, 2003. That the song by the Psychedelic Furs triggered the film *Pretty in Pink* harks back to an earlier argument made in Chapter One of the synergy between the youth experience and the commodity culture of cinema and music.

⁷⁸ Jerry Lazar. “Breaking away”, *US Magazine*, August 1990.

<<http://www.mollyringwald.co.uk/article14.html>> Accessed online on 29 April, 2003.

Corliss, “Well, hello Molly!”.

⁷⁹ *The Pick Up Artist*. Directed and written by James Toback. Twentieth Century Fox, 1987.

For Keeps. Directed by John G. Avildsen. Written by Denise DeClue and Tim Kazurinsky. Columbia Tristar Pictures, 1988.

Betsy’s Wedding. Directed and written by Alan Alda. Touchstone Pictures, 1990.

Ringwald had matured from young love and prom dresses to dealing with the mafia, battling post-partum depression and wedding gown dramas. Even when still portrayed as a teenager, the roles the actor pursued (dis)located her outside of the insulated high school zone. In *Fresh Horses*, Ringwald was cast as Jewel, a teenage bride who engages in an illicit affair with a college student.⁸⁰ Matt was played by her *Pretty in Pink* co-star Andrew McCarthy. The setting was a barren, rural wasteland that removed the characters from the familiarity of a pink bedroom or the interior of a grand ballroom. Ringwald and McCarthy reprise the roles (and relationship) of the working-class girl from the wrong side of the tracks and the privileged preppie. The film goes so far as to make a direct reference to *Pretty in Pink* when Matt gives Jewel a pink scarf as a gift. Jewel however, is not the same sweet sixteen year old that was Samantha Baker. Her backstory reveals that the incestuous advances of a drunkard stepfather forced her to marry an older man to escape her home, only to discover that her husband is no better. Jewel does not attend school. She whittles her days away, aimlessly wandering around dilapidated buildings and sites. Thrust into a premature adulthood, Jewel's experiences and knowledge isolated her from the majority of youths who watched the film. Molly Ringwald was no longer the model teenager.

After *Pretty in Pink*, Ringwald's films tended to be marginally profitable. None were embraced with the same feverish fervour that had greeted the Hughes-Ringwald repertoire. A bitter parting from Hughes after *Pretty in Pink* signified Ringwald's severance of the umbilical cord from the man who had made her the face of misunderstood adolescence in the 1980s, completing the actor's impatience to graduate

⁸⁰ *Fresh Horses*. Directed by David Anspaugh. Written by Larry Ketron. Columbia Tristar Pictures, 1988.

from the teenage years.⁸¹ Just as rapidly as her ascension to fame, three years later she was pronounced a “tepid has-been”.⁸² As Jerry Lazar points out in an article, “like most Brat Packers who seemed destined to rule Hollywood in the Nineties – [Ringwald] has shown herself incapable of making the transition from teen queen to leading lady”.⁸³ Despite a consistent stream of employment in film and television from the onset of her career to the present, the media’s reportage of Ringwald’s movements (professionally and privately) have tended to hark back to her Hughes heydays. In relation to *For Keeps*, Richard Corliss questioned whether “Molly Ringwald still has to wonder: Will they love me for keeps the way they did when I was in the Pink?”⁸⁴ In a particularly scathing commentary on her fashion sense, critics censured:

“I think she’s having an identity crisis because she’s outgrown all her clothes” says Ilene Beckerman. Adds costumer Penny Rose: “She’s confused. She’ll have to go back to the ‘80s”.⁸⁵

Ringwald no longer seemed to be making history. She appeared to have *become* history. Arrested in adolescence, she was frozen in time to perpetually live in the 1980s. In retrospect, the promotional poster slogan of *Sixteen Candles* – “It’s the time of your life that may last a lifetime” – begins to sound like an ominous premonition.

There are socio-political implications involved in the rendering and remembering of Molly Ringwald as the personification of an era and society. Authorised history has conveniently written her past over the pages of her present. In doing so, Ringwald risks becoming the unknowing protégé of Sandra Dee, destined to be a teenager for eternity. I explore how the actor has been appropriated as a disembodied text to serve

⁸¹ “Molly Ringwald: Townies”, *People Weekly*, Vol. 46 (10), 2 September, 1996. p. 48.

⁸² Lazar, “Breaking away”.

⁸³ Lazar, “Breaking away”.

⁸⁴ Richard Corliss. “Night of the falling stars: Some familiar faces try to rediscover their old box-office magic”, *Time*, Vol. 131 (3), 18 January, 1988. Accessed on Expanded Academic Database 9 April, 2003.

the needs of a particular historical narrative, and how popular memory renegotiates this account.

History's recording of events writes a narrative of the past that is selective and seductively commonsensical and logical. It works most effectively when it can be located onto a palpable trace. In the films of John Hughes, this was conferred onto Molly Ringwald as a cultural body. History's appropriation of Ringwald perpetuates a myth of the 1980s of the way it never really was, doused with nostalgic affection. The actor has become the vessel for a cultural fantasy of denial that had already begun to crack during that decade, and would worsen throughout the 1990s. The 1980s of Molly Ringwald is remembered as 'better times' when the concerns of youth were patronisingly limited to issues such as wardrobe decisions and fads.

What was it about the 80's that made it so fab? Was it the music, the attitude? No, it was the fashion ... Only the 80's could spawn such inimitable fashion as legwarmers, skinny ties and black t-shirts with a faux tuxedo or skeleton x-ray on the front. There was the Swatch addiction, scrunchies, fluoro everything and shoulder pads which, in most cases, were bigger than silicon implants.⁸⁶

As the virtuous teenager in the Hughes films, Ringwald was a reassurance against the culture of excess and hedonism that had become associated with the 1980s.⁸⁷ Where the Yellow Peril once threatened the nation state, the paranoia of the AIDS epidemic supplanted this panic onto the private body. The legacy of political and economic restructuring by the Reagan Administration had fostered an ethos of mass gluttony, fuelling rampant consumerism in the face of societal denigration.⁸⁸ The relentless pursuit of personal wealth had taken precedence over wider social issues at a local, national and international level that included:

⁸⁵ "Ten worst dressed: Molly Ringwald", *People Weekly*, Vol. 46 (12), 16 September, 1999. p. 92.

⁸⁶ Marianna Longmire. "80's Fashion: Lest we forget", *Grok*, Issue 7, 1998. p. 12.

⁸⁷ In all of the three Hughes-Ringwald films, the actor is never shown engaging in sexual activities. At most, the audience is privy to a kiss.

the Iran-Contra scandal; the staggering annual budget deficits; the government's slow response to the AIDS crisis; the crack cocaine wars that turned inner cities into shooting galleries; the debacle in Beirut, Lebanon, that left 211 U.S. Marines dead; the growing gap between rich and poor; the doubling of the nation's incarceration rate.⁸⁹

The spiritual emptiness of the go-go 1980s and dictum that "Greed is good", encapsulated in Oliver Stone's *Wall Street*, extended beyond the world of executive mergers and acquisitions.⁹⁰ It deepened into the sanctuary of the family and home. This was explored in the 1987 film adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis' novel *Less Than Zero*.⁹¹ In arrant contrast to the adolescent romanticism in Hughes' films, *Less Than Zero* plunged its youth into a world of opulent Beverly Hills mansions, expensive convertible cars, fatalistic orgies of drugs, meaningless sex and the dark underbelly of gold-collar crime. The story comes to a nightmarish resolve when Julian (Robert Downey, Jr.), a hopelessly addicted junkie, dies in the arms of his two closest companions while escaping from his drug dealer. Clay (Andrew McCarthy) and Blair (Jami Gertz) reject their depraved self-indulgences of the fast lifestyle, but only after their loss has been the greatest and their suffering is inevitable. The series *21 Jump Street* capitalised upon the fears of the accelerated aging of the young.⁹² The narratives centred around a team of undercover police officers who infiltrate high schools and colleges, posing as students. They unveiled a world that was not immune to narcotics, homosexual bashings, teenage prostitution, rape against students by teachers, arson, gang-related violence and murder. Youth were no longer in danger, but more likely the ones to be dangerous. The menace was no longer behind enemy lines. It was on domestic soil.

⁸⁸ Carl M. Cannon. "The '80s vs. the '90s", *National Journal*, Vol. 32 (16), 15 April, 2000. p. 1189.

⁸⁹ Cannon, "The '80s vs. the '90s", p. 1187.

⁹⁰ *Wall Street*. Directed by Oliver Stone. Written by Oliver Stone and Stanley Weiser. Twentieth Century Fox, 1987.

⁹¹ *Less Than Zero*. Directed by Marek Kaniévská. Screenplay written by Harley Peyton. Based on a novel by Bret Easton Ellis. Twentieth Century Fox, 1987.

The Time of Your Life: Stretching the Moment

The John Hughes oeuvre depicted a 1980s that resisted the foreboding nihilism that permeated the public and private domains. As with Sandra Dee, Molly Ringwald became the corporeal collateral of youth and the nation state of the 1980s, despite escalating social problems and civic concerns. In a time when sexual intercourse ran the risk of disease, emotionless trysts or even death, Ringwald consummated her romantic love with an innocent kiss. When the collapse of the nuclear family continued to burgeon, Ringwald functioned as the unwavering centre.⁹³ In the context of widening disparities between the prosperous few and economically-disadvantaged many, Ringwald's characters reconciled the gaping chasms through social mobility.

The desire for a utopian society in the Hughes collective has often been misconstrued as escapism, debasing the politics practised by youth as trivial quips. The result has been the perpetuation of a lazy (lack of) articulation of their cultural spaces. In the 1987 film *Some Kind of Wonderful* (which was written by John Hughes), Keith (Eric Stoltz) spends his college fund savings to purchase a pair of diamond earrings for the most desirable girl at his school, after Amanda (Lea Thompson) agrees to accompany him on a date.⁹⁴ Keith's working-class father, Cliff (John Ashton), furiously

⁹² *21 Jump Street*. Created by Patrick Hasburgh and Stephen J. Cannell. Fox Studios. Originally aired on 12 April, 1987 (USA). The series ran for five seasons.

⁹³ In *Sixteen Candles*, the chaotic environment of the home differentiates between Samantha's rational nature and the scatter-brained family members as they prepare for her older sister's wedding. In *Pretty in Pink*, Andie lives with her unemployed father (Harry Dean Stanton). From the film's onset, she is established as the steady centre of the family, assuming an almost maternal role. It is she who must urge her father to meet his responsibilities as a parent, and must help him overcome the pain of his wife abandoning the family. In *The Breakfast Club*, as the majority of the narrative takes place within the premises of the school grounds, Claire's interaction with her family is minimal. However, from the brief discussion the character has with her father (Tim Gamble) in the film's opening sequence, he is portrayed as ignorantly detached from his daughter. When Claire complains to him that her consignment to Saturday detention is absurd, he retorts with, "I'll make it up to you. Honey, ditching class to go shopping doesn't make you a defective. Have a good day".

⁹⁴ *Some Kind of Wonderful*. Directed by Howard Deutch. Written by John Hughes. Paramount Pictures, 1987.

reprimands his son for this decision as he attempts to reduce him to an ignorant teenager.

Cliff: You're only eighteen years old for Christ's sake!

Keith: Then I'm nineteen, then I'm twenty. When does my life belong to me? Dad, listen. I'm going out with a girl tonight and she's beautiful and everybody's in love with her, and she's going out with me. Get it? See, in the eyes of most people around here, I'm a nothing. And so I don't start agreeing with them, I'm gonna go through with this date. I want to show this girl that I'm as good as anybody else ... Dad, didn't you ever have guys at your school that didn't fit in?

Cliff: Yeah, of course.

Keith: Yeah? Well, I'm one of those guys.

Cliff: I thought things were going okay for you.

Keith: Yeah, well I like art. I work in a gas station. My best friend is a tomboy. These things don't fly too well in the American high school.⁹⁵

The social alienation of the protagonist becomes manifest in his livelihood and leisure. Keith's greasy work overalls and fondness for painting become signifiers for his second-class citizenship and exclusion from the centre, which is denoted as the influential, preppie school clique. The gravity of hierarchies between the powerful and marginalised, and the wealthy and working class are played out within the realm of the confessional date and popular culture. The intensity of the moment of being a teenager in love, angered and confused – these become the tangible and real for Keith, supplanting the ethereal dream of a future manufactured by his father. It is a radical, political agenda to live in the Now. The culmination of teen narratives at a keg party, the prom, or the clandestine rendezvous for the meeting of lovers, do not just capture a fleeting moment in youth, but a splinter of time that lasts a lifetime. Michael Schaffer wryly comments:

thanks to Hughes and his colleagues, I knew exactly what to expect when I moved home at age 14. High school would be big and crucial; my standing in its hierarchy of jocks and brains and losers would determine my happiness. Like any true, red-blooded American kid, I knew I would care desperately about the football game, the dance afterwards, and the big, drunken party to follow. Hey – I'd watched the instructional video.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Cliff and Keith in *Some Kind of Wonderful*.

⁹⁶ Michael Schaffer. "No more fast times at Ridgmont High", *The Washington Monthly*, January 2001. p. 28.

While Schaffer later admits that his high school experience resembled little of the ‘instructional’ movies of John Hughes, the statement does emphasise the cultural currency of the films and the pedagogy of popular culture. In the shared space of the high school, fantasy and reality collide in such a way that they become indistinguishable. The excessiveness of sensory history in film is given a modality for its expression and relevance in popular memory – the nervous chewing of a lip, the disapproving shake of a head, hands thrown up in frustration, the ecstasy of the first kiss, the anxiety of graduation. The experiences are invested with a profundity that cannot be adequately relayed by words on paper.

The Hughes films practise a micro-politics. Employing the high school as a compressed microcosm of the wider social framework where the central agency is transferred from adults to adolescents, the traversal, transcendence or dissolution of boundaries permits an ideal social mobility and “reconciliation of diverse bodies”.⁹⁷ Here, the nerds can be hailed the heroes (*Weird Science*), the oppressive bureaucracy of officialdom (embodied by the pompous, vindictive principal) can be subverted in the name of freedom (*Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*), and the artistic recluse can befriend the most popular girl at school (*Some Kind of Wonderful*).⁹⁸ Like the glorious pandemonium of the carnival, the boundaries between authority and the disempowered are transgressed. The malleability of the high school structure is a precursor of societal change. In a memorable scene from *Pretty in Pink*, Andie confronts Blaine (Andrew McCarthy) in the school hallway to discuss the prom. When she demands an answer

⁹⁷ Lesley Speed. “Pastel romances: The teen films of John Hughes”, *Metro*, No. 113/14, 1998. p. 104.

⁹⁸ *Weird Science*. Directed and written by John Hughes. Universal Pictures, 1985.

Ferris Bueller’s Day Off. Directed and written by John Hughes. Paramount Pictures, 1986.



Figure 2: Andie (Molly Ringwald) and prom anxieties in *Pretty in Pink* (1986).

as to whether he will escort her or not, he mumbles that he had forgotten a previous engagement.

Andie: You're a liar. You're a filthy, fucking no-good liar! You don't have the guts to tell me the truth ... You're ashamed to be seen with me ... You're ashamed to go out with me. You're afraid. You're terrified your god damn rich friends won't approve!⁹⁹

Beating Blaine against the locker, Andie is the vision of the frustration of the disenfranchised. In her rage, she gives voice to the silenced. No longer humiliated, Andie has become a siphon of social truths. Prom politics becomes a point of reference for global politics, where youth are granted a salience that validates not only their existence but also their amniotic surrounds of popular culture.¹⁰⁰ Music and fashion are not merely commodities, but metaphysical skins grafted onto the body. As Meaghan Morris points out, culture has “supplanted politics and religion as the dominant heading under which the social and moral issues of the day are played

⁹⁹ Andie in *Pretty in Pink*.

¹⁰⁰ Amy Best's *Prom Night* provides a cultural critique of the struggles, resistance and relations of power that exist in the organisation and experience of the prom. See: Amy L. Best. *Prom Night: Youth, Schools, and Popular Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 2000.

out”.¹⁰¹ Described as a “retro Time Warp that tosses all previous decades in a Cuisinart and purees them”, the 1980s functioned as a virtual crossroads in time.¹⁰² In *Pretty in Pink*, Andie dresses in clothing that layers the vintage over the modern. She creates an originally designed prom gown from outdated second-hand garments, one of which is clearly from the 1960s, that refuses to be comfortably categorised as definitively 1980s fashion.

[Andie] takes Iona’s prom dress and the lurid pink gift from her father and, with her artistic bent, converts them into something that is less a garment than a statement: a cool, pink, fuck you, a sexy suit of armor.¹⁰³

The character’s wearing of fragmented pop couture and eras is derived less so from financial necessity than the remaking of social identity. In this decade of meta-cultures, the past and present congeal into an eclectic bazaar of styles where in(ter)vention of commodity culture signifies infinite possibilities for transformation.

The ‘Ringwald phase’ of the 1980s carries such emotional gravity for the youth of then and now, that she has transcended her own existence to become a rare phenomenon – an image that encapsulates a moment so deeply that it has literally shaped history and is crucial to how it is remembered. Popular narratives of the decade can be traced through the trajectory of a Ringwald-Hughes plot like a geographical map. Ringwald was the crucible of teendom, embodying the rich and poor, the strong and the weak, the decisive and the confused, the humiliated and imposing. It is a testimonial to her charisma and influence. Her incessant media presence as the angst-ridden teenager was ‘normal’ enough to be accredited as the every-adolescent, yet enigmatically

¹⁰¹ Personal communication with Meaghan Morris (21 May, 1997). Mark Davis. *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism. Second Edition*. St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1999 (1997). p. 30.

¹⁰² Corliss, “Well, hello Molly!”.

¹⁰³ Jonathon Bernstein. *Pretty in Pink: The Golden Age of Teenage Movies*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1997. p. 77.

elusive because of her celebrity status. Molly Ringwald *meant* something more than just a teenage takeover of the cinema theatres. Popular memory has ensured that the actor's identity, fictional and real, has grounded time and her place within it. She was no longer a simile or abstraction of the 1980s. Molly Ringwald was a metaphor. She *was* the 1980s.

Popular memory, like history, is a hegemonic formation. It is intrinsically interlocked in a constant negotiation with dominant discourses. Where Molly Ringwald is *now* illuminates the virtual trade-off of being heralded the model teen of an era. Although she has been allowed to remain the perennial teenager, it is a stalemate. This Fountain of Youth is "laced with citric acid".¹⁰⁴ Her youth has no expiry date. Ringwald remains a time capsule of a by-gone era, consigned to reliving her high school experiences in an unbroken loop. In an interview, John Hughes commented in relation to his creation Ferris Bueller, "You don't want to see him today. You'd hate him. He'd either be a bum or a politician".¹⁰⁵ Molly Ringwald, as with Matthew Broderick in the role of Ferris Bueller, represents that transitory and liminal moment of optimism that the future is filled with unbounded potential before the disappointment of adulthood descends. The ephemerality of Ringwald's high school days is intentionally stretched. The past is brought forward in time, pulled over the present. Ringwald has been *time*-cast, not *type*-cast.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Richard Corliss. "Pretty in pink", *Time*, Vol. 127, 3 March, 1986. p. 83.

¹⁰⁵ John Hughes quoted in Daley, "How could we forget?"

¹⁰⁶ Since his collaborations with Molly Ringwald, John Hughes has forged a successful career directing and writing screenplays for family-oriented movies, with an emphasis upon scriptwriting. Among his lucrative projects are the four *Home Alone* films, *Beethoven*, *101 Dalmations* and *Maid in Manhattan*. *Home Alone*. Directed by Chris Columbus. Written by John Hughes. Twentieth Century Fox, 1990. *Beethoven*. Directed by Brian Levant. Written by John Hughes and Amy Holden Jones. Universal Studios, 1992.

101 Dalmations. Directed by Stephen Herek. Written by John Hughes. Based on a novel by Dodie Smith. Walt Disney, 1996.

Homecoming Queen: Back to School

Molly Ringwald's projects in recent years underscore her cauterisation in the 1980s. She wears the decade like the scars of a third degree burn. In *Teaching Mrs Tingle*, the actor portrays Miss Banks, a timid administrative staff member at Grandsboro High School, who converts into a farcically foul-mouthed substitute teacher, appropriately for History class.¹⁰⁷ In the Australian production *Cut*, she is cast as Vanessa Turnbull, a B-grade Los Angeleno actor.¹⁰⁸ Fourteen years prior in 1985, Turnbull starred as a teenage victim of a slasher film. Production was halted when a murder was committed during the film's shooting. The actor returns to fill the role of the dead girl's mother, only to discover that the past has literally come back to haunt her. The killer is a paranormal spirit that is conjured into corporeal form each time the original reel of footage is revisited. Although *Cut* was predicted to reach cult status, financial success and function as Ringwald's comeback debut – with Beyond Films, in conjunction with France's TF1, selling the rights for theatrical release to approximately 95% of the world's territories – it failed commercially.¹⁰⁹ Despite Ringwald's black humour and acerbic impression of the diva which echoed her own well known fiery temper, it seemed the audiences were still not ready to see the actor age.

In arguably her most memorable role in recent years, Ringwald needed to go back to high school. *Not Another Teen Movie* parodies the popular American youth cinema of

Maid in Manhattan. Directed by Wayne Wang. Written by Kevin Wade. Based on a story by John Hughes. Columbia Tristar Pictures, 2002.

¹⁰⁷ *Teaching Mrs Tingle*. Directed and written by Kevin Williamson. Miramax and Dimension Films, 1999.

¹⁰⁸ *Cut*. Directed by Kimble Rendall. Written by Dave Warner. MBP, Mushroom Pictures and Beyond Films, 2000.

¹⁰⁹ Mark Woods. "Homegrown *Cut* looks for o'seas slice", *Variety*, Vol. 377 (13), 14 February, 2000. p. 27.

the 1980s and 1990s with particular reverence paid to the Hughes opus.¹¹⁰ The film desecrates the plotlines and character tropes of the genre. Ringwald's cameo appearance as a Flight Attendant reflects not only upon youth cinema, but also her integral role within this discursive framework. At the film's climax, the hero Jake (Chris Evans) attempts to convince Janey (Chyler Leigh) not to leave him for Paris, France.¹¹¹ Janey is partially modelled on Ringwald's character of Andie Walsh. Struggling to express his feelings, Jake resorts to sprouting identifiable lines from other teen movies, including *Pretty in Pink*, only to be rudely interrupted and reprimanded by Ringwald's character for his lack of originality and hyperbolic sentimentality. When the two lovers resolve their differences, ready for the climactic kiss that will cue the rising swell of inspiring music and the credits, Ringwald's character cynically rebukes them, directing her comments to the camera.

Flight Attendant: We all know where this is going. Fucking teenagers.¹¹²

For a brief moment in time, Ringwald stepped out of the 1980s. The 'adult Molly' brought her past into the present, enabling her to become resistive to her time-casting as the eternal adolescent. In that transient window of opportunity, Ringwald's significance to youth, popular culture and the 1980s convene in a perfect synchronicity and clarity. The irony of knowing 'where this is going' was that she was never allowed to go beyond 'there'. If the Future is Now, Ringwald is living the Longest Now. It is relevant that Ringwald's much hyped cameo role was to take place within a borrowed narrative from her Hughes projects, where the school is called John Hughes

¹¹⁰ *Not Another Teen Movie*. Directed by Joel Gallen. Written by Michael G. Bender, Adam Joy Epstein, Andrew Jacobson, Phil Beaman and Buddy Johnson. Columbia Tristar Pictures, 2001.

¹¹¹ Ringwald had defected to Paris in 1992 after her career abated.

"Molly Ringwald in 'the big time'", *CBSNews.com*, 17 October, 2002.

<<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/10/16/earlyshow/leisure/celebspot/main525848.shtml>>

Accessed online on 19 July, 2003.

¹¹² Flight Attendant in *Not Another Teen Movie*.

High, and the cover track over the end credits is “Don’t You (Forget About Me)”, the song that closed *The Breakfast Club*.

Sandra Dee only existed in, and for, the 1950s. Dee – the person – evaporated when she was replaced by the myth and superseded by a greater narrative. Her final performance would cast the last(ing) impression in popular culture of a still-life portrait, a homage to the dead. It seemed so appropriate that, while this doctorate passed through the final stages of editing, the ‘real’ Sandra Dee died. Molly Ringwald has not experienced this final performance. She continues to make films. She has moved from the 1980s, through the 1990s and into the new millenium. Ringwald resists inertia, chasing the dream of social mobility. The actor’s relative invisibility in projects since the late 1980s illustrates that as she grew older, time struggled to travel with her. History and popular memory loathe releasing Ringwald into the adult world beyond graduation. The dream of *that* 1980s is not yet ready to be over. While Samantha Baker, Claire Standish and Andie Walsh are tactically remembered as the darlings of the 1980s, Molly Ringwald may as yet hitch that elusive ride back to the future.

Declaration of Independence

When it comes to popular music, I am a slow learner. It took me an entire year after their international debut, a world movie premiere and a handshake from Emma Bunton before I bothered learning the real names of the Spice Girls. Buying into the scathing critiques by ‘serious’ music journalists, I had previously dismissed the quintet as bubblegum pop and their Girl Power as a feminist faux pas. In hindsight, their millions of fans had caught onto something that had eluded me. The Spice Girls were space invaders, proud and loud. They revelled in the power of celebrity exposure, girly femininity and advocated that everyone had a bit of ‘spice’ in them. Maybe that was not so terrible after all.

Although the Spice Girls hail from the United Kingdom, their success has made them a global phenomenon that cannot be contained by the boundaries of a single nation. They are media icons of an era – even warranting a mention in the 20th Anniversary Trivial Pursuit board game. The controversy and carnivalesque spectacle of the Spice Girls goes beyond a clever marketing ploy. They embody vibrancy and an ‘incite to excite’ demeanour that is infectious. There is more to their ridiculously high platforms, knickers-flashing outfits, and upbeat lyrics than meets the eye. The group blurs the boundaries between the performing superstar and the adoring fan, the public and the private. They campaign for a form of feminism that has previously been inaccessible to youth.

In focusing upon the Spice Girls, this chapter reinforces the relationship between popular music and film. They are not disconnected, but inform the other. The video

clip for a single exemplifies this synergy, as does the distribution of a movie soundtrack before the film's theatrical release for cross-promotional purposes. There is an established tradition of building and promoting star personalities in the music industry through the mediums of cinema and television. Prominent examples include Elvis Presley, The Monkees, Madonna, Michael Jackson and David Bowie. Within the works of the Spice Girls, both their albums and *Spice World: The Spice Girls Movie*, we can see how their constructed metatextual identities are used to fortify fan loyalty and relay their feminist ideals. While they may have been a manufactured ensemble – a cluster of girls responding to an advertisement in a newspaper – they captured the imagination of the world (then and now) and provided their own answers to the formation of youth, gendered identity and empowerment. What the Spice Girls have left behind is a mark of their times, and their politics.

Chapter 4

Girl Power

The Politics of Pop

Silence is golden but shouting is fun
Freedom fighters
Future is female
Spice Revolution.¹

~ The Spice Girls ~

Pushed up against the metal barriers, hundreds lined the boulevard. Thousands more behind them brought the gathering to a teeming swell. Traffic was stopped. Security was tight. The atmosphere crackled with tension. ‘They’ had already started amassing from the early hours of the day. Youth had taken to the streets again to rally for their cause. It was always the youth.

Then it began. From the outskirts came a tremor of activity. Like a tsunami, it stirred and undulated. By the time it had reached the barricades, it had multiplied tenfold. People screamed with their arms outstretched to the sky. Many cried so uncontrollably that they shook violently. Bodies hurtled towards the main thoroughfare, going for the jugular. Their deafening voices roared until all else receded into oblivion. The air was an electrical storm of intense energy; a constant sonic boom. It was awakening. It was frightening. This was hysteria.

6 o’clock. A double-decker bus painted with a gigantic Union Jack ambled around the boulevard corner. With it travelled the adoration of thousands of fans. The world’s media witnessed the power of popular music, celebrity fame, and the power of those

that granted celebrity its fame – the audience. One of the century’s most recognisable musical ensembles, a rag-tag assemblage of youth hailing from Britain, had crossed the Atlantic to the Americas, bringing revolution. This was no promotional tour. This was history being made.

This euphoric cultural moment did not jut from 1964. It was not four mop-topped lads from Liverpool who had incited the commotion. The year was 1998. From the roof of the double-decker, it was a Fab Five group of lasses who instigated the scene of glorious pandemonium. In their matching white pant suits, they glowed under the spotlights and frantic flashing of cameras. Perched high above the hordes, they were the vision of deified divas. The Gods were not smiling down that day because the Goddesses had assumed control.

That day in 1998, I had been in the vicinity of Hollywood Boulevard when the Spice Girls launched the world premiere of *Spice World: The Spice Girls Movie* at Mann’s Chinese Theatre.² I was familiar with their first album *Spice* but not a devotee. I did not even know the real names of Sporty, Scary, Posh, Baby and Ginger Spice. This necessitated my speedy re-education under the tutelage of the enthusiastically obliging, prepubescent girls and a twenty-something male who surrounded me. I had previously regarded their music as a highly successful strain of bubblegum pop. I was sceptical of the Girl Power mantra the group claimed as their motivation. This was bolstered by their carefully constructed personalities that bordered on caricature, a fondness for outrageous outfits, the abundance of overflowing cleavage and flesh, and primarily

¹ The Spice Girls. *Spice* liner notes. Virgin Records Ltd, 1996.

² *Spice World: The Spice Girls Movie*. Directed by Bob Spiers. Written by Kim Fuller. Based on an original concept by the Spice Girls and Kim Fuller. Polygram Filmed Entertainment, 1997.

teen and preteen market demographics.³ If they advocated a politics, it was based on consumerism and well publicised gimmicks with a girly spin.⁴ If they contributed anything to society, it was their ubiquitous faces on everything from pencil cases to Pepsi cans. They provided the fodder for the next fad.

How wrong I was. My mindset was challenged that day. In the company of frontline aficionados, wedged between a barricade and virtual sea of youth, the raising of decibels and the syncopated lunging of bodies in motion testified that this was no mere fluffy kids' entertainment. Beyond the glitter and glamour, something more was going on. Hemmed in by girls dressed as mini Spice Girls and young boys and men shouting with approval, the sense of collectivity was undeniable. The rush of adrenaline was infectious and overwhelming. I was witnessing a microcosm of a phenomenon much greater, more profound and relevant than I could have fathomed at the time.

Seven years later, the once formidable presence of the Spice Girls has disappeared.

Whether they represented a face of dynamic feminism or a musical farce still provokes impassioned debate. These have often perpetuated a merry-go-round discussion of the

³ Part of the phenomenal success of the Spice Girls was derived from the visible alter egos each of the members projected. Posh Spice (Victoria Adams) embodied sophisticated snobbishness, with her stylish designer label wardrobe and signatory pout. Scary Spice (Melanie Brown), with her wild hair and zany outfits, was notorious for her practical jokes, crude behaviour and no-holds barred approach towards others. In one unauthorised publication, it was stated that "as well as strip poker, sexy Mel B loves mooning at strangers, peeing in pot plants and flashing her undies" (Aplin, 1997, p. 17). Emma Bunton was Baby Spice, the junior member of the group. Her juvenile features were accentuated with baby doll dresses, matching compact backpacks, her doe-eyed expressions and pigtails. The athlete of the group, Sporty Spice's (Melanie Chisholm) uniform consisted of trainers and tracksuits. She was as well known for being an avid football fan as for her trademark back flips, air punches and kicks on the music videos. Ginger Spice (Geri Halliwell) was the archetypal saucy redhead, which resonated her previous employment as a club dancer, cable television presenter and topless model (Aplin, 1997, p. 24). Rebecca Aplin. *Spice Girls: Giving You Everything*. London: UFO Music Ltd, 1997. pp. 17, 24.

⁴ One of the most infamous photographs of the Spice Girls was during their presentation to Prince Charles at the 21st anniversary Royal Gala in Manchester on 9 May, 1997. The group broke protocol during the encounter as they hugged and kissed the member of royalty. The Prince of Wales was left smiling sheepishly at the cameras with lipstick marks on his cheek. The girls, meanwhile, proceeded to grin, wink and display victory hand signs to the press (*Rolling Stone*, 1997, p. 76).

hyper-manufactured and marketed aspects of the British group. Riding the descent from superstardom into musical mediocrity, there is the temptation to dismiss the Spice Girls as old news only to be dredged up as a kitschy, low-brow topic of 1990s pop music. While yesterday's Spice supporters have packed their platforms and adhesive tattoos away in the cupboard, there is a residue of the experience that lingers. What is significant is whether it is admitted into the hallowed halls of history as authentic and credible, or discredited and then forgotten. Where were you when Kennedy was shot? Where were you when news broke of the Boxing Day tsunami tragedy? These moments defined an era and are acknowledged as legitimate remembering. It does not grant the same privilege to the antics of five feisty women and their fans. Where were you when you first heard "Wannabe"? The most likely response is: who cares? For many, however, singing and dancing to the *Spice* album with a hairbrush for a microphone, pledging Girl Power with friends in school yards, and standing with thousands of others at a Spice Girl concert (or premiere) were defining moments in *their* history. The relationship between cinematic and musical mediums provides a particularly powerful trigger for their recall. In relation to musical recordings, Will Straw describes an "'extrasomatic memory' (memory stored outside the body)" which transforms fleeting moments into personal and collective history.⁵ This argument can also be extended to visual modalities. The constant proliferation of images and sounds in the media has meant that popular culture becomes redundant at an ever-accelerating speed, leaving behind volatile memories and narratives. This chapter presses the rewind button and rereads the explosive, but transitory phenomenon of the Spice Girls in slow-motion. In focusing upon this manufactured girl group, the chapter reinforces

Rolling Stone (United States Edition), 10-24 July, 1997. p. 76.

⁵ Will Straw. "Consumption" in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*. Simon Frith, Will Straw and John Streets (eds) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. p. 58.

the tight connection between cinema and popular music through the construction of the (intertextual) star persona.

Fighting Feminism(s): Breaking the Waves

Maybe the third wave will lead the way to a calmer and more reconciled future. I just wish they'd get started.⁶

Anne Summers

In 1995, Anne Summers wrote an article that sparked a vicious slagging match amongst feminists.⁷ “Shockwaves at the revolution” implied that a younger generation of women had yet to grasp the baton from their elders to continue the cause. That same year, *The First Stone: Some Questions about Sex and Power* echoed the same sentiments.⁸ Helen Garner’s book painted a dismal picture of young feminists as “punitive girls” who had turned their attention away from the wider social issues of radical and liberal feminism.⁹ The result was a narcissistic refocusing on the individual rather than collectivity. This was taken as a sign of filial ingratitude, a disrespectful slap in the face to their forerunners.¹⁰ Where women in the past had once picketed for the reproductive rights of their bodies, young women now seemed more preoccupied with which handbag they would pick to accessorise their bodies. The victories and social liberties won for, and by, women were being squandered on the daughters of feminism. This inheritance allowed them to experience the fruits of labour, but forget the pain-staking hardships of those efforts.

⁶ Anne Summers. “Shockwaves at the revolution”, *Good Weekend: The Australian*, 18 March, 1995. p. 30.

⁷ Summers, “Shockwaves at the revolution”, p. 30.

⁸ Helen Garner. *The First Stone: Some Questions about Sex and Power*. Sydney: Picador, 1995.

⁹ Garner, *The First Stone*, p. 100.

Summers' and Garner's concerns were not unique. They revealed an issue that had been fermenting for some time, and which the media found great entertainment in exacerbating. Berating contemporary women for their assumed apathy, ignorance or consumerism exposed a generational friction unable to reconcile shifting definitions of feminism and feminist activism. This was the catalyst for confusion as much as it was responsible for those at loggerheads. What follows is a discussion of dominant narratives of feminism to illuminate the problematics of its current conceptualisations. It is not the purpose of this thesis to resolve debates that seek to either conjoin or delineate between contemporary and past feminisms. Rather, feminism is employed to navigate and probe the terrain of women in popular culture, specifically music and cinema. By unravelling the ideologies that surround young, female artists, the politics of labelling them becomes evident.

The progression of feminism in contemporary western society has been traced through three distinct phases. The first wave began in the mid-twentieth century and was mapped up until the 1950s. It was characterised by the struggle for basic legal and liberal rights that was inclusive of women's right to vote, to own property and to sit in the Senate in the United States of America.¹¹ With their demonstrations and protest marches, first wave feminists made considerable headway against the blatant socio-sexual inequalities. They created a hairline crack in the monolithic wall before them. The 1960s was heralded as the emergence of second wave feminism that was augmented by the new left and Civil Rights movement in America.¹² The maxim that 'the personal is political' revalued women's role and function in the home and their

¹⁰ Louise D'Arcens. "Mothers, daughters, sisters" in *Talking Up: Young Women's Take on Feminism*. Rosamund Else-Mitchell and Naomi Flutter (eds) North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1998. p. 106.

¹¹ Brenda O'Neill. "What do women think?", *Herizons*, Vol. 16 (2), 2002 (Fall). p. 20.

bodies, while opening opportunities in the public sphere. Milestones included reproductive rights to legalise birth control and abortion services, a conscious effort to eradicate workplace discrimination (which introduced a discourse of sexual harassment into the judicial vernacular), the introduction of anti-rape law, the equal division of property upon divorce and the vocalisation of equal pay for equal work.¹³ A third wave identified feminists who came into consciousness in the 1980s and 1990s, dubbed with a DIY (Do-It-Yourself) ethic. It has been identified as a “paradigmatic and postmodern approach to gender”, with its reappropriation of popular cultural texts.¹⁴ At its most favourable, it has been regarded as fervently creative. At its most damaging, it was criticised as a violent backlash against the second wave. Third wave feminism became the polar opposite, the definitional negative of its predecessors.¹⁵ Current interchange between some second and third wave feminists suggests a dividing chasm that is joined only by the thread-like bridge of womanhood. The vitriolic dialogue between the two groups has contributed to the notion of “feminism as an empire that is either falling prey to an adolescent *coup d’etat* or covetously ruled over by rapacious matriarchs”.¹⁶

Dominant narratives pit differing feminisms against one other, based on a reductionist representation of over two centuries of women’s social history. In the sanitised compartmentalisation of feminism into three distinctive stages, contradictions and fissures are sealed over with the glossy veneer of time. The coining of catchphrases

¹² Judith A. Peraino. “Girls with guitars and other strange stories”, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 54 (3), 2001 (Fall). p. 693.

¹³ O’Neill, “What do women think?”, p. 20.

¹⁴ Peraino, “Girls with guitars and other strange stories”, p. 693.

¹⁵ Cathryn Bailey. “Making waves and drawing lines: The politics of defining the vicissitudes of feminism”, *Hypatia*, Vol. 12 (3), 1997 (Summer). pp. 12-28. Accessed on Expanded Academic Database 20 December, 2002.

¹⁶ D’Arcens, “Mothers, daughters, sisters”, pp. 115-16.

such as ‘victim feminism’ and ‘power feminism’ simplify the complicated nature of feminism(s) into bite-size chunks that are conducive to easy digestion.¹⁷ The result is a fragmented feminist consciousness that is devoid of a unified voice. This benefits patriarchal structures by splintering potential resistance, weakening the position from which women are able to speak.

One of the charges against the second wave was its repudiation of abstract individualism to create a cohesive feminism.¹⁸ This metaphoric umbrella that claimed to shelter and protect women was inherently flawed from its inception. It would not only reformulate, but furthermore perpetuate, existing oppressive power structures that fostered gendered, racial and economic disparities. The loudest of feminist voices would only mark out the race and class privileges of a largely bourgeois, Anglo-Saxon populace.¹⁹ As Anna Julia Cooper argued:

when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me.*²⁰

Written over a century ago in response to African-American liberation, the declaration made by Cooper still holds validity in current discussions of identity (crisis) in feminist politics. Cooper’s statement elucidates the problematic position of being not just a woman, but a black woman.²¹ Extrication of blackness cannot arrive at a democratic negotiation of feminism. This underscores the difficulties of establishing a feminist subjectivity of, and for, the marginalised. Cooper’s own assertions inadvertently

¹⁷ For a further discussion of victim feminism and power feminism, see: Naomi Wolf. *Fire With Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century*. New York: Random House, 1993.

¹⁸ Hilde Lindemann Nelson. “Resistance and insubordination”, *Hyppatia*, Vol. 10 (2), 1995 (Spring). pp. 23-40. Accessed on Expanded Academic Database 13 January, 2003.

¹⁹ bell hooks. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press, 1984. p. 6.

²⁰ Anna Julia Cooper. *A Voice from the South*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988 (1892). p. 31. Italics in original text.

reiterate this dilemma. The position of education and privilege from which she spoke could not reconcile the distance between herself and the disadvantaged African-American women in shanty towns who she claimed to speak for, but never directly to.²² Despite its flawed presumptions, Cooper's *A Voice from the South* illustrates that certain voices are drowned out by those of dominant feminisms.

It was not surprising that the image of second wave feminism as an exclusive club comprised predominantly of white, middle-class and heterosexual citizens would compel third wavers to hastily distance themselves.²³ Failure to acknowledge the intricate relation between feminisms can only conclude either with a position of ignorance, or spiral into a self-defeating, empty dialogue. The outcome is the hindrance, rather than support, of the women's movement. For instance, feminist literature in the 1970s and 1980s undermined the notion of a unified second wave.²⁴ It was marked by various factions that did not necessarily uphold the same agenda nor agree on issues and modes of intervention and (re)action.²⁵ In their analysis of the book *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*, Allison Howry and Julia Wood studied the major concerns expressed by third wave feminists in relation to the

²¹ Stephanie Gilmore. "Looking back, thinking ahead: Third wave feminism in the United States", *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 12 (4), 2001 (Winter). p. 218.

²² Mary Helen Washington. "Introduction" in *A Voice from the South*. Anna Julia Cooper (author) New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988 (1892). p. xlix.

²³ Leila Rupp questions the idea of whether feminism is viewed by young women to be "the province of middle-aged women whose consciousness had been raised in the late 1960s and early 1970s" (2001, p. 164). According to temporal charting of the movement, this would correlate with the second wave of feminism. The author considers education, economics and maturation as factors that give an advantage to older women (as opposed to young people) to actively participate in public and political processes and debates.

Leila J. Rupp. "Is feminism the province of old (or middle-aged) women?", *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 12 (4), 2001 (Winter). p. 164.

²⁴ Bailey, "Making waves and drawing lines".

²⁵ Allison Howry and Julia Wood note that the collective known as the second wave included the different strains of liberal feminism, radical feminism, separatism and revalorism (2001, p. 335). Allison Lea Howry and Julia T. Wood. "Something old, something new, something borrowed: Themes in the voices of a new generation of feminists", *Southern Communication Journal*, Vol. 66 (4), 2001 (Summer). p. 335.

second wave.²⁶ The findings yielded overlap and congruity. Resistance to societal devaluation, acknowledgement and maintenance of connections among women, the urgency to claim and use their feminist voices, and the general continuation of struggle against social imbalance were values shared by both arms of the movement.²⁷ It highlights that second and third wave feminism are not oppositional or adversarial. The nuances that prevent a collapse of the different feminisms into a homogenous body arise from the social contexts from which they were formed.

In efforts to categorise and catalogue feminism via waves, feminists have participated in exclusionary practices in which “the experiences and struggles of thousands of women are discredited and denied”.²⁸ Where they were once considered to be fighting against the patriarchal institution, women were now seen to have turned against each other. Feminism now conjures the impression of a political catfight. The remarks of Garner and Summers only add fuel to this dilemma which burn, rather than build, potential bridges. Feminism is not this simple, nor is it static. It changes. Only with this acceptance can issues central to women’s struggles move forward into the future, instead of being enmeshed in the past.

²⁶ Howry and Wood, “Something old, something new, something borrowed”, p. 332.

Listen Up: Voices from the Next Generation of Feminists is a compilation of essays written by third wave feminists. They express their thoughts regarding feminism and their role in the wider movement. This voice has been further explored in a bevy of publications that follow the same basic structure of confessional essays. See:

Kathy Bail (ed.) *DIY Feminism*. St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1996.

Barbara Findlen (ed.) *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*. Seattle: Seal Press, 1995.

²⁷ Howry and Wood, “Something old, something new, something borrowed”, pp. 332-33.

²⁸ Tara Brabazon. *Ladies Who Lunge: Celebrating Difficult Women*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2002. p. 82.

Sisters Are Doing It For Themselves: DIY Feminism

Riot grrrls, guerrilla girls, net chicks, cyber chix, geekgirls, tank girls, supergirls, action girls, deep girls – this is the era of DIY feminism.²⁹

Kathy Bail

The 1990s was a decade that witnessed the pervasiveness of self-professed, young feminists in the media from magazines to music, comics to cartoons, television to the silver screen. The cultural landscape would be marked in particular by the grating music of the Riot Grrrls, the stoic female hardbody in action films and the cheekiness of the Spice Girls in their video clips and their self-titled movie. This was not to imply that competent and influential women had been a rarity up until that point in popular culture. For example, Charlie's Angels, Honey West, Emma Peel and Wonder Woman from the 1960s to the 1980s are quickly invoked in popular memory.³⁰ The 1990s bombardment of distinctive images of female power was significant not only in terms of its sheer volume and visibility, but also the type of feminism it promulgated, its modes of activism and its origins.

²⁹ Kathy Bail. "Introduction" in *DIY Feminism*. Kathy Bail (ed.) St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1996. p. 3.

³⁰ For further discussion of the wonder women in popular culture from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, see: Susan Hopkins. *Girl Heroes: The New Force in Popular Culture*. Annandale: Pluto Press Australia, 2002.

Julie D'acci provides an illuminating account of one of the lesser known heroines in 1960s television, that of private eye, super sleuth – Honey West. In post-World War II America, the so-called crisis of masculinity that arose from women's achievements in the wartime labour market, the aftershock of the Cold War, the success of the Soviet-launched Sputnik (mobilised as evidence of America's own technological impotence), the prominence of African-American men during the Civil Rights movement and the changing roles of middle-class white men, enabled characters such as West to enter popular discourse (D'acci, 1997, p. 75). Touted as a "sportscar driving, martial-arts wielding, pet-ocelot toting 'female dick'", Honey West broke conventions that relegated women to the roles of the sensible, good woman or the voracious harlot (D'acci, 1997, p. 74).

Julie D'acci. "Nobody's woman? *Honey West* and the new sexuality" in *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (eds) New York and London: Routledge, 1997. pp. 74-75.

Honey West. Based on the novels by Skip and Gloria Fickling. A Four Star Production. Originally aired on 17 September, 1965 (USA). The series ran for one season.

Taking the underground subculture of punk as its grassroots, the Riot Grrrl Movement was the battle and playground for a new feminism that was marked by a postmodernist sensibility. The entry of women into punk music, a traditionally male-dominated domain, enabled a vocal aggression and political front that was specific to a technologically-advanced environment. With Debbie Harry, Patti Smith and the Slits entering the 1970s punk scene, it signified a veering away from the female as eye-candy performer – a body disengaged from its vocal agency.³¹ With its DIY ethos, punk offered the opportunity to rewrite women's roles that had conventionally consigned them as the consumer or the consumed, but never the active producer of meaning. As Rebecca Daugherty points out, the “rock epiphany of punk ethics and aesthetics opened the door for women to trade in their eyeliners and hairspray for electric guitars and the authorial pen”.³² The concept of punk de(con)struction extended beyond the musical arena to encompass a politics of (life)style that protested against existing narratives of youth and social responsibility. If the punk masculine objected to populist culture and boredom, the punk feminine upped the ante to include a reordering of gendered space.³³ An illustration of the violent disruption of public space was Ludus' final performance at the Hacienda in Manchester on 5 November, 1982.³⁴ The lead singer, Linda (Linder) Sterling, wore “a dress of discarded chicken meat sewn onto layers of black net”.³⁵ The group strung tampons from the balconies and distributed giblets wrapped in pornography to audience members. At the climax of the act, Sterling ripped off her skirt to display a black dildo strapped to her groin.³⁶

³¹ Rebecca Daugherty. “The spirit of ‘77: Punk and the girl revolution”, *Women and Music*, 2002 (annual). p. 30.

³² Daugherty, “The spirit of ‘77”, p. 29.

³³ Daugherty, “The spirit of ‘77”, p. 31.

³⁴ James Nice. “Ludus: Genius and damage”, 2002.

<<http://home.planet.nl/~frankbri/ludushis.html>> Accessed online on 23 May, 2003.

³⁵ Nice, “Ludus”.

³⁶ Lucy O'Brien. “The woman punk made me” in *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*. Roger Sabin (ed.) London and New York: Routledge, 1999. pp. 196-97.

The confrontational aspect of this (nightmarish) vision of womanhood indicated the archaic cultural expectations of women as objects, turning the phallic symbol of masculinity into a ludicrous appendage. This was summed up by Sterling's recollections of the night's proceedings in 1997:

I remember the audience going back about three foot. There was hardly any applause at the end. And that was a crowd who thought, nothing can shock us, we see porn all the time, we're cool. When that happened, when they stepped back, I thought, that's it, where do we go from here?³⁷

This became even more evident with the transformation of 1970s punk feminism (feminine punk-ism) into the Riot Grrrl Movement of the 1980s and 1990s.³⁸ With its principal beginnings on the north-west coast of the United States in cities such as Seattle, Olympia and Portland, the movement grew from a localised, national undercurrent into an international phenomenon that defiantly remained in the underbelly of popular culture. Often aligned with third wave feminism, the Riot Grrrl Movement enabled young (and not-so-young) women to engage with, redefine and remake cultural texts.³⁹

Labelling and confining the Riot Grrrl Movement to a specific locality and time frame runs the risk of gross simplification and inevitable exclusion of certain figures. Nevertheless, its aggressive image and logos warrants a brief, etymological discussion of this pervasive, yet elusive, counter-culture. Although the term Riot Grrrl has undergone copious debates as to its origins and originators, there is a general association with the group Bikini Kill. This female band hailing from Olympia, Washington was a prominent figure in the development of a feminism with a distinctly

³⁷ Linda Sterling quoted in O'Brien, "The woman punk made me", p. 197.

³⁸ Daugherty, "The spirit of '77", p. 35.

³⁹ Johnny Temple. "Noise from underground: Punk rock's anarchic rhythms spur a new generation to political activism", *The Nation*, 18 October, 1999. pp. 17-28. Accessed on Expanded Academic Database 13 January, 2003.

punk political agenda.⁴⁰ Their music overtly addressed and critiqued issues surrounding violence directed towards women. The taboo topics of rape, incest, domestic violence and the psychological trauma of being invisibly female took centre-stage.⁴¹ The shock factor of their performances was a brazen and abrasive representation of women (and girls). It was not unusual for the band's singer, Kathleen Hanna, to appear onstage topless with the word 'slut' scrawled on her midriff.⁴² If the image of the classic female beauty had been constructed in the media as a commodity to be gazed at through a one-way mirror, the Riot Grrrl forced upon its audience an active (re)construction of femininity. It not only offended with its anti-glamour aesthetics, but also smashed the mirror to return and challenge the gaze.

Get angry, get even, have fun – or all of the above – is the rowdy M.O. of the smart slut set. Cuisinart your femininity: Dress like a baby doll and cuss like a stevedore.⁴³

'Grrrl' reclaimed the word 'girl', stripping away its childish naivety and reinscribing it with a suggestive growl. The movement did not refute the vulnerability experienced by women. It revelled in its raw and brutal nature. Derogatory gendered terms such as 'bitch', 'slut' and 'cunt' were written on the skin as a form of crude body-art. It transformed the corporeal into the ultimate text. Irony and contradiction became the tools by which Riot Grrrls navigated, made sense of, and asserted their strain of feminist activism. This was epitomised in the quasi-uniform of the Riot Grrrl performer, with her second-hand baby doll dress, clunky Doc Marten boots, body piercings and tattoos, and smeared lipstick. The performance of the kinderwhore entered into a violent celebration of femininity.⁴⁴ The Riot Grrrl refused to be

⁴⁰ Temple, "Noise from underground".

⁴¹ Temple, "Noise from underground".

⁴² Gerri Hirshey. *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: The True, Tough Story of Women in Rock*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001. p. 160.

⁴³ Hirshey, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, p. 160.

⁴⁴ Susan Hopkins. "Hole lotta attitude: Courtney Love and guitar feminism", *Social Alternatives*, Vol. 18 (2), April 1999. p. 12.

invisible, ignored and relegated to the anonymity of the screaming fan or the disembodied chanteuse by appropriating the “accoutrements of girlhood, femininity, and alternative youth culture for an ironic (dis)play and disruption of the signifying codes of gender and generation”.⁴⁵

Despite entering the international domain, the Riot Grrrl Movement remained largely subversive and operated outside most mainstream political channels.⁴⁶ This was not a forced exile to the outskirts of dominant culture, but a self-imposed extrication and statement. It refused the external agents of major recording studios and established, literary publishing houses the right to sanitise and package the proudly aggressive femininity. It denied the “act of regulation” of the body by removing the boundary separating the poised, classical nude from an unruly, pornographic nakedness.⁴⁷ Like a gaping wound, the open body of the Riot Grrrl displayed its disorderly anatomy with its orifices and fluids. It threatened to swallow its onlookers with its terrifyingly grotesque, but titillating, nature. It was a pestilent laceration. The demarcation between the watcher and the watched became ambiguous. Like the punks who spat at their audiences, the Riot Grrrl body broke down the hierarchical structure of the subject-object relation. It went beyond returning the gaze to literally pulling the audience out of its comfortable facelessness in the mosh pit. During Hole’s 1999

⁴⁵ Mary Celeste Kearney. “‘Don’t need you’: Rethinking identity politics and separatism from a grrrl perspective” in *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World*. Jonathon S. Epstein (ed.) Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. p. 158.

⁴⁶ Temple, “Noise from underground”.

The Riot Grrrl Movement did not exist exclusively outside of mainstream media and culture. Arguably the most well known of Riot Grrrl groups, Hole has enjoyed international fame and recognition. The group signed a major recording contract with David Geffen’s DGC label in 1993 for their second album, *Live Through This*, which secured record sales in the millions. Although it is not an all-female band, the prominence of its lead singer as the definitive Riot Grrrl has resulted in Hole being labelled according to the feminist politics of Courtney Love.

Seth Hindin. “Biography: Hole”.

<<http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/bio.asp?oid=23>> Accessed online on 25 March, 2003.

⁴⁷ Lynda Nead. *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*. London: Routledge, 1992. pp. 12-16.

Australian tour, the lead singer gave away a guitar to a female audience member at the climax of each concert.⁴⁸ It was an invitation to DIY. Music-making became a metonym for a wider cause – make noise, be seen and be heard. At one concert, Courtney Love’s instruction to the recipient captured the philosophy of her forceful feminism – “play it loud and DON’T give it to your boyfriend”.⁴⁹ Devoid of a slavish adherence to white-collar management, Riot Grrrls played the music they wanted, in the way they wanted.

The Riot Grrrl was not limited to the domain of the concert or garage gig. Music was one facet of a wider community defined less by biological age than the technologic surrounding it. Ednie Kaeh Garrison describes technologic as the blurring of boundaries between human and machines.⁵⁰ Technology is not considered an extension of the human experience, but an integral component of it. Contemporary feminists have a symbiotic “interfaced-connection” with technology that, albeit not freely available, is becoming increasingly accessible.⁵¹ With the trend towards the digitalisation of communication in leisure and industry, this has opened a floodgate of alternative modes in which women can travel along the information superhighway and contribute to the production and circulation of information and knowledge.

The opposition to dominant discourses of gender, sexuality and social propriety manifested itself not only in the lyrics and caustic instrumentals of the Riot Grrrl musical genre, but also in the tactical praxis of textual production. This included videos, magazines, compact disk booklets and the internet which embraced a “low-

⁴⁸ Hopkins, “Hole lotta attitude”, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Hopkins, “Hole lotta attitude”, p. 11.

⁵⁰ Ednie Kaeh Garrison. “U.S. feminism – grrrl style! Youth sub(cultures) and the technologic of the third wave”, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 26 (1), 2000 (Spring). p. 144.

tech, amateur, hybrid, alternative” style.⁵² With its rejection of the refined appearance of professional publications, the most basic of technology – a computer, modem and photocopier – became the apparatuses and weapons of choice. This was observed in the burgeoning internet and fanzine culture.

Although the Riot Grrrl Movement restricted itself to underground networks, the seepage into mainstream media of the antics of angry women was significant.⁵³ As Catharine Lumby states, the “meaning of an image doesn’t reside inside it, but in its rapid circulation”.⁵⁴ The barbarians may have been outside the walls of the city, but their pounding at the gates served as a constant reminder of their presence. Many female bands failed to reach the popularity of groups such as Hole, or the lesser known Bikini Kill, 7 Year Bitch and Huggy Bear. Websites and fanzines have come and gone, with new ones constantly replacing the defunct. Its impermanence was not the fulcrum upon which its importance was balanced. The political praxis instigated by the Riot Grrrl Movement constructed a lived, intense experience that belied its transience. In the same way that “[p]unk was about being looked at, creating a temporary celebrity”, the Riot Grrrl Movement tore a gash in the smooth surface of popular culture, challenging and altering notions of women’s activism.⁵⁵ It left behind a permanent scar, proclaiming a gloriously messy vision of a female agency that was visually and aurally loud. The movement rebutted the premature announcement that the accomplishments of the first two waves of feminism had paved the way for a post-

⁵¹ Garrison, “U.S. feminism”, p. 144.

⁵² Garrison, “U.S. feminism”, pp. 150-51.

⁵³ For instance, much has been reported of Courtney Love’s public outbursts and assaulting of airline staff and the paparazzi. This has often been viewed as an almost laddish sensibility, inflected with a vitriolic, harpy quality. Love became the poster-girl for an excessive and dangerous femininity. She was the virago to be feared.

⁵⁴ Catharine Lumby. *Bad Girls: The Media, Sex and Feminism in the 90s*. St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1997. p. xxv.

⁵⁵ O’Brien, “The woman punk made me”, p. 191.

feminist society, suggesting that it was no longer necessary. Social progress had supposedly reached its zenith. Inequalities were no longer obstacles, but minor creases in the social fabric that could be easily ironed out.⁵⁶ 'Post-feminism' functioned as a hegemonic device, camouflaging a U-turn back to conventional, "tidy gender roles" that vindicated the orderly woman.⁵⁷ The self-imposed marginalisation of the Riot Grrrl Movement from mainstream culture and women's continued struggle in the masculine terrain of (post) punk music problematised the dysfunctional proposition that the battles of the first and second wave feminists had been fought, and the war won.⁵⁸

Space Invaders: The Politics of Pop

Picket signs alone are not enough, as they will be cast with residual modes and rendered ineffectual and impotent – quaint signposts from another era demanding a different kind of intervention.⁵⁹

Patricia Zimmerman

Female musicians have often been misaligned alongside their masculine counterparts, separated by a barbed and heavily patrolled perimeter. These artists have furthermore been splintered into disconnected parties that reinstate a type of internal binarism. The effect has been to further subdivide and atomise women into warring factions. It has

⁵⁶ Peraino, "Girls with guitars and other strange stories", p. 692.

⁵⁷ Peraino, "Girls with guitars and other strange stories", p. 692.

⁵⁸ Just as punk was "no land of milk and honey" for women in the 1970s, the Riot Grrrls in the 1980s and 1990s experienced similar gender-based discrimination in punk and alternative rock music (Daugherty, 2002, p. 33). Despite its free-for-all maxim which permitted anyone the opportunity to pick up an instrument and form a garage band, this did not translate into a gender-blind solidarity. The fact that female bands are still a minority, and remain the target of derogatory slurs that debase them as non-proficient musicians and psychotic 'bitches', still serves as a reminder that a wide gap exists. This is reinforced by the relative absence of the writings about female bands in music journalism.

The stigma of women as the bane of the punk scene is still an acrid residue from the 1970s. Rebecca Daugherty points out, "In punk mythology, girls were portrayed as a hazard to the integrity of the all-male band" (2002, p. 34). She cites Nancy Spungen as the female wedge responsible for the demise of the quintessential male punk rock band The Sex Pistols. Daugherty, "The spirit of '77", pp. 33-34.

become most evident in the frictional juxtaposition of the Riot Grrrl Movement and the populist girl culture embodied by the Spice Girls. While the Riot Grrrl became the iconoclasm for a femininity that was vehemently anti-establishment, political, angry and underground, the Spice Girls became the self-elected spokespersons for a feminism that heralded populism and the consumer market as the basis of their power. The Riot Grrrl graffitied the body and assumed an image of combat iconography that was raw and painful. The Spice Girls opted for a polished and pretty exterior that reinscribed an aesthetically pleasing femininity back onto the corporeal. Dominating the international music charts in 1997, the face of Spice materialised into a frenzied circulation of their doppelgangers. Andrew Goodwin argues, “The commodity form of pop has always needed other discourses of visual pleasure that are unavailable on disc”.⁶⁰ Imprinted on coffee mugs, fanzines, lunch boxes, accessories, shampoo, even their own customised Barbie-like dolls, the Spice Girls were commodified feminism (and femininity) incarnate. The performance imagery of the group would be carried and maintained through the narratives of video clips and their 1997 self-titled movie. The most vehement criticisms against the Spice Girls were triggered by their markedly clean image compared to the jagged edges of their supposed Riot Grrrl rivals. Described as domesticated and non-authentic, often by feminists, they were regarded as a hackneyed sales pitch at the mercy of capitalism.⁶¹ Ellen Riordan argues that the popularisation of girl power overshadows “genuine Riot Grrrl values”, creating a monstrous Frankenstein of “commodified fashion statements”.⁶²

⁵⁹ Patricia Zimmerman. “The female bodywars: Rethinking feminist media politics”, *Socialist Review*, Vol. 23 (2), 1993. p. 52.

⁶⁰ Andrew Goodwin. *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992. p. 9.

⁶¹ Catherine Driscoll. “Girl culture, revenge and global capitalism: Cybergirls, riot grrrls, Spice Girls”, *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14 (29), 1999. p. 187.

⁶² Ellen Riordan. “Commodified agents and empowered girls: Consuming and producing feminism”, *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, July 2001. p. 294.

In today's late capitalist marketplace, popular music stories and styles are more powerful and profitable than ever. Girls and young women are playing an increasingly important role in these image-based economics. But 'Girl Power' has more to do with the construction of identity commodities than with commitment to any substantive feminist politics ... Behind the staged 'statement' is only the perfect vacancy of the pop music 'star'.⁶³

There was the unequivocal articulation that the user-friendly, female power of the Spice Girls was a superficial construct, a cheap imitation devoid of organic origins. Girl(y) Power was chastised for plagiarising the rhetoric of previous feminisms, processing it to a point of de-radicalisation that was blandly palatable for a conservative consumer base.⁶⁴ The Spice Girls and Girl Power were equated with the notion of 'you are what you buy'. Feminism could be bought, mixed, matched and tailored to taste. Like a fashion statement, it was subject to fluctuation and therefore impermanent. It synthesised an illusion of empowerment through consumption. It was a classic case of what Karl Marx terms commodity fetishism.⁶⁵ The tangible commodity is seen as detached from the economic determinants involved in its production, severing the social relations between process and product. Consumers become oblivious to their slavish adherence to the economic machine. According to critics, the feminism promoted by the Spice Girls was a fraud and destined for failure. Their endorsed products and commodified bodies existed only to satisfy the capitalist pocket by feeding off the desperate gluttony of young girls filling their voids of juvenile insecurity.⁶⁶

Kristen Schilt claims that the appropriation of Riot Grrrl politics by commercial artists has led to a diluted feminism (2003, p. 14).

Kristen Schilt. "'A little too ironic': The appropriation and packaging of riot grrrl politics by mainstream female musicians", *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 26 (1), 2003. p. 14.

⁶³ Hopkins, *Girl Heroes*, pp. 73-74.

⁶⁴ Hopkins, *Girl Heroes*, p. 294.

⁶⁵ Karl Marx. *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*. Edited by Frederick Engels. London: Swan Sonnenschein, Lowrey and Co., 1887. pp. 42-43.

⁶⁶ Although males comprise a notable proportion of the Spice Girls' fan base, I restrict my discussion to the preteen and teenage female demographics that constitute the majority.

Feminism is in danger of losing its political edge when reduced to the mere production and purchase of commodities. Finding fault with the Spice Girls simply because of their status as commodified agents is equally troubling. It not only berates the cultural function of celebrity, but also discredits the fan base and rejects popular culture as a site of political activism. The dismissive labelling of the Spice Girls is a strategic move to protect the centre. The separatist parties of the Girl Power and Riot Grrrl Movement share more in common than they do differences. Their disparities resided largely in the way they were discussed.

As Kylie Murphy recognises, a “pure precapitalist artistic space” is a social and economic myth.⁶⁷ To demonstrate this argument, she refers to punk as an alternative mode for the construction, selling and distribution of an image. Punk was a commodified lifestyle, in spite of its proud anti-establishment and anti-corporatism declarations. While it eschewed authority, participants would closely follow trends in fashion by wearing the accepted punk couture. Slapping punk with a label of authenticity is a marketing device, claiming genuineness. Similarly, the Riot Grrrl Movement would not have been possible (or as widespread) had it not been dispersed in the mediums of music albums, digitalised internet technology, magazines and videography, to reach a target audience. What is of most interest extends beyond the workings of the capitalist wheel to the rhetoric surrounding it. The 1970s punk scene and the 1980s and 1990s Riot Grrrl Movement have retained an aura of credibility. It is an authenticity that claims a grassroots foundation rather than a plagiarised past. The slandering of a celebrity as a sell-out blemishes and undermines this reputation. It is a tarnished title that works to detach a text from its politics. When Courtney Love traded

in her tattered dresses and smeared makeup for a Versace gown and personal stylist, it signified more than an image overhaul. It was an ideological transmutation from “an exhausted heroin-using outcast into a beautiful, respected film star and model”.⁶⁸ The artist was accused of shamelessly pandering to the mainstream, exchanging politics for prettiness. She had sold her soul for a saunter down the red carpet. At approximately the same time, Hole had reshaped its earlier brute edge for a more harmonised sound that appealed to a wider audience base. Although she had gained respectability as a film star and model, there was the general impression that Love had done so by forfeiting what made her fearsome – her aggressive feminism and autonomy. What is forgotten is that Hole and Love were, from the beginning, capitalist formations. Proclaiming Love as having lost her underground credibility exposed attempts to confine her in a controllable space. Love had become too big for her Doc Marten boots.

In spite of its impact, the Riot Grrrl Movement (and punk rock) was never going to succeed in a *coup* of dominant socio-cultural politics and discursive frameworks. Its fringe status ordained it to be a resistive outlaw at the border, a minority. The trespassing of Love into the centre(stage) posed a threat. It was inevitable that she would be shot down for entry into a no-fly zone to nullify, or at least dilute, her dangerous feminist politics. There was a need to reinstate this subversive agent as a “talentless [mouthpiece] of the pop machine” as an act of disempowerment.⁶⁹ This transition into a voiceless puppet of populism, however, is suspect. Donned in her designer wardrobe, beautified and mainstreamed, there still lurked an angry woman

⁶⁷ Kylie Murphy. “‘I’m sorry – I’m not really sorry’: Courtney Love and notions of authenticity”, *Hecate*, Vol. 27 (1), May 2001. p. 141.

⁶⁸ Hopkins, “Hole lotta attitude”, p. 13.

⁶⁹ Murphy, “‘I’m sorry – I’m not really sorry’”, p. 141.

who declared, “You want a piece of me? / Well I’m not selling cheap”.⁷⁰ With a knowing, snide smirk, Love flaunted the masquerade that had delivered her fame. This is astutely captured in Brian Dillard’s review of Hole’s third album, *Celebrity Skin*, and commentary on the lead singer.⁷¹ Dillard states, “the melody and accessibility are actually subliminal secret weapons – pretty masks that, like the Dorian Gray faces of the Hollywood elite, hide something altogether more sinister”.⁷² Love exploited the artifice of her surface for her own purposes. She manipulated the system that sought to manipulate her. The artist deftly navigated within the terrain of the dominant, wearing the artificial celebrity skin over her scarred Riot Grrrl body.

The co-imbrication of politics and style is even more obvious when discussing the Spice Girls. The group epitomised a hyper-commodified agency that sought to revolutionise feminism for a new generation of (mainly) young females. Consumption became a driving force, where the buying of a Girl Power look, attitude and lifestyle was encouraged. As Garrison comments:

the ability to intertwine politics and style is a risky and necessary tactic in a cultural-historical period marked by “the logic of late capitalism” in which the commodification of resistance is a hegemonic strategy.⁷³

During the height of the phenomenon in 1997, the near omnipresence of the Spice Girls in the international mediascape surpassed merely being a lucrative marketing ploy. In spite of their entourage of stylists, personal trainers, public relations managers and accountants, beneath the gloss and glamour, there was an ardent political agenda that instigated not only diatribe but also dialogue, spurn and support. The space occupied by Spice buzzed with an unstable electricity. It refused to be reduced to a denotative,

⁷⁰ Courtney Love. “Celebrity Skin”, *Celebrity Skin* album. DGC Records, 1998.

⁷¹ Brian J. Dillard. “*Celebrity Skin*: Review”, 1998.

<http://www.armchair-dj.com/reviews/c/celebrity_skin.asp> Accessed online on 25 March, 2003.

⁷² Dillard, “*Celebrity Skin*”.

harmless vision of a contrived, girl pop group – a double detriment. The opening line in their debut single “Wannabe” declared, “Yo I’ll tell you what I want, what I really really want”.⁷⁴ It was more than a catchy jingle. It became their militant pledge of musical and social world domination. Their philosophy of Girl Power as a “new age feminism” advocated the rights of all females to vocalise their valued opinions.⁷⁵ While the sloganeering was a naïve promise that women could, and would achieve success in life, its ability to incite confidence and vehement campaigning was a landmark development in the cultural landscape never before seen in youth feminist circles. Geri Halliwell (Ginger Spice) stated:

Ok, so a lot of people think it’s just cheese ... but if we can give anyone a bit of motivation, make any girl just sit up and go: ‘I’m strong’, then that beats any No. 1 or meeting any star.⁷⁶

The Spice Girls yanked young girls out of their bedroom-based fan culture, with their male idols plastered on pink walls and albums on continuous loop. It invested them with an active role that constructed an unusual synergy between the celebrity and supporter. As Henry Jenkins writes, “Fans are poachers who get to keep what they take and use their plundered goods as the foundations for the construction of an alternative cultural community”.⁷⁷ The purchasing of merchandise permitted the fans to participate in the Spice Girls’ self-empowered negotiation of identity. Exchanging money for the latest publication of a Spice Girls’ magazine shook itself loose from the stranglehold of commodity fetishism. It made the consumers’ social relations to the commodity paramount, conscious and not hidden. Fans were urged not to simply

⁷³ Garrison, “U.S. feminism”, p. 143.

⁷⁴ The Spice Girls. “Wannabe”, *Spice* album. Virgin Records, 1996.

⁷⁵ Aplin, *Spice Girls*, p. 29.

⁷⁶ Damon Syson. “1997: A spice odyssey”, *Sky*, February 1997.

<<http://www.dreamwater.org/music/sgmagazines/SKYspicegirls.html>> Accessed online on 5 January, 2005.

⁷⁷ Henry Jenkins. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 1992. p. 223.

identify with a Spice Girl, but *as* a Spice Girl.⁷⁸ John Tulloch argues that ‘meaning’ is generated in that “dynamic interplay between text, inter-texts and the socially situated viewer”.⁷⁹ One unofficial guide entitled *All About the Spice Girls and Me* interjected the group’s profile page with room for readers to insert their own personal details. It simulated a sixth Spice member.⁸⁰ A rudimentary quiz fortified this direct identification with the quintet. The quiz informed readers which Spice Girl was closest to their “personal style”.⁸¹ The result was a quasi-DIY scrapbook of the reader’s investment and interaction with the group. The Spice Girls’ movie would further invite its fans into their intimate world in a loose (pseudo) docudrama format.

The Spice Girls dissolved the boundaries between the star and fan, the public and the private, the active and passive. It was “the ordinariness of the Spice Girls that render[ed] them relevant to cultural critics, and formulate[d] an innovative link between the group and their fans”.⁸² The “melding of text and context” collapsed the semiosphere, opening a virtual floodgate for young females to reorder the space around them and their positions within it.⁸³ The notion that the Spice Girls’ achievements was as if “five of [the fans’] mates had somehow infiltrated the secret world of showbiz” was emphasised in the group’s authorised book *Real Life – Real Spice: The Official*

⁷⁸ Driscoll, “Girl culture, revenge and global capitalism”, p. 175.

⁷⁹ John Tulloch. *Television Drama: Agency, Audience and Myth*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990. p. 238.

⁸⁰ Beth Wyllyams, Mandy Norman and Linda Males. *All About the Spice Girls and Me*. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1997.

⁸¹ Wyllyams, Norman and Males, *All About the Spice Girls and Me*, pp. 20-21.

An example of one of the style descriptions reads as:

You’re wild like Mel B. Always the individual, you are not afraid to experiment with your clothes. Your style may not be to everyone’s taste, but it certainly suits you (Wyllyams, Norman and Males, 1997, p. 20).

Despite the divergent styles of each of the Spice Girls, they all promoted a confident, positive personality.

⁸² Tara Brabazon and Amanda Evans. “I’ll never be your woman: The Spice Girls and new flavours of feminism”, *Social Alternatives*, Vol. 17 (2), April 1998. p. 39.

⁸³ Brabazon and Evans, “I’ll never be your woman”, p. 40.

Story.⁸⁴ Through the commentary of the Spice Girls and various family members, the book documents their development from infancy to their eventual superstardom. Replete with exclusive portraits in professional and private situations, and a diary-like address to the reader, *Real Life – Real Spice* reads like a family album. It negotiated between the bipartite promotion of the collective as ordinary girls and their ephemerality as international celebrities. While the Spice Girls may have reached the pinnacle of fame, the book frequently reminds us of each of the members' humble beginnings. It does not lose the link to the real world of family, friends, school days, memories of a childhood spent in working-class council estates (as was the case for Melanie 'Sporty Spice' Chisholm) nor their first menial jobs.⁸⁵ The simultaneous attainability and untouchable nature of the Spice Girls was both alluring and inspired awe. Their status as a floating signifier, suspended between the mundaneness of the everyday and the mystique of stardom, performed the complexities of a postmodern feminism. It could not be pinned down or rendered static in an "image freeze".⁸⁶

The days when political activity focused solely on the streets, aiming to change the world and make it a better place are gone, looking more and more like a painted Volkswagen bus without an engine ... activist politics needs a different kind of vehicle, one with more power and an ability to manoeuvre over multiple terrains – real, discursive and representational.⁸⁷

The politics practised by the Spice Girls was embedded in popular culture, populism and commodified style. It unabashedly advocated, and was fuelled by, the desire to attain wealth, celebrity status, and above all, visibility. It was, however, contrary to the vacuous contemporary feminism of "[f]ashion spectacle, paparazzi-jammed galas, mindless sex talk" proposed by Ginia Bellafante.⁸⁸ There was nothing mindless about

⁸⁴ The Spice Girls. *Real Life – Real Spice: The Official Story*. London: Zone/Chameleon Books, 1997.

⁸⁵ The Spice Girls, *Real Life – Real Spice*, p. 38.

⁸⁶ Hopkins, *Girl Heroes*, p. 206.

⁸⁷ Zimmerman, "The female bodywars", p. 52.

⁸⁸ Ginia Bellafante. "Feminism: It's all about me!", *Time*, 29 June, 1998. pp. 54-62. Accessed on Expanded Academic Database 26 March, 2003.

the Spice Girls' image circulation, nor their forced entry into the public and private realms of the city billboard, classroom and bathroom. Unlike the dead, staring eyes of a Gatsby-esque Doctor T. J. Eckleburg caught in a perpetually ominous act of surveillance, the face of Spice commanded attention with, and to, its gaze. It invited onlookers to enter a spot-lit moment of fierce ecstasy, audacity and mischievous, protocol-breaking antics.⁸⁹

Rejecting the outdated modes of political activism, the engineless 'Volkswagon bus', the Spice Girls employed the postmodern vehicle – popular culture – for the mass promulgation of their feminist agenda. Unlike a hall of mirrors that reproduces a series of voiceless, vacant reflections, the Spice Girls asserted an identity premised on 'being loud'. From the moment they appeared on the popular music scene with their bold video clip for "Wannabe", the group presented an in-your-face feminism not unlike the confrontational defiance of the Riot Grrrl. Their lyrics placed the value of individualism, friendship and forthrightness above the need to please a lover. The decree that all females be liberated from a stuffy definition of conservative femininity is the common bonding agent of the often (bi)polarised Riot Grrrl and Spice Girl. The peppy pop lingo of the Spice Girls resonated the Riot Grrrl directives to be noticed, acknowledged and reckoned with. It was no coincidence that the Spice maxim, 'Silence is golden but shouting is fun', echoed the Riot Grrrl's 'A loud woman is a good one'. The noise of the Riot Grrrl assaulted the senses with abrasive sound and kinderwhore style. It applied an electric shock to the temples of popular culture, feminism and patriarchy. The Spice Girl strategy employed an approach that was no

⁸⁹ One of the most controversial outfits was a Union Jack, underwear-exposing mini-dress worn by Geri Halliwell during the British Top of the Pops Awards evening in 1997. Also notorious were the dangerously high platforms that became a trademark for Emma Bunton (Baby Spice), Melanie Brown (Scary Spice) and Halliwell.

less effective. It was based on the inclusion of its audience to join in their mad fun and seemingly frivolous escapades.

While men may claim their space on the streets in paniniro-inspired designer labels and 'an attitude', young women gain collective space and empowerment through laughter. The laughter of women is a larynx-driven invasion of public space.⁹⁰

The Spice Girls refashioned the notion of the unruly woman into one wearing four inch platforms and micro-skirts. By embracing the carnivalesque, they not only critiqued systems of social hierarchy but also toyed playfully with them. With their ability to move millions of dollars globally, to uproot fans from the lounge-room and imbue audiences with a sense that they could affect social change, the group refuted the label of banal adolescent fluff, a passing fad. They hovered between the populism and political of popular culture. The symbiotic affinity forged between the fan base and the British quintet enacted very real effects. In a society which limits the social, political and economic influence of young, attractive and confident women beyond the pleasures of the objectified body, the Spice Girls adopted this disabling discursive framework. They twisted it to their advantage, heightening this paradox to the point of hyper-real ridiculousness. By working the system, the collective was able to reach an inordinate number of viewers, transnationally and transculturally, yet always remained out of the reach of critics whose evaluative criteria of the group's (dis)credibility could not stick. Like the spectacted garishness of a mud wrestling competition, the Spice Girls retained centre ring, but were too slippery to handle by those on the outside.

Female Bond(ing): It's a Spice World

Spice World: The Spice Girls Movie extends the group's projected image in music and the media. Like a press conference, the film is 'question and answer' time in a

⁹⁰ Brabazon and Evans, "I'll never be your woman", 1998. p. 40.

narrative completely under their control. It is a brilliant pastiche that pokes fun at the media circus that surrounds them, and also turns the laughter upon their own selves. *Spice World* merges fact and fiction with the stage of the music video clip. Fantasy and performance mix with the common experience of female friendship and bonding. It follows the madcap antics and adventures of the Spice Girls as they prepare for their first live concert at London's Royal Albert Hall. The escapades are more than just fillers before the finale, allowing a glimpse into the hyperreal world of the Spice Girls – imagined and real. The film relies upon a knowledge of 'vital Spice stats' and in-jokes as a type of membership into the Spice club – you are in if you get *it*. Those who have no idea – the critics – need not apply.

Spice World borrows from the familiar docudrama style of The Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night*.⁹¹ Public performance becomes blurred with private life, but pushes its excessiveness to the point of the carnivalesque. Boundaries have become permeable. Law and order have given way to the celebration of disorder and a topsy-turvy state of being where anything goes. The Spice Girls stomp around the sets in their platforms (and trainers), mingling with superstars playing themselves. This includes Elton John, Elvis Costello and Bob Hoskins. The movie upsets the hierarchy of 'celebrity royalty' with 'pop sensation' by humorously making fun of both. At a star-studded publicity party, Posh Spice is chatting with Jennifer Saunders of *Absolutely Fabulous* fame.⁹² When Posh asks if Saunders knows anything about manta rays, the latter is so eager to impress that she foolishly bumbles that it is one of her favourite designers. This

⁹¹ *A Hard Day's Night*. Directed by Richard Lester. Written by Alun Owen. Miramax, 1964.

⁹² *Absolutely Fabulous*. Directed by Bob Spiers. Written by Jennifer Saunders. Created by Jennifer Saunders and Dawn French. BBC. Originally aired on 12 November, 1992 (UK). The series ran for five seasons.



Figure 1: The Spice Girls demonstrate a proud, loud and popular feminism. Promotional still from *Spice World: The Spice Girls Movie* (1997).

fashion faux pas has not been lost on Posh. Saunders has become the butt of the joke. Meanwhile, Scary Spice is conversing with Bob Geldof. She is berating him for his unruly tresses. Later, the scene cuts back to the duo. Scary Spice has redesigned his hair to look like one of her trademark hairstyles. He is at her mercy. The crux of the scene is the willingness to abandon propriety and decorum for disruptive fun. The Spice Girls dust off the snobbery of blue-blood celebrity power. They invade this privileged space, injecting cheeky audacity and colour into an industry of black power suits and haughty profiles. The message is simple. A bunch of girls can make a difference.

Spice World plays with the idea of projected identity and fame.⁹³ While the group revels in the power they are accorded, it is never taken seriously.⁹⁴ The artifice of the

⁹³ In *Understanding Celebrity*, Graeme Turner acknowledges the complex nature of celebrity by defining it as a genre of representation, a commodity traded by media industries and a cultural formation with certain social functions (2004, p. 9).
Graeme Turner. *Understanding Celebrity*. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004. p. 9.

media machine and celebrity status is laid on the table from the onset, questioned and laughed at. There is nothing to hide. At one point, Sporty Spice remarks to the others, “I don’t get it. Why do people stereotype us all the time?”⁹⁵ At that moment, Sporty is riding an exercise bike. Baby Spice is sucking on a lollipop and holding a stuffed toy. Posh Spice is posing on her miniature catwalk, dressed in a little black dress and reading a fashion magazine. Ginger Spice peers down at her slinky outfit and quickly crosses her arms to cover her breasts. Scary Spice is terrorising the fish in the aquarium. Each reacts with an expression of guilt at Sporty’s comment. They know they have implicated themselves in the charges their critics hurl at them. Their response is to give each other new alter egos. In the following scene, the Spice Girls are at a photo shoot where they volley between them ideas for a new image while largely ignoring the irritating remarks of their photographer (Dominic West).

Posh: What about Bricklayer Spice?
Photographer: Sexy. Come on, energy.
Baby: Or, um, Trainspotting Spice.
Photographer: Smashing.
Sporty: What about Sporty-but-I-am-actually-interested-in-other-things Spice?
Photographer: Go for it girls. Go for it. Come on.
Ginger: Or Cheesed-off-with-cheesy-photo-sessions Spice.⁹⁶

Abandoning the photographer, the group sets about reinventing themselves. They don the clothing and wigs of icons such as Twiggy, Marilyn Monroe, Charlie’s Angels and Wonder Woman. They then take turns adopting the appearance and attitude of a fellow Spice member, acknowledging that their celebrity skins are as changeable as their outfits. Rather than apologising for their manufactured artifice, they claim it as their

⁹⁴ In *Bad Girls: The Media, Sex and Feminism in the 90s*, Catharine Lumby argues that mass-media culture and information flow has advanced feminist opportunities by eroding the boundaries between public and private spheres which have previously demarcated the masculine from the feminine realm (1997, pp. 171-74). This argument is further developed in her following book *Gotcha! Life in a Tabloid World*.

Lumby, *Bad Girls*, pp. 171-74.

Catharine Lumby. *Gotcha! Life in a Tabloid World*. St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1999.

⁹⁵ Sporty Spice in *Spice World*.

⁹⁶ Posh, Baby, Sporty, Ginger and Photographer in *Spice World*.

own. As Graeme Turner points out, “a significant component of their appeal to their audiences was both their explicit acknowledgement of their commodification *and* their refusal to allow this to de-legitimise them”.⁹⁷ The Spice Girls shrug their shoulders, but it is with a knowing wink.

To look for depth in *Spice World* is a pointless exercise. This is intentional. When documentary filmmaker Piers (Alan Cumming) tells his crew, “Now, remember, the camera is the window to the soul ... what I want to do is take my audience on a journey into the mind’s eye of the Spice Girls, and focus on their deeper subconscious”, we know that it is a futile venture.⁹⁸ That is the punch line. The Spice Girls are nothing but surface. For the fans, this is enough. They are aware that they must fill in the remainder of the incomplete picture. Their involvement in creating the narrative is imperative to its meaning and relevance. Meaning is constructed through the negotiation of textual ambiguities by the interpretative community of fandom.⁹⁹ The role of the fan is made clear when two competition winners, Jack (Devon Anderson) and Evie (Perdita Weeks), spend an afternoon with the Spice Girls in London. It begins as a dreary and stifling event, dictated by insurance policies and a public relations agenda. The divide between the fan and performer is evident. When the Spice Girls break protocol by escaping with the children from their road manager, Clifford (Richard E. Grant), and spontaneously jump aboard a speedboat on the

⁹⁷ Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, pp. 55-56. Italics in original text.

⁹⁸ Piers in *Spice World*.

⁹⁹ John Tulloch. “‘But why is *Doctor Who* so attractive?’ Negotiating ideology and pleasure” in *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek*. John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins (authors) London and New York: Routledge, 1995. p. 113.

I have deliberately mobilised John Tulloch’s discussion of science fiction texts to discuss the importance of reading strategies by fans. A significant body of work has amassed in this genre analysing the role of fandom in the construction of alternative textual meanings. See: Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*.

Thames River, the audience is reassured of *their* place in the picture. This is reinforced at the film's mockumentary conclusion. While scripted, it is the most 'truthful' part of *Spice World*. Actors assume their real names, discuss their roles in the movie and air their concerns. For instance, Alan Cumming reverts to his native Scottish accent and complains that he must wear a chest wig for his part. It is a candid sequence that ends with the Spice Girls approaching the camera, and directly addressing the audience. It is a reminder that the film operates as a cog in the wider Spice world system where the binarisms of fact and fiction, the diegetic world of the narrative and nondiegetic existence outside of it, and star and viewer are no longer sacred.

For all its superficiality, frivolity and light humour, *Spice World* is a parable of the significance of girl power. It is exercised in the realms of the spectacular and the common, in fame and friendship. While we witness the Spice Girls dominate glamorous gala events and concerts, their passion and zeal to perform is surpassed only by their dedication to maintaining a close-knit circle of personal relations. It is a saccharine, but poignant, moment when they realise they have compromised their integrity and are in danger of losing sight of why they started out in the music industry in the first place. They jeopardise missing their concert at Royal Albert Hall when they wait in hospital for their friend, Nicola (Naoko Mori), to give birth. The bond between (girl)friends is prioritised over their professional careers. The Spice Girls have become one of *us*. They straddle the line between being the girls-next-door and the superstar superhero(in)es. They accomplish what Superman and Spiderman were never able to do. They do not hide behind disguises to distinguish the Clark Kents from their alter ego caped crusaders. They are the every-girl and superhero at the same time. This is

Constance Penley. "Feminism, psychoanalysis, and the study of popular culture" in *Cultural Studies*.

apparent from the textual poaching from the world of 007 of which cues are littered throughout the narrative. As *Spice World* opens, a seductive song is played. The accompanying image is of female silhouettes dancing against a psychedelic, swirling background that is reminiscent of a Bond film. A pitching session puts forth an idea for a movie script in which the Spice Girls are secret agents who accomplish amazing feats. At one point, Posh dresses up as Ursula Andress' character from *Dr. No* with a blonde wig, trademark bikini and brandishing a hunting knife. Roger Moore himself makes a cameo as Chief, a spoof of the mastermind M, who sprouts ridiculous advice and mottos.¹⁰⁰ The effect is a parodic homage to one of the world's most recognisable heroes. The misogynistic leanings of the Bond films have been hijacked and replaced by a feminist agenda. Adopting the commanding presence and heroics of 007 and the uber-feminine, but also independent, ways of a Bond Girl, the Spice Girls are James Bond *and* Honey Ryder. It encapsulates the whole ethos of the Spice Girls – that it is not only possible to be female and powerful, but a right.

Recalling my experience at the *Spice World* premiere in 1998, I was surrounded by – and complicit with – the representational politics of the Spice Girls. It was discernible in the throngs of fans around me. These were not docile, blindly infatuated pre-teens, as was made clear by their very reasons for being at Mann's Chinese Theatre that day. Aside from the obvious desire to see, hear and (possibly) touch their idols, the fans were caught up in a feverish ritual of celebrity worship that implicated their own integral involvement and overwhelming sense of collectivity. They were not present just to see the Spice Girls. The Spice Girls were just as eager to see *them*. The female

Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (eds) New York and London: Routledge, 1992. pp. 479-500.

¹⁰⁰ *Dr. No*. Directed by Terence Young. Written by Richard Maibaum, Johanna Harwood and Berkely Mather. Based on a novel by Ian Fleming. MGM, 1962.

fans inserted themselves into the imagineered world of the Spice Girls as activists – not daydreamers. While they wore the attire of their favourite Spice member (their own celebrity skins), accessorised with a Spice backpack and waved posters, their deep investment was manifested in the wholly physical exertion and corporealism of the experience – their laughter, screams and surging bodies. The Spice Girls did not just mobilise a market. They formulated a feminism that made (greater) equality to young women more accessible and ratifying. It validated the experience and existence of the fans. Girl Power celebrated its space invasion.

The popularity of the Spice Girls proved transitory. Support for the group waned by the end of 1998, coinciding with Halliwell's departure to pursue a solo musical career. The Spice Girls' fifteen minutes of fame had run its course. Bemoaning the demise of one of the world's most recognised and successful girl groups tends to stultify its relevance and overlook the effects of accelerated culture. It diverts focus to, and generates a myth of a defunct, simulated feminism. The intensity of their fleeting conquest in popular culture is conveniently forgotten over time. The liminality of that brief moment, its affectivity, the rush of adrenaline – these are all lost in authorised history. It is salvaged from the individual's memory as the 'feeling of an era'. In popular memory, it is remembered as an overwhelming camaraderie, a collaborative effort between fan and celebrity. It meant something. Their ephemerality and embeddedness in popular culture allows understandings of the Spice Girls to shift over time and across context to survive the deadening effects of its rendering, or erasure, in history. Several years after the height of their success, the dialogue surrounding the (de)merits of the Spice Girls stubbornly attests to their continued, animated existence. Even after the moment is gone, they have not.

As with Courtney Love, the Spice Girls were a problematic paradigm of feminism, but as Hopkins acquiesced:

there is something magic in that moment when Courtney Love reaches out to her young female audience and passes on her guitar. There is a fleeting sense that anything is possible.¹⁰¹

When the Spice Girls stepped away from the red carpet to clasp the hands of their fans, sign autographs and incite vocalised outbursts of Girl Power, there was a magic to *that* moment. Instead of a guitar, they passed on their feminist vision and ideals that women (young and old) have the power and will to embrace ambition and take action. Their verve and positivity was intentionally contagious. In their fleeting moment, the collective adulation of the crowd and the reciprocity of the Spice Girls was saturated with the sense that anything was possible. The intensity left a burn mark in popular culture that cannot be erased. It is seared into popular memory. It was befitting that the lyrics of one of their songs was “Live Forever, for the moment”.¹⁰² There is a life beyond Warhol. Viva Forever.

¹⁰¹ Hopkins, “Hole lotta attitude”, p. 14.

¹⁰² The Spice Girls. “Viva Forever”, *Spiceworld* album. Virgin Records Ltd, 1997.

In July 1998, the single “Viva Forever” entered the coveted number one spot in the UK charts despite Halliwell’s departure from the group in late May. This pivotal song resonated public narratives of fandom and support. See:

“Spice Girls”, *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Spice_Girls> Accessed online on 5 January, 2005.

Violent Femmes

The mall, the football game, prom night, the party held while the parents are away – these are familiar cultural and filmic tropes that the very mention of youth cinema conjures. It is not limited to the spaces occupied by, and the leisurely pursuits of, youth but also extends to the archetypes that permeate the narratives. The genre holds a special place for the Bitch, the nasty girl of youth cinema. While a film may occasionally leave out the token bullying jock or the socially incompetent chemistry geek, the absence of the bitch has a far more resounding impact. As the quintessential prima donna, she demands the glare of the spotlight with her acerbic words and actions.

The bitch embodies paradox. She is the site of fascination and repulsion. She invites disdain. There is something gratifying about witnessing her acts of aggression and cunning, even though we may barrack for her eventual punishment or some form of reprisal. This is not a case of the bitch as a necessary evil and the foil in the plot. Although youth cinema, the teen film in particular, often paints cartoonish caricatures, the bitch is the most complex of its constructed personalities. She hails from an established lineage of ‘bad women’ in cinema but is not a subdued version of her predecessors. While the femme fatale of film noir was destined to death or a life of continual depravity, the bitch offers a different version of the threatening woman. Just as she possesses the propensity for destruction, she is also the source of potential social change. This chapter broadens the trope of the bitch to encompass the underdog, the

angry girl in youth cinema who is an adaptation of the violent femme. It creates a space in which to discuss the transgressive and political resonance of this icon.

Chapter 5

The Beauty in the Bitch Angry Girls in Teen Cinema

I'm sexy, I'm cute,
I'm popular to boot!
I'm bitchen! Great hair!
The boys all love to stare!
I'm wanted, I'm hot,
I'm everything you're not!
I'm pretty, I'm cool,
I dominate the school!¹

~ Toro Cheerleaders [*Bring It On*] ~

I cannot help it, but I get a grim satisfaction when I see another bitch bite the dust. The teen film provides a smorgasbord of incidents that indulges this guilty pleasure – the demented witch Nancy (Fairuza Balk) being incarcerated in a psychiatric ward (*The Craft*), leader of the ‘Plastics’ Regina (Rachel McAdams) getting hit by a school bus (*Mean Girls*), and the exposé of Kathryn’s (Sarah Michelle Gellar) lies and deceptions to her peers (*Cruel Intentions*).² Memories of high school carry with it a collective consciousness that is reproduced and conveyed through the cinematic medium. Even if your school never had an A-list clique of vampish cheerleader types, whose every movement was so enviable that it warranted being captured in slow motion cinematography, the image is so common that it feels as if it did.³ Barracking for the underdog – the new girl, the unattractive nerd, or the independent spirit with a heart of

¹ *Bring It On*. Directed by Peyton Reed. Written by Jessica Bendinger. Universal Studios, 2000.

² *The Craft*. Directed by Andrew Fleming. Written by Peter Filardi and Andrew Fleming. Columbia Pictures, 1996.

Mean Girls. Directed by Mark S. Waters. Written by Tina Fey. Paramount Pictures, 2004.

Cruel Intentions. Directed and written by Roger Kumble. Based on a novel by Choderlos de Laclos. Columbia Tristar Pictures, 1999.

³ This visual trope is reiterated throughout *Jawbreaker*. In dramatic form, the school’s most popular girls are frequently shown strutting in slow motion down the hallway for all to admire, in time with the beats of a funky soundtrack. They are the image of ‘cool’ and as the character Fern (Judy Greer) describes, “Satan in heels”.

gold and a crystalline conscience – and gleefully anticipating the downfall of the vile teen dominatrix goes beyond personal grudges and the intended knee-jerk reaction. Our responses are swayed and shaped by cultural history. The teen film is no exception. It hooks into an already established tradition of ‘bad women’ in visual art and literature.

In this chapter, I focus on the bitch in youth cinema. This persona seems so clearly defined that discussing her elusive qualities seems a moot point of debate. She is the Machiavellian villainess. Popular Hollywood cinema demands that her stinging words and wicked ways repulse, serving to justify her inevitable punishment. She is no Mona Lisa. There is no mystery behind her cunning smile, or so it appears. After numerous viewings of teen movies, I was struck by a recurring feature that many of the more memorable ones exhibited. To achieve victory, the heroine had to be a bitch in the process. I am not talking an Olivia Newton-John faux transformation at the end of *Grease*, where Sandy exchanges her pastel ensembles for black lycra, paints on red lipstick and stamps out a cigarette butt with her high heel.⁴ I am talking ‘the good girl’ playing nasty and enacting justice her own way. It is Carrie (Sissy Spacek) in the self-titled film on a homicidal prom night mission, seeking retribution on all those who have tormented her.⁵ This is not a simple case of beating the bitch at her own game. Such a claim is too convenient to explicate the dynamic relation between the cinematic text and the active audience. The heroine acting as a bitch is misconstrued as hypocritical, hence her return to the girl-next-door role by the film’s end. I argue against this paradox that pits the fashionably evil against the virtuous good. The bitch

Jawbreaker. Directed and written by Darren Stein. Columbia Tristar Pictures, 1999.

⁴ *Grease*. Directed by Randal Kleiser. Written by Warren Casey and Jim Jacobs. Paramount Pictures, 1978.

is a figure of power whose influence can be as progressive as it can be damaging. An exploration of the bitch requires backtracking to the early influences of this character type. The chapter investigates the femme fatale before tracing the major changes and continuations in the bitch icon in teen cinema. To ground this discussion, I conclude with a case study of two seminal films that proudly boast the angry cattiness of its heroines: *Heathers* and *Freeway*.⁶

Queen Bitch: The Femme Fatale

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a spate of fatal femme movies was unleashed in commercial cinema. Spearheaded by the controversial *Fatal Attraction* and followed by the likes of *Basic Instinct*, *Body of Evidence* and *Jade*, the manipulative, intellectual seductress and dominatrix became a prominent personality that has solidified into a stock character type.⁷ She speaks the words that no other dares utter. She does as she pleases, and gets what she wants. Her influence extends beyond psychological manipulation and hypnotic beauty. She is not afraid to employ physical violence to satiate her wants (not *needs*), a device more accessible and acceptable for the wielding of masculine authority. Her very existence threatens conservatism and entrenched gender roles. As Janice Haaken comments:

the discovery of hidden female aggression served to fortify an original split between female purity and female malevolence. It was difficult for patriarchal authority to hold multiple representations of women in mind without suffering an existential crisis of its

⁵ *Carrie*. Directed by Brian De Palma. Written by Lawrence D. Cohen. Based on a novel by Stephen King. MGM/United Artists, 1976.

⁶ *Heathers*. Directed by Michael Lehmann. Written by Daniel Waters. Anchor Bay Entertainment, 1989.

Freeway. Directed and written by Matthew Bright. Republic Pictures, 1996.

⁷ *Fatal Attraction*. Directed by Adrian Lyne. Written by James Dearden and Nicholas Meyer. Paramount Pictures, 1987.

Basic Instinct. Directed by Paul Verhoeven. Written by Joe Eszterhas. Lionsgate/Fox Studios, 1992.

Body of Evidence. Directed by Uli Edel. Written by Brad Mirman. MGM, 1993.

Jade. Directed by William Friedkin. Written by Joe Eszterhas. Paramount Pictures, 1995.

own, particularly in that virile manhood rested so heavily on its counterweight in female passivity and virtue.⁸

The delicious insidiousness of these femmes lies not in the shock factor of their actions. Catherine Trammell's (Sharon Stone) infamous crotch shot, Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) boiling the Gallagher family's pet rabbit and Rebecca Carlson's (Madonna) sadomasochistic sex rituals are beside the point. Their most unnerving trait is the ability to command the audience's gaze and elicit a perverse viewing pleasure. We become implicated in the distorted world of this femme, compelled to watch. Our eyes are pried wide open like Alex's (Malcolm McDowell) in the Kubrick nightmare *A Clockwork Orange*.⁹ We become giddily lost in her labyrinthine maze of reworked rules and double entendre. Conjuring the image of the vagina dentata, the femme fatale is marked by unpredictability and ambiguity as she walks the tightrope between that which is desired and despised.¹⁰ The lack of cultural scripts for the venting of female aggression sways between being "free-floating, or like an alien upsurge of black bile within".¹¹

While filmmakers may contend that the fatal femme in the erotic thriller allows the audience's "safe flirtation with danger in an age of tightening anxiety", the demise of this character suggests otherwise.¹² In one interview, Sharon Stone remarked that such films were "the New Age answer to terrorism" – a comment that gathers eerie

⁸ Janice Haaken. "Bitch and femme psychology: Women, aggression, and psychoanalytic social theory", *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, Vol. 7 (2), 2002 (Fall). p. 205.

⁹ *A Clockwork Orange*. Directed and written by Stanley Kubrick. Based on a novel by Anthony Burgess. Warner Bros., 1972.

¹⁰ Barbara Creed provides a comprehensive study of the 'female monster' that populates cinema. See: Barbara Creed. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

¹¹ Haaken, "Bitch and femme psychology", p. 213.

¹² Brian D. Johnson. "Killer movies", *Maclean's*, Vol. 105 (13), 30 March, 1992. Accessed on Expanded Academic Database 22 July, 2003.

resonance in light of global events over the last decade.¹³ It is frightening entertainment viewed from the safe distance of a darkened theatre or television set, where the compulsion to watch and repulsion of the experience must come to a climactic resolution. Punishment is imminent. Audiences across America rallied together screaming “Kill the bitch” during screenings of *Fatal Attraction*.¹⁴ As amusing as this anecdote is, the reaction is worrying. The unruly woman is identified and blamed as the ‘terrorist’, thereby bypassing serious discussion of gender imbalance. In saying this, I am not condoning revenge – although I did find great amusement at the news that Lorena Bobbitt had hacked off her husband’s penis. Enclaves of ‘phallic women’ supporters have claimed such figures as feminist icons, arguing that dominant interpretations of the films reproduce misogynistic readings of domineering women.¹⁵ This is illustrated when Alex confronts Dan (Michael Douglas) in *Fatal Attraction* after their one-night stand.

Alex: You thought you could just walk into my life and turn it upside-down without a thought for anyone but yourself ... I won’t allow you to treat me like some slut you can just bang a couple of times and throw in the garbage.¹⁶

Alex’s statement directly questions the integrity of Dan’s masculine authority. Dan is the philandering husband. When Alex informs him that she is pregnant with his child, he coldly dismisses her. It is insightful to witness how swiftly the audience acquits him of his personal offences and indicts Alex. By the film’s end, the archetypes of the faithful wife, the reformed husband and the wicked woman are reinstated. The camera rests upon the family photograph as the final image. As Dan Goodgame and Richard Corliss observe, “*Fatal Attraction* transforms a theater full of strangers into a

¹³ Sharon Stone quoted in Johnson, “Killer movies”.

¹⁴ Chris Holmlund. “Reading character with a vengeance: The *Fatal Attraction* phenomenon”, *The Velvet Light Trap*, No. 27, 1991 (Spring). p. 25.

¹⁵ Douglas Keesey. “They kill for love: Defining the erotic thriller as a film genre”, *CineAction*, 2001 (Summer). p. 47.

¹⁶ Alex in *Fatal Attraction*.

community: confidant to Dan, cheerleader to Beth, lynch mob for Alex”.¹⁷ Order is restored, the home is protected and gender genres are once again shrink-wrapped and tightly sealed. My grievance remains entrenched in the fact that the threatening femme has only two options. She will either end up buried six feet under (with her death a moment to celebrate) or remain the manipulative vamp the audience loves to hate. There is nowhere else for her to go.

The restriction of options to the dangerous woman is nothing new. The killer babes of the 1980s and 1990s sexual thrillers hail from an established tradition of wayward women depicted in literature, art and folklore that can be traced back to the closing decades of the nineteenth century. While mythological and biblical references to figures such as Medusa and Salome predate this period, the design style of Art Nouveau popularised a distinctive iconography of the femme fatale that intensified the divide between mere sin and unrelenting evil, focusing upon the latter.¹⁸ In *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon*, Virginia Allen closely studies the altering representations of this figure over the last three centuries in paintings. Although she notes the subtle changes – the shape of the mouth, the direction of the gaze, the posturing of the body, the surrounding scenery – Allen’s interest resides in the defining features of the femme fatale that continue to be echoed in present day popular culture. The femme fatale is an enigmatic beauty who seduces and ruins men.¹⁹ Her capacity for destruction is matched only by her inability to create, for she is diametrical to the nurturing “good

¹⁷ Dan Goodgame and Richard Corliss. “Killer! *Fatal Attraction* strikes gold as a parable of sexual guilt”, *Time*, Vol. 130 (20), 16 November, 1987. Accessed on Expanded Academic Database 25 July, 2003.

¹⁸ Virginia M. Allen. *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon*. New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1983. pp. 1, 11-12.

¹⁹ Allen, *The Femme Fatale*, p. 1.

woman” of the domestic sphere.²⁰ The femme fatale’s blessing and curse is her less than human quality that marks her as “immortal, queen, goddess”.²¹ As Allen states:

there is a dimension to the meaning of the femme fatale suggesting that even though she might die, she will not be obliterated. She will rise to claim another victim, perhaps as one of the living dead, a vampire.²²

Although the good woman may go to her grave with her husband shedding tears and flowers on her tombstone, it is the vamp who lingers like a haunting apparition in his mind. To borrow from Allen’s analogy, the femme fatale as vampire is profanity incarnate. This dangerous woman is “both Siren and Circe, Lilith and Delilah, seductress and devourer; as Shiva-like dissolver of identity; the woman as eternal enigma, baffler of Freud, destabilizing mystifier, one-way ticket to madness and self-destruction”.²³ Her existence can only produce sexual, spiritual and physical pollution that necessitates her termination.

The iconic status of the femme fatale gained further cultural currency in the 1940s and 1950s film noir genre that was particularly popular in the United States. Book-ended by the aftermath of World War I and the beginnings of the Cold War, noir embodied an historical period in American society rife with violence, greed, cynicism and suspicion.²⁴ The need to reassert order and (masculine) authority in the nation state manifested itself in the hearth of home and government. Where Rosie the Riveter had once served her country in steel mills, the end of World War II required her reinstatement in the kitchen. The good woman was no longer the patriotic feminist fighting for her nation, but the doting wife cooking and ironing for her husband and

²⁰ Allen, *The Femme Fatale*, p. 4.

²¹ Allen, *The Femme Fatale*, p. 4.

²² Allen, *The Femme Fatale*, p. 2.

²³ Ron Rosenbaum. “In praise of dangerous women: The beautiful and the damned”, *Esquire*, Vol. 125 (3), March 1996. p. 105.

family. Gender roles became even more important and tightly policed during the McCarthy trials that demanded even greater vigilance to un-American activities. Mass hysteria and paranoia replaced the concerted efforts to rebuild a society devastated by the war with the desperate attempt to construct the façade of the outstanding citizen. Self-surveillance was one of the few means of averting suspicion of being a Communist or sympathiser, even though this was no guarantee. Such events identified major markers that permanently altered the national landscape. As Sylvia Harvey writes:

It may be argued that the ideology of national unity which was characteristic of the war period, and which tended to gloss over and conceal class divisions, began to falter and decay, to lose its credibility, once the war was over. The encounter with a depressed peacetime economy, with its threat of high prices and rising unemployment, began a process of general disillusionment for many of those returning home after the war, in search of values which they had fought to defend.²⁵

Film noir reified the lived experiences and preoccupations of American citizens by transposing the threat of danger, confusion and fear upon the already familiar archetypes of the paternal figurehead, the virtuous woman and the vamp. The male protagonist resides in an unstable position. He is obligated towards the wifely character but drawn towards the femme fatale. He is an anti-hero “struggling for a foothold in a maze of right and wrong”, and lacking the moral base and reference points that the classic Hollywood hero is equipped with.²⁶ The urban landscape becomes a quagmire of seedy temptation associated with contemporary society. Public space is an external projection of the private. Control of the environment is tantamount to control of the self. The secretive dark alleys, the amoral smoky bars and

²⁴ E. Ann Kaplan. “Introduction to new edition” in *Women in Film Noir. New Edition*. E. Ann Kaplan (ed.) London: British Film Institute, 1998. p. 1.

²⁵ Sylvia Harvey. “Woman’s place: The absent family of film noir” in *Women in Film Noir. New Edition*. E. Ann Kaplan (ed.) London: British Film Institute, 1998. pp. 38-39.

²⁶ Janey Place. “Women in film noir” in *Women in Film Noir. New Edition*. E. Ann Kaplan (ed.) London: British Film Institute, 1998. p. 51.

boudoirs of modern society are personified by the seductress – the Spider Woman.²⁷

As Janey Place comments:

the visual movement which indicates unacceptable activity in film noir women represents the man's own sexuality, which must be repressed and controlled if it is not to destroy him ... only in a controlled, impotent, powerless form, powerless to move or act, is the sexual woman no threat to the film noir man.²⁸

The femme fatale's opposite is the asexual, nurturing woman who offers redemption and the "possibility of integration for the alienated, lost man into the stable world of secure values, roles and identities".²⁹ This character must be removed physically in space and time. The nurturing woman embodies the idealised, pastoral "remembered past".³⁰ She is the hero's link to a lost nostalgia of traditional conservatism.

Importantly, it is the past that must be returned to if the hero is to find salvation.

Unlike the good woman who is bound to the sphere and service of the home, the femme fatale is mobile and drifts between spaces. The paradox is that the only place she can never occupy is the sanctuary of the past, for she is a construction of modernity. Her certain demise is not redemptive, but like the surgical removal of a tumour. The femme fatale is conveyed as an agent of corruption whose modus operandi is premised on fierce independence and guiltless self-obsession. Her power is the source and justification of her suppression. The femme fatale is not a simple product of film noir. She is the fulcrum through which the narrative of social disorder and instability hinges. Although she is consigned to the shady corridors and backrooms, dwelling on the periphery of (in)sanity, she ruthlessly occupies the epicentre.

²⁷ Place, "Women in film noir", p. 53.

²⁸ Place, "Women in film noir", pp. 57, 60.

²⁹ Place, "Women in film noir", p. 60.

Jump cutting from the 1940s and 1950s of film noir to the sexual thriller of the 1980s and 1990s, adverse representations of threatening women have not quelled as a result of changing attitudes towards gender inequality and a more scrupulous and informed viewership. They have arguably worsened. Kate Stables argues that:

Commentators writing in the 70s, when the *fatale* figure seemed safely historical, made the assumption that western cultural movements such as feminism and ‘sexual revolution’ would render the idea of the *femme fatale* obsolete, reducing her to a quaint fantastical figure produced by repressed, male-dominated societies. In fact, the reverse has happened – in a movie-producing culture which abounds with mediated images of sex and proliferating sexual discourses, the sexually threatening woman comes to take centre stage.³¹

Financial success of productions within the international market has increased the stakes for high concept films with recognisable narratives and archetypes.³² Political instability and cultural anxiety of changing gender roles post-World War II has been displaced by the preoccupation with the so-called crisis of masculinity that defines the dangerous woman as the root of all problems in the neo-noir. Although the postmodern version poaches from 1940s noir, the former bears only a modest semblance upon further analysis. While transgressive sexuality is nothing new to this fatal figure, Stables states, “never before has the overt representation of sex been utilised in such a blanket fashion in her construction and with such distorting results”, in which aesthetic and narrative meaning is filtered through the singular mesh of sexual performance.³³ The soft-pornography inclinations of current sexual thrillers dislodge the *femme fatale* from the immediate historical context. Her function in the narrative is boiled down to titillating perverse pleasures. While her 1940s counterpart was symptomatic of a diseased decade, the modern seductress can claim no purpose other than embodying feminine evil for its own gratuitous sake. When Kathie (Jane Greer)

³⁰ Place, “Women in film noir”, p. 51.

³¹ Kate Stables. “The postmodern always rings twice: Constructing the *femme fatale* in 90s cinema” in *Women in Film Noir. New Edition*. E. Ann Kaplan (ed.) London: British Film Institute, 1998. p. 167.

³² Stables, “The postmodern always rings twice”, p. 167.

is killed during a rain of police gunfire in the 1947 noir *Out of the Past*, there is a collective sigh of relief that law and order in the home and nation state will be re-established.³⁴ The foreign enemy has been conquered. When Rebecca in *A Body of Evidence* is fatally shot and plummets through a window, the satisfaction is tellingly indulgent. She deserves a gruesome death because she is a wicked woman. For this fatal female, there is no public facet to her persona. She has become the doomed villainess so absorbed in narcissism – the body and foul mouth that always returns attention to her – that must result in her death lest we too are drawn into her private obsession. Although this femme may have been beaten, raped and ridiculed, her excessiveness far outweighs the wrongdoings in her past. There is no sympathy for her. While the 1940s femmes may have been transgressive, the vamps of the 1980s and 1990s were arguably regressive.

Carrying the Banner: Killer Babes

The teenage bitch in youth cinema reconceptualises the threatening female popularised in film noir and the erotic thriller. She is the daughter that the femme fatale would have borne had she not been barren or killed off in her sexual prime. She is the most envied girl in the school – beautiful, sexy, a ‘man-eater’. Raised on a pedestal, she is revered and loathed for her desirability. Her entrance is always visually dramatic. Flattering lighting, a lingering pan shot over her sculpted body to register her every movement – the turn of the head, the flick of her hair, the pout of her lip-glossed mouth, the fluttered eyelashes – are all part of her arsenal. Encapsulated in the opening scene of *Bring It On*, a team of cheerleaders is performing a choreographed routine.

³³ Stables, “The postmodern always rings twice”, pp. 171, 172.

³⁴ *Out of the Past*. Directed by Jacques Tourneur. Written by Daniel Mainwaring. Based on a novel by David Mainwaring. Warner Bros., 1947.

Each is athletic and nubile, sassy and seductive. Although we later realise it is a dream sequence, the lines of their cheer/jeer are intentionally candid. Not only are they ‘hot’ and everything the ordinary girl is not, they also ruthlessly dominate the school.³⁵

This bitch is not a teenage mimesis of the femme fatale. Although there is a correlation, the bitch is a different strain of the threatening woman. This transmutation is explored through a case study of *Heathers* and *Freeway*. Separated by a seven year period, the morphing representations of the ‘tough girl’ from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s suggest significant cinematic reconceptualisations of girlhood and youth. While there are shared nuances between both films, *Freeway*’s digression from the archetypal uber-femme bitch is of particular cultural relevance that is resonant of the musically-derived Riot Grrrl ethos.

Produced in 1989, Michael Lehmann’s *Heathers* is an acerbic satire of the teenage experience that drips with rancour and fifth-gear bitchiness. The narrative centres around Westerburg High School’s most powerful clique of female vamps. They are a quartet comprised of Heather Chandler (Kim Walker), Heather Duke (Shannen Doherty), Heather McNamara (Lisanne Falk) and Veronica Sawyer (Winona Ryder), who is the protagonist. The group indiscriminately inflict humiliation upon students (including members within the circle) with insidious intent and success. In the film’s opening sequence, the three Heathers are gracefully flitting through a picturesque garden engaged in a game of croquet. The surface image of civility and female decorum is scratched by their subtle actions. The trio trample through a bed of flowers

³⁵ I depart from Elizabeth Wurtzel’s imagining of the bitch in her monograph *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women*. Wurtzel’s celebration of difficult women overlooks the socially and culturally problematic nature of the angry female. Elizabeth Wurtzel. *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women*. New York: Doubleday, 1998.

and vindictively smirk as they take turns swinging their mallets.³⁶ The scene concludes with a close-up shot of Veronica's head protruding from the ground and surrounded by croquet balls. She is the begrudging human goalpost. As the narrative progresses, it becomes apparent that only Veronica has any residue of guilt, conscience or consequence.

After a heated argument, Heather Chandler threatens to expel Veronica from the clique. Veronica's reprisal is to concoct a bogus morning-after remedy which will make Heather vomit wretchedly. She is accompanied by her new lover, Jason 'J.D.' Dean (Christian Slater). Unbeknown to Veronica, J.D.'s psychopathic tendencies result in his switching the drink with liquid drainer. The impression of cold beauty and control is shattered when Heather's convulsing body plunges face first into a glass coffee table. Upon J.D.'s prompting, Veronica agrees to stage the mishap as a suicide. This results in a chain effect of false claims of camaraderie among the student body, and Heather Duke swooping in like a vulture to claim the coveted position as the group's leader. After Veronica once again inadvertently assists J.D. in murdering two of Westerburg's star football players and making it appear a homosexual suicide pact, suicide is transformed into a trend-setting statement.

The femme fatale of 1940s noir is reappropriated through the bitch in *Heathers*.

Female sexuality is equated with danger and death with the femme occupying the

³⁶ There is an historical trajectory of powerful women who operate as a trio in art and folklore. Whether beautiful or grotesque, their common feature is that they are all dangerous. Some of the most well-known examples are the three witches in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and in Greek mythology – the Siren sisters (Parthenope, Leukosia and Ligeia), the Harpies (Aello, Okypete and Kelaino), the Gorgon sisters (Medusa, Stheno and Euryale) and the Graiai (Pemphredo, Enyo and Deino) who were the sentries of the Gorgons (Rose, 1964 [1928], pp. 28-29, 245, 252-53). Although the number of Sirens varies according to source material, depictions in art generally show three women or winged creatures. H. J. Rose. *A Handbook of Greek Mythology: Including its Extension to Rome*. London: Methuen and Co., 1964 (1928). pp. 28-29, 245, 252-53.

narrative's centre.³⁷ The body beautiful of the bitch is a carefully manicured construction. It is preened and primed to hold the gaze, connoting what Laura Mulvey refers to as its “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” quality.³⁸ Fashion and beauty become as lethal as scathing remarks and maniacal tricks. Strict censorship guidelines and moral guardians of the media demand that the sexual exploits of the bitch cannot be as overt as that of the femme fatale, who is generally geared towards a more mature viewership. The bitch of youth cinema, particularly teen films, is “a teened down version of the *femme fatale*, fit for the high school corridor”.³⁹ Visual presentation is loaded with meaning to the point of excess. Heightened aesthetics finds expression in *Heathers* through the surrealism of the mise-en-scene, specifically costume and setting. The steamy boudoir is transplanted with the teenager's bedroom, and the back alleys with the winding high school corridors. The eroticism of the femme fatale is displaced with sexy, bad attitude.

The variations do not simply suggest a shift in context, but also a makeover in which the power of the femme need not be unstable and ultimately damaging. While noir posits the femme fatale's body as inherently pollutant and dangerous, *Heathers* exposes this gendering of female identity – a conflation of culture with nature – as artificial and engineered. Our attention is not only drawn to the body, but more importantly how it is accessorised. Colour motifs function as carriers of meaning. This is evident in the association of characters with a particular primary hue. Heather

³⁷ Yvonne Tasker. *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998. p. 117.

³⁸ Laura Mulvey. “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema” in *Film Theory and Criticism*. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy (eds) New York: Oxford University Press, 1992 (1975). p. 750. Italics in original text.

³⁹ Kylie Murphy. *Bitch: The Politics of Angry Women*. PhD Dissertation. Murdoch: Murdoch University, 2002. p. 78.



Figure 1: (L to R) Heather Duke (Shannen Doherty), Heather Chandler (Kim Walker), Heather McNamara (Lisanne Falk) and Veronica Sawyer (Winona Ryder) in *Heathers* (1989) – the bitchy, bold and beautiful.

Chandler's trademark is red as displayed through her scarlet attire, the furnishings in her home and the lighting in which she is bathed. Veronica is distinguished by her penchant for blue, Heather Duke with green and Heather McNamara with yellow. As the status symbol of superiority, the colour red firmly establishes Heather 'Number One' Chandler as the Machiavellian socialite. She is the one who makes the winning swing at Veronica's head in the opening scene and rebukes her for expressing admiration for others outside of their elite circle.

Heather: If you're going to openly be a bitch.

Veronica: It's just Heather, why can't we talk to different kinds of people?

Heather: Fuck me gently with a chainsaw. Do I look like Mother Theresa? If I did, I probably wouldn't mind talking to the Geek Squad.⁴⁰

After Heather Chandler's death, Heather Duke assumes the colour red. Power is not fixed but transferable. Relations of power are not closed and therefore are subject to change. They can be rewritten. Veronica eventually dethrones Heather Duke,

⁴⁰ Heather Chandler and Veronica in *Heathers*.

claiming to be the “new sheriff in town”.⁴¹ She takes away this wicked witch’s red ribbon in a symbolic gesture and ties her own hair with it.

While the Heathers more closely resemble the femme fatale with their masochistic ideals of femininity, social exclusion and repression, Veronica offers a polemic movement away from this self-deterministic nihilism.⁴² Although popularity, feminine wiles and prettiness initially provide Veronica with the tools to assert authority, it becomes apparent that they are unable to instigate real social change. Her frustrated tirades can only be vented onto the pages of her private journal in which she writes, “Dear diary, I want to kill and you have to believe it’s for more than just selfish reasons, more than just a spoke in my menstrual cycle”.⁴³ It is J.D. who converts Veronica’s anger into physical action. As Steven Woodward argues, “Jason enacts what Veronica can only feel and express inwardly ... [h]er violent emotions must not be seen”.⁴⁴ Her eventual commandeering of the dominant position requires the subversion of dualistic structures of object/subject, feminine/masculine and victim/victimised. This argument requires a consideration of theories of the cinematic gaze.

⁴¹ Veronica in *Heathers*.

⁴² Steven Woodward. “She’s murder: Pretty poisons and bad seeds” in *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*. Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance (eds) Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002. pp. 314, 316.

Heather Chandler’s self-destructiveness manifests itself in meaningless, degrading trysts, Heather Duke’s in her bulimia and Heather McNamara’s unsuccessful suicide attempt by swallowing sleeping pills. The emphasis on sex, diet and a ‘soft-suicide’ option firmly ensconces these females within a rigid patriarchal rendering of the female body and identity.

⁴³ Veronica in *Heathers*.

⁴⁴ Woodward, “She’s murder”, p. 315.

Mary Ann Doane states that the “woman’s exercise of an active investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimization”.⁴⁵ This proposition is influenced by Laura Mulvey’s seminal papers in which she contends that the cinematic gaze is a locus of power, commanding the ability to look, desire and therefore construct the Other. It is a spectatorial act that splinters male/active from female/passive, in which the “determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly”.⁴⁶ Mulvey later revises this theoretical paradigm in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, conceding that there *is* a female gaze.⁴⁷ It is only possible through the enacting of the active masculine. The female subject shifts restlessly in its “transvestite clothes”.⁴⁸ In light of this proposition, Doane’s comment makes sense. The female gaze is no trump card but a liability. Borrowed power is never willingly relinquished and must therefore be torn away. The vilified female gaze is justified with a return to familial bliss and a ‘natural’ social order which smooths over its serrated edges. It is the proverbial spoon of sugar to make the medicine go down.

In *Heathers*, there is no idyllic home life or nostalgic community to which to return or regress. Veronica’s family embodies this absent origin. Vacuous conversations are repetitively carried out in near verbatim over the ubiquitous bourgeois platter of pâté.

Father: So what was the first day after Heather’s suicide like?

Veronica: I don’t know, it was okay, I guess.

Mother: Terrible thing. So will we get to meet this dark horse prom contender?

Veronica: Maybe.

Father (looking at his cigarette): Goddamn. Will somebody tell me why I smoke these damn things?

Veronica: Because you’re an idiot.

Father: Oh yeah, that’s it.

Mother: You two.

⁴⁵ Mary Ann Doane. “The ‘woman’s film’: Possession and address” in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (eds) Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984. p. 72.

⁴⁶ Mulvey, “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema”, p. 750.

⁴⁷ Laura Mulvey. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: The Macmillan Press, 1989.

⁴⁸ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 37.

Veronica: Great pâté, but I'm going to have to motor if I want to be ready for that funeral.⁴⁹

Home life has been reduced to materiality without context, emotion or meaning. Individuality and autonomy must be forged in the space of the school and sites of leisure, where power dynamics among students can be mobilised and reworked to effect social change.⁵⁰ *Heathers* presents a caricatured community of date-rape jocks, awkward geeks, detached stoners, false preppies and dim-witted faculty members no less vulgar than the parentals. There is irony in the fact that Veronica's only admirably happens to be a psychopath with a penchant for detonating things. While Veronica's death wishes provide the impetus for ousting toxic personalities from the school body, she is initially the foil for J.D.'s personal vendettas. Veronica reappropriates the mantle of violence for creative purposes as opposed to anarchy, but it requires her to play the part of the bitch.⁵¹

Herein lies the fundamental difference between the bitch and the femme fatale. While the transgressive femininity of the latter establishes her as a social saboteur struggling against patriarchal codes of conduct, the bitch works within these confines to unsettle the (dis)equilibrium around her. The bitch's forthrightness and brutal honesty is able to unmask ideologies and serve as a "jolt and a warning".⁵² Her dissension has a purpose beyond her own selfish wants. While these moments may be rare, they provide an option to the punishment complex that inflicts the doomed femme fatale. The bitch wields both artifice and truth-telling like weapons. They are her dual

⁴⁹ Father (Bill Cort), Mother (Jennifer Rhodes) and Veronica in *Heathers*.

⁵⁰ A comprehensive discussion of sites of consumption, leisure and discipline in youth cinema can be found in:

Steve Bailey and James Hay. "Cinema and the premises of youth: 'Teen films' and their sites in the 1980s and 1990s" in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*. Steve Neale (ed.) London: British Film Institute, 2002. pp. 218-35.

⁵¹ Woodward, "She's murder", p. 316.

passports to penetrate deep under the skin of the social infrastructure and subversively (re)shape its social DNA. Veronica transcends “glamazon cattiness”.⁵³ The bitch is able to bravely go where no man has gone before.

If the textual eradication of noir’s femme fatale “involves a desperate reassertion of control on the part of the threatened male subject” as Doane argues, the bitch in youth cinema often signifies an obvious lack of ideal masculinity.⁵⁴ In *Heathers*, paternal figures are clueless or demented. Boyfriends and male colleagues are boorish, boring or pathetic. There are no heroes to be found in this hellish vision of teendom.

Veronica must rely on her own wits and initiative to save the school and reinstate order – her way. Extracting herself from J.D.’s scheme to detonate the school in a misguided act of altruism, Veronica must exploit the same ruthless violence. By the film’s finale, she has twisted the dichotomy of the female as the punished into the punisher.

Veronica’s active gaze is transmuted into dramatic action. A final conflict between J.D. and Veronica takes place in the school’s boiler room where he has strategically planted explosives which she must disarm. J.D. beats Veronica bloody and she responds by opening fire on him. This bitch is not afraid to soil her couture, mess up her hair or get her hands dirty.

Veronica’s transgressive agency does not privilege masculine ideals of strength and toughness. She requires a gun to wound J.D. Her frame is petite. In fact, she is not even successful in killing him, only injuring him. When she staggers through the front

⁵² Murphy, *Bitch*, p. 85.

⁵³ I have poached this phrase from the character of Brooke McQueen (Leslie Bibb) in the high school television series *Popular*. Episode 37: “It’s Greek To Me”. *Popular*. Created by Ryan Murphy and Gina Matthews. Warner Bros. Originally aired on 29 September, 1999 (USA). The series ran for two seasons.

door of the school after their violent encounter, her exit bears none of the fanfare, bravado or stylings of the hardbody heroine evident in films such as *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, *The Long Kiss Goodnight* or *Girlfight*.⁵⁵ The film's resolution, however, is no less significant or subversive.

J.D.: Colour me impressed. You really fucked me up pretty bad, Veronica. You've got power. Power I didn't think you had. The slate is clean. Pretend I did blow up the school. All the schools. Now that you're dead, what are you gonna do with your life?⁵⁶

Veronica removes a cigarette from her blazer pocket and shoves it in her mouth. She then folds her arms. J.D. sets off an explosive that he has strapped to his waist as Veronica watches on. No tears are shed. She does not recoil. She puffs on her cigarette with cool detachment, even though she is dishevelled and her hair and clothes are singed and smoking. J.D. kills himself because he resigns to the fact that Veronica is right, that she – not he – has the power. Veronica claims this defining victory. Her competency and agency has expanded the limits of the bitch and angry femme archetype. It is her rationality and reason, coupled with a no-holds-barred retaliation against physical and psychological abuse, which forces J.D. to turn his irrational violence and gaze upon his own self. Veronica exercises the ability for self-restraint and reaction, negotiating that awkward terrain between nicety and nastiness, and being bold and bitchy.⁵⁷ Such empowering fantasies of dangerous and commanding women

⁵⁴ Mary Ann Doane. *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. New York and London: Routledge, 1991. p. 2.

⁵⁵ *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. Directed by James Cameron. Written by James Cameron and William Wisher, Jr. Artisan Entertainment, 1991.

The Long Kiss Goodnight. Directed by Renny Harlin. Written by Shane Black. New Line Cinema, 1996.

Girlfight. Directed and written by Karyn Kusama. Columbia Tristar Pictures, 2000.

⁵⁶ J.D. in *Heathers*.

⁵⁷ This is made clear through the film's characterisation of female extremes. The 'nice girls' always finish last. They are the outcasts and down-trodden. At the other end of the scale are the unrelentless, cold bitches who slip into the punishing cycle that befalls the femme fatale. They are killed off like Heather Chandler, or remain despised with no mode of redemption.

“carve out new possibilities for female subjectivity”.⁵⁸ Veronica has earned what no femme fatale could ever aspire for, or be given – respect. She willingly enters the boxing ring and gives as good as she gets. While her right hook is no match for J.D.’s attacks, she responds with an equally effective counter. She unflinchingly shoots off his middle finger when he flips her the bird.

Heathers resolves any “lingering cultural discomfort” of the commanding femme in cinema with Veronica and Westerburg’s unofficial mascot for losers, Martha Dunnstock (Carrie Lynn), engaged in girley chat as a sultry jazz version of “Que Sera, Sera” plays sentimentally over the closing scene.⁵⁹ Opting to forgo her prom for an evening of movies and popcorn with Martha, the closing shot is of Veronica ambling down the darkened high school hallway with Martha circling around her in a motorised wheelchair. It is a Bogart/Raines-esque grand exit. While the bitch allows the performance of the difficult femme who digs up and disrupts the social foundation, it cannot be maintained permanently. It is a tense and strained persona that needs a release valve for narrative closure. This luxury is not so easily available to the heroine in *Freeway* who is a more problematic rendering of the teen bitch.

Freeway is a warped reworking of Little Red Riding Hood updated for the 1990s. With a “refreshing dose of bad attitude and potboiler freakishness”, the fairytale’s

⁵⁸ Kirsten Marthe Lentz. “The popular pleasures of female revenge (or rage bursting in a blaze of gunfire)”, *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 7 (3), 1993. p. 398.

The transgressive potential of vengeful female outlaws in negotiating contested space is also explored by Judith Franco in her study of the rape-revenge drama and action film. See:

Judith Franco. “Gender, genre and female pleasure in the contemporary revenge narrative: *Baise moi* and *What It Feels Like For A Girl*”, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, Vol. 21, 2004. pp. 1-10.

⁵⁹ Carol M. Dole. “The guns and the badge: Hollywood and the female lawman” in *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies*. Martha McCaughey and Neal King (eds) Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001. p. 98.

Jay Livingston and Ray Evans. “Que Sera, Sera”, *Heathers* album. Version performed by Sly and The Family Stone. CBS Records, 1989.

innocent heroine is replaced with an illiterate, shrill-voiced teenager hailing from a trailer trash caste.⁶⁰ When her mother, Ramona (Amanda Plummer), is arrested for solicitation and possession of narcotics and her step-father, Larry (Michael T. Weiss), for multiple parole violations, Vanessa Lutz (Reese Witherspoon) embarks on a journey to Grandma's (Kitty Fox) house to begin a new life. She encounters the big, bad wolf – the aptly named Bob Wolverton (Kiefer Sutherland) – a therapist who turns out to be the I-5 serial killer notorious for his signature rape, mutilation and murder of young 'wayward' girls. When he reveals his identity to Vanessa, she fights back but fails to actually end his life (although she is not aware of this at the time). Vanessa escapes a juvenile detention centre soon after she has been captured by the police, and then continues her jaunt to Grandma's – for which there is to be no happy ending. Grandma has met a grisly fate. She has been raped and garrotted by Wolverton. In a final clash, Vanessa's rage reaches its apex in response to Wolverton's vicious beatings. The police arrive shortly after she has overpowered and strangled her attacker to death. Gavin Smith describes *Freeway* as "a mirror image of *Clueless*, except that its vision of blonde SoCal girl agency is backed up by a .45 instead of a credit card. Definite Guilty Pleasure".⁶¹ Whereas *Heathers* posits the angry femme as privileged, wealthy and with her anger seething beneath a pretty exterior and feminine politesse, Vanessa Lutz is more the screaming harpy. With her aesthetically abrasive appearance and personality, her bitch tendencies erupt with every corrosive diatribe and corporeal assault.

Premiered during the international Spice Girl phenomenon, *Freeway* is more aligned with the vehement protestations of the Riot Grrrl Movement. It is a grating

⁶⁰ Gavin Smith. "Girlpower: Sundance '96", *Film Comment*, Vol. 32 (2), March-April 1996. p. 52.

representation of the angry teenage female that starkly contrasts the more consumer-friendly Girl Power. Vanessa's body is coded to be looked at with her tight-fitting, skimpy outfits and her sexually suggestive statements. It is however, a battered, bloody and dirtied body that does not allow visual pleasure but an assault upon the visual senses. The eroticism of the spectacle is turned into "a deliberate *demonstration*".⁶² After killing Wolverton, Vanessa emerges from her grandmother's house a mess. Blood, sweat, tears and mascara run down her face. It is an unsettling portrait that is punctuated by a freeze-frame of Vanessa midway through laughter as the eerie closing track reverberates in the background.



Figure 2: The final image of a battered and bloodied Vanessa Lutz (Reese Witherspoon) in *Freeway* (1996).

Freeway is no celebratory instance of perverse pleasure and punishment. It does not pander to gratuitous fantasies of female empowerment and rage. Vanessa's outbursts are a telling sign of the constrictions of her social ranking. Violence is not a last resort nor approached ambivalently, but a necessary and normal survival tactic – a feature

⁶¹ Smith, "Girlpower", p. 52.

⁶² I have utilised Rey Chow's analysis of the battered female body as an intentional visual assault in the film *Ju Dou*.

Rey Chow. *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. p. 167. Italics in original text.

which distinguishes her from Veronica Sawyer.⁶³ While Veronica's "teenage angst bullshit has a body count", death and injury done unto others is initially unpremeditated.⁶⁴ By the end, her actions are geared towards correcting her wrongdoings. Vanessa must employ violence to ensure her subsistence within regimes of systemic coercion. While there is no dark forest for this Red Riding Hood, there is a corresponding concrete jungle of freeways, Compton-like urban ghettos and institutions of incarceration. Wolverton is not Vanessa's only threat. For instance, Vanessa reveals that she has been repeatedly molested by her stepfather from an early age. Law enforcement agencies disregard her testimony that Wolverton is the I-5 Killer as defamatory lies. As Kimberley Roberts writes, "Vanessa does not stand a chance when pitted against a criminal justice system that is inherently biased, a system that would convict rather than defend her".⁶⁵ There is no knight in shining armour to come to her rescue. Even when Detectives Mike Breer (Wolfgang Bodison) and Garnet Wallace (Dan Hedaya) realise that Vanessa has been wrongly accused, they arrive after she has saved her own life. Vanessa is literally on her own.⁶⁶

Vanessa depicts a tough femininity that cannot be easily slotted into the role of the impassive female fighter, the bewitching femme fatale or the hard-done-by victim driven to revenge. These are tropes which can mitigate female agency and violence as a political intervention as argued by Sherrie Inness in *Tough Girls: Women Warriors*

⁶³ Kimberley Roberts. "Pleasures and problems of the 'angry girl'" in *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*. Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance (eds) Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002. p. 222.

⁶⁴ Veronica in *Heathers*.

⁶⁵ Roberts, "Pleasures and problems of the 'angry girl'", p. 225.

⁶⁶ This point is made clear early in *Freeway*. Vanessa's fiancé Chopper (Bokeen Woodbine), the only person she truly loves and can depend upon, is swiftly removed from the narrative. Unbeknown to her, he is fatally gunned down by rival gang members soon after she has bid him farewell.

and Wonder Women in Popular Culture.⁶⁷ Vanessa is removed from familiar scenarios of girlhood in cinema. There is no high school, end-of-year prom, shopping mall or cosy bedroom.⁶⁸ Vanessa traverses through foreign landscapes where the only common denominator is her continued oppression in an adult world of drugs, sex, assault and condescension. The embodied bitch is her armour. Offensive quips and impressive couture alone have little currency.

Freeway sketches a dystopic society that is an endless gauntlet of obstacles for the teenage girl. Vanessa lacks the education and financial resources to allow social (upward) mobility that the more conventional teen bitch possesses. With no home, belongings or support network, Vanessa can only claim ownership over her own body which require her voice and fists to deliver even greater clout. Her hyper-aggression is vengeance with a reason. Her actions are commensurate with her anger. This is exemplified in the first struggle between Vanessa and Wolverton. After he has beat and berated her as white trash, cut off her ponytail and promised to perform sexual acts upon her corpse, Vanessa retrieves a handgun from her basket and holds him hostage. She proceeds to earnestly lecture him on his perverted inclinations. After questioning his faith in God, she fires a bullet into his neck. When it becomes apparent that he is still alive, Vanessa fires several more rounds until she believes he has died. Her actions are decisive – to rid society of the threat that he poses. Following this gory shooting, Vanessa drives to a roadhouse and nonchalantly orders a “double He-man

⁶⁷ Sherrie A. Inness. *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

⁶⁸ The closest we come to a high school in *Freeway* is a brief opening scene in a juvenile corrective facility. Alison Bain explores the restricted urban spaces that young, white females occupy in teen films. See:

Alison L. Bain. “White western teenage girls and urban space: Challenging Hollywood’s representations”, *Gender, Place and Culture*, Vol. 10 (3), September 2003. pp. 197-213.

breakfast and a large size cherry cola”.⁶⁹ There is no room for remorse, hesitation or sentimental vulnerability. This breakfast scene is simultaneously comical and frightening. After having committed an act of savage violence, Vanessa’s casual demeanour is one of a teenager who has spent an exhaustive day at the mall. When she realises that her clothes and face are smeared with blood, she excuses herself to the bathroom to wash up. Vanessa exhibits a ruthlessness that is rarely accorded to women, especially young girls, and presents an alternative femininity. Her indifference is registered differently to that of the male hardbody of the action genre. While the steely expressions of Keanu Reeves and Vin Diesel are signs of self-control and coolness, Vanessa’s detachment is read as symptomatic of emotional and psychological imbalance. In her article on tough women in cinema, Stephanie Mencimer comments that:

Women are still only allowed to be violent within certain parameters largely proscribed by what men are willing to tolerate ... in the old action films, at the end, the male hero always walks away from a burning building looking dirty, bleeding sweaty yet vindicated (Remember Bruce Willis’ bloody feet after walking through broken glass barefoot in *Die Hard?*).

None of today’s action chicks come near that level of messiness. The violence is sterilized.⁷⁰

In *Freeway*, the violence is neither sterilised nor restrained. It is ugly and messy. This aggression filtered through the bitch is problematic. Roberts supports Mencimer’s view that “[t]he long history of the angry youth in film, canonized by James Dean, has by and large been a male story – one where the individual is valorized and set in conflict with the traditional mores of his parents and the larger society”.⁷¹ While James Dean may have been valorised, the teenage girl is pathologised. Vanessa is diagnosed by the authorities as having an antisocial personality disorder. She is

⁶⁹ Vanessa in *Freeway*.

⁷⁰ Stephanie Mencimer. “Violent femmes”, *The Washington Monthly*, Vol. 33 (9), September 2001. p. 18.

⁷¹ Roberts, “Pleasures and problems of the ‘angry girl’”, p. 222.

described by Mrs Cullins (Susan Barnes), a staff member at the juvenile jail, as “a sophisticated criminal and extreme danger to society”.⁷² She is penalised for her justified rage, whereas Wolverton’s homicidal tendencies are masked by the façade of white, bourgeois citizenship. Institutional and social discourse has no modality for imagining the violent teenage female beyond the juvenile delinquent. Vanessa’s actions, as vigilante as they may be, attempt to fulfil civic duties of social responsibility and concern – to purge the streets of psychopathic predators which the law is incapable of accomplishing. At one stage, Vanessa holds a John Doe (Michael Kaufman) at gunpoint and castigates him when he solicits her for sexual tricks. Confused and terrified, he asks why she is terrorising him. She shrieks in response, “Because I’m pissed off and the whole world owes me!”⁷³ She then empties the contents of his wallet and locks him up in the trunk of his motor vehicle. While her reasons may appear individualistic rhetoric, her resolutions serve a wider social purpose. This is solidified in an earlier scene between Vanessa and Mesquita (Alanna Ubach), another inmate of the juvenile jail, after they have both escaped.

Mesquita: So, uh, you won’t think I sound all feminist and shit. It’s like, the one thing that I learned in jail is that girls gotta help out other girls, you know? Especially convicts girls, cuz if they don’t they’d oughta be fucking dead. You know what I mean?

Vanessa: I hear what you’re saying.

Mesquita: Okay.⁷⁴

This is girl guerrilla warfare. It is a politics of desperation. The girls have no choice other than to form an alliance against oppressive institutions that punish a growing underclass of disadvantaged youth.

As part of a Latino gang and a convicted murderer, Mesquita represents yet another facet of the underclass of Los Angeles. Similar to Vanessa’s relationship with Chopper, her relationship with Mesquita serves to highlight the allegiance she feels to other teenagers who have “been in the system” – others who are considered beyond the

⁷² Mrs Cullins in *Freeway*.

⁷³ Vanessa in *Freeway*.

⁷⁴ Mesquita and Vanessa in *Freeway*.

pale of middle-class respectability and law-abiding behavior. Vanessa's relationship to Mesquita, however, is also deeply connected to their position as women.⁷⁵

Racism, sexism, age discrimination and class divisions manifest like infected, gaping wounds in *Freeway*'s nightmarish vision of a contemporary America where democracy is power owned and wielded by the privileged. Henry Giroux delineates this dire paradox in which the "welfare system's most vulnerable citizens – the young and the poor – [are] no longer a focus of social investment but a matter of social containment ... viewed as depraved rather than deprived, troubling rather than troubled".⁷⁶ Whereas Giroux singles out the young and the poor, *Freeway* affixes female identity to this catalogue of condemning traits. When Vanessa screams that she is pissed off and that the whole world owes her, it is not bratty bitchiness or the voicing of a personal agenda. It is a public protestation that meritocracy is no guarantee of social progress for the disadvantaged. The violence enacted is not hubristic, but a desperate clawing for justice and (ultimately unattainable) political citizenship.

While the femme fatale of noir must meet a bloody demise or face a lonely, deprived future for our viewing pleasure, the bitch expands the possibilities of the angry femme. *Heathers* and *Freeway* suggest two trajectories of the bitch in which her influence and aggression can be utilised to instigate social change, or at the very least provide a critique of stifling notions of girlhood. The bitch moves the plot along but cannot claim the same for ideologies of femininity. The tension created by the bitch cannot be sustained. Her anger exhausts itself eventually. While Veronica Sawyer and Vanessa Lutz present radical bitch politics, their divergent endings are revealing.

⁷⁵ Roberts, "Pleasures and problems of the 'angry girl'", p. 229.
Chopper is an African-American teenager on parole.

Veronica's vented violence achieves real change. The high school is a better place as a result of her actions. She elicits a collective sigh of relief with the narrative's orderly closure and her resumption as the benevolent defender of the meek. While she still retains an air of (tolerated) toughness, Veronica is no longer deadly. Vanessa, however, remains uncomfortably displaced.

She may have defeated the demon that was Bob, but the real demons of poverty, illiteracy, and a criminal record still exist. In fact, it is her very outlaw mentality – and her raging need to take things into her own hands in order literally to survive – that offers a critique of the ways in which girl power's tendency toward a "Just Do It!" ideology leaves those in the grip of systemic oppression completely outside the fold and, indeed, often further subjects them to it. Despite the bluster of her angry outbursts, we cannot help wondering at the film's conclusion, what exactly can this particular girl "just do"?⁷⁷

Vanessa's anger and bitch mentality finds no outlet for satisfactory resolve. While she has been cleared of her outlaw status by Detectives Breer and Wallace, she is still resigned to the periphery. There is no contingency plan to control this bitch. Veronica Sawyer's bitch politics can be reappropriated with a new application of makeup and a chic outfit. Vanessa's transgressive bitch politics (read as grotesque) is too wieldy and excessive to contain. Matthew Bright's film may have given us one of the most shocking, memorable and brazen cinematic depictions of teenage female rage and reprisal to date, but the fact that Vanessa is hardly better off from where she began is cause for concern. The femme fatale's grave may have merely been traded in for a barred cell or a ticket to ride to nowhere.

Feminism has made women the siren call for social change after the Second World War. The politics of desperation in the bitch expose a limitation in the magnitude of these advances and the speed at which they occur. While the happy solidarity of the

⁷⁶ Henry Giroux. *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear*. New York and Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. p. 107.

⁷⁷ Roberts, "Pleasures and problems of the 'angry girl'", pp. 230-31.

Spice Girls is (barely) tolerated, bitch politics is troubling. The bitch is at her best when she practises a raw, fierce femininity that is not afraid to get down and dirty, but is only permitted to bubble to surface under extreme circumstances. The prominent body of the bitch amplifies her protests, but also magnifies the open wounds and faded scars of an ongoing struggle.

Behind the Strobes and Smoke

Every generation of youth is remembered for its invention, or desecration, of culture. It is through hindsight that their impact upon the social landscape can be more accurately gauged. Separated by time and space, the modern observer can map the progression of subcultural movements with a certain level of (detached) insight. While the fast-paced music of Bill Haley and the gyrating hips of Elvis Presley incited moral panics of the spiritual pollution of teenagers in the 1950s, today they are recognised as national heroes – the kings (not culprits) of rock and roll. Time changes our perception and acceptance of events.

Youth of the last two decades will inevitably be associated with the rise (and fall) of the rave phenomenon. The scene was the postmodern answer to rock and roll in terms of its sheer size, popularity and its encroachment on daily existence. Every week, hundreds of thousands of ravers descended into abandoned warehouses, open fields and converted clubs to experience a celebration of the senses. Its innovation stemmed from its aspiration to build cohesive communities where anything *seemed* possible. This chapter picks up where (very) few cultural theorists have left off – wondering where women fit into the picture. Aside from the Day-Glo girl on the dance floor, the female is conspicuously absent from other spheres of rave. This becomes obvious when we look at the cogs of rave – the economics that allow it to operate. *She* is nowhere to be found. Without denying the revolutionary influence of rave upon contemporary culture, this chapter takes the common argument of the politics of pleasure and reinserts the female into the picture, where she becomes the metaphoric spanner thrown in the works.

Chapter 6

Club Casualties

Go-Go(ing) Girls of Rave

The weekend has landed. All that exists now is clubs, drugs, pubs and parties. I've got forty eight hours off from the world man. I'm gonna blow steam out of my head like a steaming kettle. I'm gonna talk codshit to strangers all night. I'm gonna lose the plot on the dancefloor; the free radicals inside me are freaking man! ... Anything could happen tonight, you know? This could be the best night of my life! I've got seventy three quid in my backburner. I'm gonna wax the lot, man.

The milky bars are on me! Yeah!

Calling all crusaders of the dancefloor in green-light mode. Disco queens, club casualties, c'mon! Let's join forces. Let's hoof it – aah!¹

~ Jip [*Human Traffic*] ~

The narrative of rave is one of ephemerality. The present is ambivalently conflated with the past and future – nostalgic recollections of last week's phenomenal rave party, and the intense anticipation of next week's event. There is awkwardness in attempting to capture the volatility of living in the moment and also writing outside of it.

Researching such an event is like trying to photograph a shadow that has already moved. The result has been a disorganised tradition of oral histories premised on sensory memories and private collections of paraphernalia – posters, fliers, technicolour garments – hoarded by the pack rat of rave couture.² Cinema provides an effective medium for translating these sensory memories and moments out of their

¹ *Human Traffic*. Directed and written by Justin Kerrigan. Renaissance Films, 1999.

² Christina Lee. "Party people in the house(s): The hobos of history" in *Liverpool of the South Seas: Perth and Its Popular Music*. Tara Brabazon (ed.) Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2005. p. 50.

In recent years, there has been a nostalgic revival of rave culture with 'reunion' nights, the release of popular 1980s acid house compilations and DJs returning to the older technologies to produce their music. See:

Dorian Lynskey. "The old skool reunion", *The Guardian*, 11 January, 2002.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/friday_review/story/0,3605,630391,00.html> Accessed online on 15 February, 2005.

transient state. I am interested in how rave is represented and remembered, in particular those narratives which are erased or pushed into the footnotes of history. This chapter locates problematic methodologies of writing rave and explores how film can provide an insight and trace for reclaiming this history. In doing so, my research unravels the contradictions of the scene and the unpopular politics of club casualties. I look at the invisible woman in rave, who implicates inequalities of power based on gender, age and class. The journey of this chapter firstly reveals the difficulties and absences in applying the paradigms set forth by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and postmodernist theory that have been *de rigueur* in studies of rave. The final section concludes with a discussion of the film *Go* as a case study into the politics of music and dance, labour, gender and representation.³ In revisiting youth and subcultural theories presented earlier in the thesis, this chapter converges like a Venn diagram onto the overlapping region of youth, class, gender and popular culture. Music and how it moves is inevitably bound to discourses of sexuality, collective consciousness and identity. Music (its production and consumption) and dance are never *just* about pleasure-seeking and entertainment.

In *Adventures on the Wheels of Steel: The Rise of the Superstar DJs*, Dave Haslam devotes a chapter to the soul disc jockeys of the 1960s and 1970s in northern England.⁴ Threads of disparate personalities and narratives are weaved together through the experiences of Brian Rae, one of the first DJs to enter the business. Of particular interest and amusement was Rae's recollection of his go-go girls who performed onstage with him. With their routines and choreographed back flips and spins

Jody Rosen. "90's Hipsters dial up with the past with an 80's plaything", *The New York Times*, 18 June, 2000. Accessed on Proquest 15 February, 2005.

³ *Go*. Directed by Doug Liman. Written by John August. Columbia Pictures, 1999.

synchronised to the music, and their “short skirts on and tassels in all the right places”, the two young women were instrumental to the demand for Rae’s services at various venues.⁵ As the DJ commented, “I got some good gigs, and I was making a name for myself for having these girls”.⁶ In 1967, Rae (successfully) auditioned for a job at the Twisted Wheel Club in Manchester, with the session presided over by the highly reputed DJ Ray Teret. As a club that prided itself on its ‘serious’ music, “[t]he Wheel was no place for commercial fripperies; the go-go girls stayed in Warrington”.⁷ To borrow from the adage, it was back to usual for these women – a factory job by day, the housebound female by night.

Brian Rae’s anecdote conjures to the surface a whole history and tradition of the serviceability and (in)significance of women, especially young females, in public spaces of music and dance. Familiar images of the wallflower desperately hoping to be asked for the next dance at a cotillion; the bikini clad hip-swingers of an Elvis Presley movie; the twirling skirts and sparkling high heels of a disco diva; a group of ‘Tracys’ dancing around their handbags in a nightclub; the faceless housewives obscured by rockstar husbands – these abound not only in (fictive and actual) cinematic and televisual productions, but also in the recorded annals of biographies, photographic exhibitions and historical compendiums of eras of popular music. A retrospective reading of such iconography has often rendered the female either absent, objectified under the (assumed) male gaze, or debased as the type of trivial nonsense

⁴ Dave Haslam. *Adventures on the Wheels of Steel: The Rise of the Superstar DJs*. London: Fourth Estate, 2001. See Chapter Six “Leaving the go-go girls at home: The northern soul DJs” (pp. 107-29).

⁵ Haslam, *Adventures on the Wheels of Steel*, pp. 111, 114.

⁶ Haslam, *Adventures on the Wheels of Steel*, p. 114.

⁷ Haslam, *Adventures on the Wheels of Steel*, p. 116.

that ensured Rae's go-go girls stayed at home while he attended to the more important job of spinning records.⁸

This absence can be tracked in Michael Winterbottom's *24 Hour Party People*.⁹ It is a self-referential film that consciously layers elements of fiction over actual events. It focuses on the evolving music and dance scene in Manchester, from punk of The Sex Pistols in 1976, through to the age of Joy Division (later reforming as New Order after the band's lead singer, Ian Curtis, commits suicide on the eve of the group's rise to stardom in America), to the exhilaration of rave culture and its eventual demise. The narrative's protagonist is Tony Wilson (Steve Coogan), a television personality and founder of Factory Records and the (in)famous Hacienda.¹⁰ Speaking direct to camera, Wilson states, "this is not a film about me ... I'm a minor character in my own story. This is a film about the music and the people who made the music".¹¹

Interestingly, but not unexpectedly, women remain marginalised in this rendition of musical history as housewives, whores, fans or girlfriends. When Curtis dies, there is no sign of his wife at the funeral proceedings. While Wilson and his male cohorts

⁸ By no means do I wish to depoliticise women's importance in the popular music and dance scene, or suggest that they permanently occupy positions of subservience and servitude. For instance, the Riot Grrrl Movement of the 1990s showed itself to be a highly influential figurehead for feminism – with its angry women enacting their rage on, and through, the body. Even the often regimented partner dancing styles of the 1940s could be reconstituted into a form of rebellion. This was evident in the rise of popularity (and notoriety) of the Lindy Hop amongst youth – a style that was based on spectacular aerial feats, couples breaking away from each other, and an inordinate amount of energy that eschewed the protocols of conservatism and self control. Women's capabilities were prized as much as their male counterparts. The act of dancing itself was a physical form of protest during World War II against the Nazi party's doctrines in countries such as Germany. See:

"The swing movement in Nazi Germany".

<http://www.ezresult.com/article/The_Swing_Movement_in_Nazi_Germany> Accessed online on 9 February, 2004.

⁹ *24 Hour Party People*. Directed by Michael Winterbottom. Written by Frank Cottrell Boyce. MGM, 2002.

¹⁰ Factory Records spawned Joy Division and Happy Mondays.

¹¹ Tony Wilson in *24 Hour Party People*.

remain the centre of the text, it is the women who are resigned to the sidelines.¹²

I argue that the ambiguity of the narrative trajectory/trajectories of rave culture as a musical formation has resulted in its difficult transition to cinema. It is surprising that there are relatively few films documenting the rave experience that capture its complexities, with warehouse dance parties often functioning merely as attractive, sanitised backdrops. I am more interested in those films which delve into darker, sideline spaces of rave that remain in the blind spot of cultural and cinematic analysis. In order to do so, it is imperative to address the problematic and simplified theorisations of rave history and its representations.

Wonderful World, Beautiful People: The Politics of Partying

The origins of rave in the United Kingdom were not to be found in the style capital of London, but hundreds of miles away in the Mediterranean, and born “at the zero degree of popular culture: the package holiday”.¹³ With its alluring cocktail of sun, sea and modern comforts at an affordable rate, the Balearic islands became a fashionable destination for British holidaymakers escaping not only the chilling winters, but also a dire socio-economic situation at home.

By the mid-eighties, unemployment in Britain had reached a record high. Prime Minister Thatcher was fond of telling us we’d never had it so good, but despite the stories of champagne-swilling yuppies in the City and loadsamoney lads in the property and building trades, for many young Britons the reality was the dole or pointless job schemes.¹⁴

¹² Deborah Curtis, the widow of Ian Curtis, has attempted to write women and their experiences back into a primarily male-dominated music history. Her biography documents the career of her husband and Joy Division through a female perspective. See: Deborah Curtis. *Touching from a Distance: Ian Curtis and Joy Division*. London: Faber and Faber, 1995.

¹³ Antonio Melechi. “The ecstasy of disappearance” in *Rave Off: Politics and Deviance in Contemporary Youth Culture*. Steve Redhead (ed.) Aldershot: Ashgate, 1993. p. 30.

Thatcherism decreed a severance from the ‘old’ ways, in favour of a doctrine of libertarian capitalism. The vision was to create a “paradise of untrammelled entrepreneurial and consumer opportunity”.¹⁵ Meritocratic ideologies assured that effort would be duly rewarded. It soon became apparent that the scheme privileged a selective minority, while a population of unemployed and minimal-wage citizens began to escalate. In addition, “Thatcherite assaults on collectivism, pursued through a whole range of policies, intentionally created a society that was fragmented and individualised”.¹⁶ This contributed to the dismal, moribund sense of futility in the wider populace that the future (and present) was to be feared, not embraced. Cynicism was rife. The promise of a dream had become the fulfilment of a nightmare for the working class and youth. Change was not only imminent, but craved like oxygen.

While the town of San Antonio in the Mediterranean was the initial locale frequented by tourists with its “self contained pocket of domestic culture, a home from home”, it was the discovery of the beyond-the-brochure Ibiza on the other side of the island that would mark the beginnings of a worldwide club and subculture.¹⁷ What was found and subsequently sought was not so much escape as it was a “broader mutation of knowledge and experience”.¹⁸ A combination of house beats, ambience and the drug Ecstasy fostered a collective sense that anything was possible. With its grandiose discotheques, eccentric and eclectic crowds – the backpacker mingling amongst celebrities – and the culture of dance it encouraged, the growing number of Britons

¹⁴ Sheryl Garratt. *Adventures in Wonderland: A Decade of Club Culture*. London: Headline, 1998. pp. 94-95.

¹⁵ Matthew Collin. *Altered State: The Story of Ecstasy Culture and Acid House*. London: Serpent’s Tail, 1997. p. 6.

¹⁶ Collin, *Altered State*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁷ Melechi, “The ecstasy of disappearance”, pp. 30-31.

¹⁸ Will Straw. “Dance music” in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*. Simon Frith, Will Straw and John Streets (eds) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. p. 174.

had found a temporary antidote to the crippling negativity that was prevalent back home.¹⁹ The British youth had not exempted themselves from reality, but rather found an environment where the responsibilities of work and routine were exchanged for spontaneous creativity.

“We were there to dance! And dance, and dance, and dance! And not stop! We got into this ideal, the E’d-up, loved-up thing; we wouldn’t have been so close without it. At one stage, eighteen of us lived in one apartment with six single beds”, says Adam Heath, then a nineteen-year-old clubber from Bromley. “We all got into the clubs for nothing, they knew us, they called us ‘the crazy English’ and they loved us. Everyone was quite young and well-travelled. We all had the same mentality, which was to have a really good time and try as hard as possible not to think about anything else. When we all came back to England, it really struck me that we’d got some kind of ... it felt like a religion”.²⁰

Shadowing the cycle of an MDMA trip – anticipation, ecstasy and freedom, followed by the depressive after-effects of the days after – youth returning to Britain after their annual pilgrimage to the Balearic islands experienced the ultimate comedown. The optimism that was generated would find no avenue for its expression, especially during the four consecutive terms of Thatcher’s Conservative government.²¹ As Matthew Collin writes of the dejected travellers’ arrivals back home:

Back at Gatwick, they stepped off the plane into a country they’d almost forgotten. *Fuck London for its dullness ...* Where to now? Back to their parents’ homes to plaster Amnesia posters over the walls of their bedrooms, sit back and drift away in reminiscence. Grey mood closing in. They’d changed, but Britain hadn’t.²²

¹⁹ Descriptions of Ibiza’s premiere dance venues Pacha and Amnesia, during and post-disco, paint images of fantasy playgrounds that starkly contrasted with the industrial nightspots in the United Kingdom. As Matthew Collin recounts:

they weren’t discos as the British knew them, typified by tinny sound systems, tacky flashing lights and carpets sticky with stale beer. Ibiza’s clubs had alfresco dancefloors illuminated by the moon and the stars, bubbling fountains, palm trees, plush cushioned alcoves, and extravagant, ever-changing décor. And the clientele! Transvestite floorshows, flash young blades from Barcelona with sculpted torsos and immaculate hairstyles, fiftysomething millionaires prancing in their suits, pop stars sipping champagne, flamboyant gays, people of all ages and nationalities (1997, p. 49).

Collin, *Altered State*, p. 49.

²⁰ Collin, *Altered State*, p. 52.

²¹ Andrew Hill provides a detailed analysis of how Acid House was an affront to the Thatcherite project and compromised the government’s “‘grid’ of control over the national space” (2003, p. 230). Andrew Hill. “Acid house and Thatcherism: Contesting spaces in late 1980s Britain”, *Space and Polity*, Vol. 7 (3), December 2003. p. 230.

²² Collin, *Altered State*, p. 54. Italics in original text.

From the mid-1980s, the house music that had been a staple in the Mediterranean nightspots had begun to trickle into venues in the United Kingdom, imported by DJs and avid devotees of the genre. It was not until the attempts at “the re-staging of Balearic memories over metropolitan weekends” that this emerging subculture would gain a distinctive shape and identity.²³ Euro-fashion dance wear found its way into clubs that resonated the nights of partying in Ibiza. It was a “weird mix of Mediterranean beach bum, hippy, and soccer hooligan – baggy trousers and T-shirts, paisley bandannas, dungarees, ponchos, Converse All-Stars sneakers – loose-fitting”.²⁴ It was a way to bring the holiday back into urbanity and the working week.

Ecstasy began to supersede alcohol as the drug of choice, and the ethos of peace, love, unity and respect (that was to be later abbreviated to PLUR) circulated among patrons. It was a dramatic and welcome contrast to the regular clubbing scene with its meat-market mentality and alcohol-fuelled hostility. The smiley face logo became the shorthand symbol for a better way of existing, borrowing from the hippie iconography of the 1960s. The trans-continental drift of the Balearic experience into what would be known as acid house was initially an exclusive affair located in established venues – with only a handful of promoters operating and limited attendees.²⁵

The manic energy and frenetic music of acid house could not be kept a holiday secret for long. The success of evenings at clubs such as London’s Shoom and Future

²³ Melechi, “The ecstasy of disappearance”, p. 33.

²⁴ Simon Reynolds. *Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1999. pp. 58-59.

²⁵ For instance, the infamous London club Shoom – the brainchild of Danny and Jenni Rampling – in 1987, became so reputed for its evenings of hedonistic dancing that soon the lines outside the venue (a small converted gym) exceeded the capacity within. Clubbers were ruthlessly turned away at the door. This problem was exacerbated when the West Coast glitterati caught news of the legendary parties. Collin, *Altered State*, pp. 57, 65-66.

created a burgeoning demand that would see more venues opening and the staging of one-off dance parties. This would not only satiate an ever-growing populace of acid house aficionados, but furthermore generate escalating public concern. It would herald the unofficial birth of rave as a new subculture associated with youth.²⁶ The enthusiastic embrace of electronic music and the ideologies expounded by this foreign dance culture witnessed a virtual explosion of rave parties between 1987 and 1989 in the United Kingdom, punctuated by the so-called Second Summer of Love (a direct reference to the 1967 Summer of Love).²⁷ As a landmark, it captured a significant moment in the history of popular youth culture that would later be (uneasily) translated into film.

By autumn '88, it was possible to live virtually full-time in this parallel universe. There was a party every night. Shoom, the Trip, RIP, and Spectrum were joined by new clubs like Confusion, Rage, Babylon, Love, Loud Noise, Enter the Dragon, Elysium, and on the weekends there were a host of one-shot warehouse events.²⁸

The media reaction to rave was initially a delayed response.²⁹ Its subversive qualities and influence evaded public scrutiny, remaining under the radar as an underground formation. This is evident from the following interviewee response.

There was one I was at that got closed down just after I left, but from what I hear the police went in and they cut the power to the building and told everyone to get out ... this girl had actually walked outside to go get some fresh air and then tried to get back in. She'd got through into the building and the police dragged her out by the hair and it caused a riot, because inside the place everyone was making their own music, everyone was stamping their feet, clapping their hands and dancing to that instead. But the place emptied eventually and everyone came outside ... I think three police

²⁶ The term 'rave' initially referred to illegal dance parties or festivals held in the late 1980s, and later extended to sanctioned (but barely 'tolerated' by the law) events up to the mid-1990s (Bennett, 2000, p. 74). Simon Reynolds describes rave as "the antithesis of *club*" (1999, p. 60. Italics in original text). Rave has now splayed into common parlance to denote any event featuring electronica music, extended periods of dancing and possible drug use.

Andy Bennett. *Popular Music and Youth Culture: Music, Identity and Place*. Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 2000. p. 74.

Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, p. 60. Italics in original text.

²⁷ Bennett, *Popular Music and Youth Culture*, p. 101.

²⁸ Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, p. 66.

²⁹ Chas Critcher. "'Still raving': Social reaction to ecstasy", *Leisure Studies*, Vol. 19, 2000. p. 148.

cars got trashed. Someone went up and down the police cars with a can of paint and sprayed them all. Didn't even make the news.³⁰

As rave became more visible, the British media was eager to endorse this new dance craze with *The Sun* even marketing its own version of the smiley logo tee-shirt.³¹

Predictably, this would rapidly degenerate into hostile 'media versus youth' warfare, with the labelling of rave culture as the latest folk devil. Discourses of moral panic that had been unleashed upon the Mods, Rockers and Skinheads in previous decades reappeared with a revised lexicon of the social perils of youth culture. Sensational media reports grossly distorted the behaviour of youth, "exaggerating dimensions of lawlessness and presenting the acid house subculture as a barometer of wider social ills and cultural decline".³² The Second Summer of Love coincided with the media's feeding frenzy, that in turn stoked the wrath of the justice system to remedy the malaise that was supposedly afflicting youth. A series of laws and sanctions was passed by the British government over the proceeding years in an attempt to curtail "any event featuring amplified repetitive beats".³³ The Licensing Act (1988) was targeted at nightclubs. The annual reapplication of a club's license was raised from one to seven, and police were granted greater agency to conduct inspections on licensed premises. The Entertainments (Increased Penalties) Act (1990) was a direct attack upon the burgeoning of unlicensed rave events. Its harsh penalties of jail sentences of up to six months, or hefty fines of up to 20,000 pounds for operators were to act as deterrents. The severity of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (1994) not only implicated rave organisers as breaching the law, but also extended to any

³⁰ 32 year old stocktake manager and freelance bouncer quoted in Lee, "Party people in the house(s)", p. 50.

³¹ Critcher, "Still raving", p. 148.

³² Bill Osgerby. *Youth in Britain since 1945*. Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. p. 182.

³³ Hillegonda C. Rietveld. "The body and soul of club culture", *The UNESCO Courier*, July-August 2000. p. 29.

individuals in attendance. In doing so, it criminalised a population of potential offenders.³⁴ Rave was seen as evidentiary of a new unruly youth culture.³⁵

The stifling regulations had an opposite effect. Rather than restricting the subculture's influence and spread, it burrowed deeper underground to evade legal prosecution.³⁶ It instigated a defiant response by ravers who saw their civil liberties as being violated. The right to party had become political. Despite the numerous penalties, the weekly number of ravers in Britain alone in 1994 was in the vicinity of hundreds of thousands, according to conservative estimates.³⁷ This was no minor feat considering the constant panoptic gaze of the legal system and its agents.

Studies of rave culture have been dominated by two main approaches. One follows the subcultural trajectories of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS). The other is ensconced in postmodern theory.³⁸ These methodologies have translated the liminality and fleeting nature of rave into tangible subcultural communities. While they have informed our understandings of rave, they have also put into place theoretical limitations. As has been discussed in Chapter One, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was a direct response to the spectacular youth subcultures in Britain that appeared between the 1950s and 1970s. These working-class youth subcultures were seen as reactions to, and corporeal manifestations of, their alienated social positioning.³⁹ Protest was seen as enacted

³⁴ Daniel Martin. "Power play and party politics: The significance of raving", *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 32 (4), Spring 1999. p. 79.

³⁵ Steve Redhead. *Repetitive Beat Generation*. Edinburgh: Rebel Inc., 2000. p. xvi.

³⁶ Rietveld, "The body and soul of club culture", p. 29.

³⁷ Jacqueline Merchant and Robert MacDonald. "Youth and the rave culture, ecstasy and health", *Youth and Policy*, Vol. 45, 1994. p. 18.

³⁸ Martin, "Power play and party politics", p. 77.

³⁹ Martin, "Power play and party politics", p. 77.

through the body via style and leisure. These subcultures were:

concrete, identifiable social formations constructed as collective response to the material and situated experience of their class ... they were also *attempts at a solution* to that problematic experience: a resolution which, because largely pitched at a symbolic level, was fated to fail.⁴⁰

As resistance was deemed ritualistic and symbolic, subcultural practices lacked “any real political clout” – consigned as empty rhetoric that lost all influence with the passing of youth into adulthood.⁴¹ The deadlock of this theoretical proposition is that subcultures have a limited shelf life. There is a built-in use-by-date that renders them benign *before* they have even been superseded by the next fad. Politically nostalgic from its conception, the imperfect cogs of the BCCCS become even more apparent with its application to rave culture. Its problematic translation across time and place accentuates the threadbare seams that holds together subcultural theory. Rave has not only altered perceptions and experiences of leisure, but also notions of economy, individualism and group identity. While there is always the danger of over-emphasising the resistive potential and intentions of the disempowered, gross underestimation is a comparable offence.⁴²

The proto-stages of rave culture were a direct response to, and against, the conservatism, declining social morale and status of disenfranchised youth and the working class, and fragmentation of previously cohesive communities. Ravers acted out their dissatisfaction by extracting themselves from the home, school or workplace to enter a space which defied the sensibilities of the everyday. The outlandish fashions

⁴⁰ John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts. “Subcultures, culture and class” in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds) London: Hutchinson and Co., 1976. p. 47. Italics in original text.

⁴¹ Martin, “Power play and party politics”, p. 77.

⁴² Resistance is not a clearly demarcated opposition to submission. Resistance lies on a continuum. It is a matter of degree. See:

and accoutrements, such as pacifiers, dolls, stuffed toys and suckers – “knickknacks from childhood” – were a means of transforming memories of Ibiza nights into actual experience that refused the drabness of wintry dystopias in Britain.⁴³ Rave offered an existence comprised of the nonlinear cumulus of the past (memories and childhood), the present (living for the moment) and the future (the optimism of a renewed nation state). As a site of bodies in motion and spaces in transition, identity became more fluid. As Philip Tagg states, “techno-rave puts an end to nearly four hundred years of the great European bourgeois individual in music”.⁴⁴ The decentring of the solo performer by an often faceless DJ (as was the case in the early incarnations of rave) rewrote the relationship between the artist and audience, elevating the status of the teeming masses offstage. The concomitant drug culture further reconstituted the rules of conduct in public spaces.

Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA), or as it was to be dubbed Ecstasy, had two major effects upon ravers. Its chemical-altering and stimulant properties simultaneously created an overwhelming sense of emotional empathy with other ravers, and provided the energy to dance for an inordinate number of hours.

One of the most striking changes was the way that the territorial rivalry between areas of London – largely expressed through following different soccer teams – was dissipated. Almost overnight, the box cutter-wielding troublemaker metamorphosed into the “love thug”, or as Brit rapper Gary Clail later put it, “the emotional hooligan”.⁴⁵

The rules of engagement had changed. This was appropriately captured by DJ Paul Oakenfold’s remark regarding the Project Club, “The idea was ‘if you’re not into

Brian Wilson. “The Canadian rave scene and five theses on youth resistance”, *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 27 (3), 2002. pp. 373-412.

⁴³ Christopher John Farley. “Rave new world: It’s more than just ecstasy”, *Time*, Vol. 155 (23), 5 June, 2000. Accessed on Expanded Academic Database 9 November, 2003.

⁴⁴ Philip Tagg. “From refrain to rave: The decline of figure and the rise of ground”, *Popular Music*, Vol. 13 (2), 1994. p. 219.

dancing, then don't come down'''.⁴⁶ Rave community aspired to, and achieved in certain respects, a form of egalitarianism. It was many bodies under one roof, bound by a shared intimacy. Additionally, Ecstasy de-emphasised sexual relations and conventional narratives of heterosexual romance.⁴⁷

Both ecstasy and amphetamine tend to have an anti-aphrodisiac effect. E may be the 'love drug', but this refers more to *agapē* than to *eros*, cuddles rather than copulation, sentimentality rather than sticky secretions. E is notorious for making erection difficult and male orgasm virtually impossible ... turning rave into space where girls can feel free to be friendly with strange men, even snog them, without fear of sexual consequences.⁴⁸

By altering the dynamics on the dance floor, rave contrasted with the more traditional club and pub scene. This had particularly significant implications for female ravers, which will be addressed later in this chapter. These readings of rave are painted in broad brushstrokes. They are useful, even necessary, to navigate this cultural terrain. They provide the starting point from which to explore the ambiguities and contradictions of its peripheral narratives, and the limitations of theoretical approaches that have been applied to their study.

Reading rave through subcultural theory, it is problematically conceptualised as an impotent pedagogy, fated to be appropriated by commercial industry. It implies that subcultures are organic formations that are vulnerable to the corrosive influences of external agents. Sarah Thornton counters:

The idea that authentic culture is somehow outside media and commerce is a resilient one. In its full-blown romantic form, the belief imagines that grass-roots cultures resist and struggle within a colonizing mass-mediated corporate world ... subcultures

⁴⁵ Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, pp. 63-64.

⁴⁶ Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, pp. 58-59.

Paul Oakenfold and partner, Ian St. Paul, were two of the pioneering proponents to introduce the Balearic experience into South London after their own time spent in Ibiza.

⁴⁷ Scott R. Hutson. "Technoshamanism: Spiritual healing in the rave subculture", *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 23 (3), 1999 (Fall). p. 69.

⁴⁸ Simon Reynolds. "Rave culture: Living dream or living death?" in *The Clubcultures Reader: Readings in Popular Cultural Studies*. Steve Redhead, Derek Wynne and Justin O'Connor (eds) Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997. p. 106.

do not germinate from a seed and grow by force of their own energy into mysterious moments to be belatedly digested by the media.⁴⁹

A host of binary oppositions is erected with the assertion of ‘authentic’ and ‘appropriated’ culture – natural versus artificial, underground versus commercialised. The subversive nature of ‘authentic’ rave would therefore also denote its weakness. The poaching of the subculture, repackaged and sold to the mainstream, become death knells to rave’s legitimacy – electronic music used in television advertisements, the rise of the superstar DJ (as opposed to anonymous personality), and holding events in sanctioned venues. This logic asserts that “underground rave is *inherently* resistive to and commercial rave culture *fully* complicitous with hegemonic capitalism”.⁵⁰

Neat analytical separations ignore the negotiative process of subcultural formations. As Steve Redhead argues, “‘Authentic’ subcultures were produced by subcultural theorists, not the other way around”.⁵¹ Rave was never pre-capitalist, even in spite of the ‘non-profit economy’ that operated in its early days.⁵² Douglas Rushkoff contends that what made rave so special was “its separation from corporate culture and the market economy”, and that once this had been transgressed, it had “lost its claim to the sacred”.⁵³ This perspective pays no heed to the fact that “[t]he production and consumption of ‘fun’ is as much about industrial production, distribution and exchange

⁴⁹ Sarah Thornton. “Moral panic, the media and British rave culture” in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (eds) New York and London: Routledge, 1994. pp. 176-77.

⁵⁰ Brian L. Ott and Bill D. Herman. “Mixed messages: Resistance and reappropriation in rave culture”, *Western Journal of Communication*, Vol. 67 (3), 2003 (Summer). p. 264. Italics in original text.

⁵¹ Steve Redhead. *The End-Of-The-Century-Party: Youth and Pop Towards 2000*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990. p. 25.

⁵² The earliest rave parties were considered to operate on a ‘gift economy’ in which collectives would form, and generate sufficient funds to print fliers and rent a sound system. The primary agenda was to hold a memorable party upholding the rave ethos. If an event broke even, excess monies would be injected into the organisation of the next party (Rushkoff, 1999).

Douglas Rushkoff. “Rave against the machine: Rave culture once promised something truly extraordinary, capable of transforming the world ... the spirit is gone ...”, *This Magazine*, Vol. 33 (3), November-December 1999. Accessed on Expanded Academic Database 9 November, 2003.

as traditional manufacture”.⁵⁴ To argue otherwise is to toe-tag youth subculture as dead on arrival – it has no life beyond its birth. Evolution denotes demise and the diffusion of its cultural relevance. The effect of claiming authenticity is that it is accorded a single, linear trajectory. Rave however, claims a fragmented and messy narrative. The inter-national translations and influences have made it a hybrid musical formation which cannot be contained by a solitary, definitive account.

The theoretical problems posed by subcultural theory become even more pronounced when considering the place of females in subcultural narratives. Much criticism has been made of the missing women in the early studies by the BCCCS.⁵⁵ It has created a pothole in social history that has yet to be adequately repaired. As Maria Pini writes in relation to rave culture:

The club cultural levels which appear to attract most critical attention, continue to be primarily male-centred. Women tend not to be located at the levels of musical production, event organization, drug-distribution and hence profit-making ... Although their exclusion from these traditionally more significant sites is clearly not total, were we to chart an objectivist history of rave culture, focusing upon its more outwardly visible signs, women would make a very fleeting appearance.⁵⁶

Angela McRobbie has written extensively of this skewed space of representation, advancing that women are not so much absent as they are rendered invisible.

McRobbie’s attempt at reinserting this figure into the subcultural landscape is counter-productive in many respects. She locates and limits females to the realms of teeny-

⁵³ Rushkoff, “Rave against the machine”.

⁵⁴ Steve Redhead. *Subcultures to Clubcultures: An Introduction to Popular Cultural Studies*. Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997. pp. 93-94.

⁵⁵ Angela McRobbie. *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1991. p. 4.

⁵⁶ Maria Pini. *Club Cultures and Female Subjectivity: The Move from Home to House*. Houndmills and New York: Palgrave, 2001. p. 30.

Also see:

Maria Pini. “Women and the early British rave scene” in *Back to Reality? Social Experience and Cultural Studies*. Angela McRobbie (ed.) Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997. pp. 152-69.

bopper pop, or they are “central and pivotal to a subordinate sphere” of the family home.⁵⁷ There is something disturbing about this direction and mode of analysis.

Narrative fantasies about bumping into David Cassidy in the supermarket, or being chosen out by him from the front row of a concert, both carry a strongly sexual element, and are also means of being distracted from the demands of work or school or other aspects of experience which might be perceived as boring or unrewarding.⁵⁸

Reading such a statement, I am unsure whether amused laughter or lament would be the more appropriate response. The recognition of bedroom/household culture is laudable, but does not compensate for the stasis in personal circumstances. Narrative fantasies are one thing. Taking active measures to make a perceptible difference in quality of life and experience is another. In *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young*, Paul Willis endeavours to reinvest significance in the banal.⁵⁹ Willis politicises the merits of what he terms “symbolic creativity” – those activities and pursuits which arise from, and are integral to, the work performed to sustain human existence on a daily basis.⁶⁰ Common culture is imbued with a relevance that is generally conferred to high art and aesthetics of fine taste. It acknowledges and seeks out the extraordinary in the ordinary.⁶¹

Willis writes, “There is work, even desperate work, in [youths’] play”.⁶² The clean divisions between labour and leisure, and politics and pleasure are unravelled. This is even more apparent with the author’s elaboration of symbolic work as a “kind of humanly necessary work” in which new meanings are invented by applying human

⁵⁷ McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, pp. 3, 11.

⁵⁸ McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, p. 13.

⁵⁹ Paul Willis. *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1990.

⁶⁰ Willis, *Common Culture*, p. 10.

⁶¹ Willis, *Common Culture*, pp. 2, 3, 9.

⁶² Willis, *Common Culture*, p. 2.

effort and capacities to “symbolic resources and raw materials”.⁶³ It asserts an egalitarian modality of informal production that is no less significant than material commodities of commerce.

Willis’ conceptualisation, in spite of its noble intentions, seems a reworked version of subcultural theory for the 1990s. The emphasis on the symbolic aspects of work and play asserts that the production of meaning is democratic in the sense that signs are readily available to be reappropriated. Resistance is to be found in the most mundane of duties, and in the most uninspiring of settings. It is an idealisation of social change at a micro-level. While Willis grants his subjects agency, it is not clear how private acts will translate into public intervention. It is little use standing on a soapbox, aided with a state-of-the-art sound system, if it is an empty hall. This problematic stance filters inadvertently through Willis’ discussion of the everyday symbolic creativity and work of unemployed youth, and more significantly young women, whom he associates with the home.

these women make some space for rest and relaxation to be themselves for themselves – and symbolic materials play a part in this. The television gives them the minimum means of escape. Many have the television on all day. Like most viewers, they combine watching television with other activities. They glance at and listen to it throughout the day. Only when programmes that they like are on, do they try to sit down and watch them.⁶⁴

In this romanticisation of the “twilight domestic world of the imagination”, where fantasy resists the demoralising aspect of being housebound, Willis overlooks the unequal distribution of cultural resources and means for social mobility.⁶⁵ There is a

⁶³ Willis, *Common Culture*, p. 10.

⁶⁴ Willis, *Common Culture*, p. 121.

⁶⁵ Willis, *Common Culture*, p. 126.

Ien Ang provides a detailed analysis of the function that melodramatic imagination plays in the “everyday consciousness” of soap opera fans, mostly women (1989 [1982], p. 82). Unlike Paul Willis, the author is wary of over-romanticising and simplifying the viewing practices of the readership and the impact of daytime soap operas upon the audience’s actual daily life.

reticence to acknowledge the very real problems faced by the working class, youth and women. While the interludes of daytime soap operas watched over a cup of tea provide moments of relief and creativity, discontentment has merely been displaced with distraction as a short-term panacea.

The limitations of the Birmingham tradition acted as catalysts for new approaches to the analysis of youth culture, such as Deviance Theory. They continued to “look beneath, or behind, the surfaces of the shimmering media-scape in order to discover the real, authentic subculture, apparently always distorted by the manufactured press and televisual image”, relying upon depth models which were no longer appropriate to postmodern culture.⁶⁶ With its sampled harmonies and lyrics, and luminous dreamscape of smoke machines and strobe lights, studies of rave have turned to postmodernist readings. The variegated and contradictory definitions of postmodernity demand comprehensive discussion which is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, I focus upon several aspects which distinguish it from subcultural theory. Described by Jean-François Lyotard as “incredulity towards metanarratives”, postmodernism marks the end of totalising narratives and absolute truths.⁶⁷ The notion of a monolithic history of human progress is rendered untenable by fragmented subjectivities and the legitimation of smaller narratives.⁶⁸

Freed of linear trajectories and the myth of ‘the real’, the responses of postmodernists

Ien Ang. *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*. Translated by Della Couling. London and New York: Routledge, 1989 (1982). p. 82.

⁶⁶ Steve Redhead. “The politics of ecstasy” in *Rave Off: Politics and Deviance in Contemporary Youth Culture*. Steve Redhead (ed.) Aldershot: Ashgate, 1993. p. 23.

⁶⁷ Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition*. Translated by R. Durand. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986. p. xxiv.

⁶⁸ Mark Poster. *Cultural History and Modernity: Disciplinary Readings and Challenges*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. p. 66.

splay in divergent directions. Jean Baudrillard's theorisation of the simulacra, the implosion of media and the "*catastrophe of meaning*" sketches a nihilistic portrait of the human condition and history.⁶⁹ By erasing authenticating narratives of the self, identity politics becomes more difficult to justify, assemble or codify. Inequalities of sexuality, class and ethnicity become atrophied in a pool of purposeful anonymity. A culture of equivalence weathers cultural difference. Identity and communal formation are reduced to the tag lines encapsulated by Ted Polhemus, "Who is real? Who is a replicant? Who cares? Enjoy".⁷⁰ This almost self-indulgent futility is contrasted by celebrations of endless possibilities, where time, space and identity are no longer fixed entities. It is this aspect that resonates in current studies of rave culture. Antonio Melechi goes so far as to affirm that identity and subjectivity is relinquished in "a seductive absence and enticing void where one can partake in the ecstasy of disappearance".⁷¹ The concept of identity dissolved is quixotic, but impractical. Rave and popular culture concerns spectacle and the spectacular that draws attention to itself.

Dick Hebdige's *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* provides a more textured and convincing reading of postmodern history and identity through the gauze of popular culture.⁷² Hebdige revels in the ambiguities of (youth) culture, and the presence and absences of the surface. He writes:

The politics of youth culture is a politics of metaphor: it deals in the currency of signs and is, thus, always ambiguous ... Subculture forms up in the space between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance, it translates the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasures of being watched. It is a hiding in the light.⁷³

⁶⁹ Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994. p. 83. Italics in original text.

⁷⁰ Ted Polhemus. "In the supermarket of style" in *The Clubcultures Reader: Readings in Popular Cultural Studies*. Steve Redhead, Derek Wynne and Justin O'Connor (eds) Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997. p. 151.

⁷¹ Melechi, "The ecstasy of disappearance", p. 32.

⁷² Dick Hebdige. *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*. London and New York: Comedia, 1988.

Hebdige draws attention to the technologies of textual production and consumption, averting us not to grand narratives, but to the minutiae of texts and their cultural significance. Transitory moments and populist artefacts are not forgotten – a symptom of the ‘end of history’ and logical time. Self does not submit to an ‘ecstasy of disappearance’. While Hebdige proposes continuity – there is no dreaded end – his is a “road to nowhere”, where we can but only laugh through the dread and crises of our times.⁷⁴ Is this enough?

The incongruity of the (reified) Birmingham theories and postmodernism means that there is little room for negotiation between the two models. It presents an ultimatum of theoretical positioning – one or the other. What is required is a middle-ground that recognises youth subcultures as neither wholly resistant or complicitly defeatist. Film provides a textual corrective to this theoretical disparity. The scholars based in the Manchester Institute for Popular Culture (MIPC) in the late 1980s and early 1990s provided a theoretical frame around (post) youth rave films. Responding specifically to British rave in the 1990s, this academic collective bridged the older tradition of the BCCCS with postmodernity. The MIPC pedagogy extends, elaborates and integrates existing theories. It understands that rave “has as much to do with shopping and consumption as with opposition and the 1960s counter-culture”.⁷⁵ Critical of claims that the “death of youth culture” in the 1990s has made subcultures rotting corpses of the present, the MIPC sought to reconcile the assumed differences between politics and pop, consumption and creative production.⁷⁶ They are not mutually exclusive. This paradigm is premised on negotiation, not negation. It reinserts bodies into spaces that

⁷³ Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light*, p. 35.

⁷⁴ Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light*, p. 243.

⁷⁵ Redhead, *The End-Of-The-Century Party*, p. 17.

⁷⁶ Redhead, *The End-Of-The-Century Party*, p. 29.

effect change, as much as they are affected by their amniotic surrounds. The MIPC allowed for the complexities and paradoxes of youth subculture, specifically rave, to be exhumed from the cracks in dominant narratives. I employ this model in a following case study of Doug Liman's film *Go*.

Go-ing My Way: Beyond the (G)rave

Ronna (Sarah Polley) is employed as a check-out clerk at a mini-mart somewhere in suburban Los Angeles. She has no money, detests her dead-end job, and is facing eviction from her apartment. It is Christmas Eve and she has been dumped with a double shift. Her youth is dismal.

The events of the day take a turn for the more interesting when Ronna is accosted by two customers in need of Ecstasy tablets. Unbeknown to Ronna, Adam (Scott Wolf) and Zack (Jay Mohr) are television soap actors collaborating with the Los Angeles Police Department in a narcotics sting. The resident go-between, Simon (Desmond Askew), is out of town in Las Vegas for a weekend jaunt of all-you-can-eat buffets, gambling and strip joints. Out of financial necessity and malice gleaned from having to labour through the festive season, Ronna decides to go directly to Simon's dealer Todd (Timothy Olyphant).

By night's end, Ronna has scored the Ecstasy tablets, evaded the law, had her life threatened by a menacing drug dealer, made a sizeable profit selling Panadol to unsuspecting youths at a rave party, convinced her best friend to sacrificially offer herself as collateral to Todd, and become a victim in a hit-and-run car accident.

However, like a late night infomercial for crock pots and steak knives, there is more.

Ronna survives the ordeal *and* manages to make it to work the following day, albeit bruised and battered. It is just another day – and Ronna’s youth is still bleak.

The narrative of *Go* takes place over two days. It moves erratically to the rhythm of a frantic techno beat, and pulsates visually through its rapid editing and mobile cinematography. Ronna’s story constitutes one of three interlocking tales, yet the film is sparked by, and concludes with, the apathetic counter girl. The conclusion is almost analogous to its beginning. Ronna is hardly better off by the time the closing credits have begun rolling from the moment we are introduced to her dreary existence. There is no revelation and no promise of an Ivy League college at the film’s end. Ronna does not quit her dead-end job, nor aspire to be more than a disgruntled sales clerk. End of story, or so it would seem.

The film has been described as a contemporary update of the narratives of the young and restless, but unlike James Dean the characters are slated as having no sense of responsibility or legitimate excuse for protest. In one review from the weekend arts and entertainment lift-out of the conservative *The West Australian* newspaper, the verdict was:

No matter how hard you try you won’t find too much significance in *Go*, not even a commentary on notions of fate, chance and redemption. So if *Go* has any meaning it’s about capturing that moment of abandonment in people’s lives when decisions are made without a thought for the consequences, when sheer intensity is the life-blood of one’s existence.⁷⁷

While Mark Naglazas is wary of completely trashing the film, his critique demeans *Go* for its depthlessness. The author appears more concerned with, and dazzled by, the “hip hyper-kinetic pleasures at ground level”, the “energy level” and “racing pulses”

⁷⁷ Mark Naglazas. “Get ready, go for some pulp action”, *The West Australian*, 21 August, 1999. p. 97.

than the film's content.⁷⁸ I dispute this appraisal.

Go is an exploration of (post) youth culture. Centring on Ronna as the primary character, the narrative navigates the precarious terrain of the traditionally male-oriented domain of club culture. In doing so, it reveals it to be a highly problematic landscape. It may seem incongruous to place this film at the tail end of this chapter. Its geographic and temporal location not only removes it from the United Kingdom, but also outside the age of rave. It is 1999 America, not 1988 Britain. Even though rave is synonymous with the United Kingdom, the subculture also had roots across the Atlantic with disco, house and techno music as the precursors.⁷⁹ Cities such as Detroit, Chicago and New York were the origins for what Simon Reynolds refers to as a "proto-rave scene".⁸⁰ Although *Go* occurs nearly a decade after the golden 'heydaze' of rave, the socio-economic environment is synergetic to the British milieu of the late 1980s. Thatcher's (unfulfilled) promise of prosperity and possibilities found its doppelganger in the great American dream that had become an invalid deal for the Generation X of the 1980s and 1990s.

America's great social experiment, arguably, has not been democracy but the pursuit of happiness – that distinctively modern idea, ordained by the Fathers as an inalienable right and wielded ever since like some vibrating megadildo, available at the right price, though with no long-term effects.⁸¹

In *Go*, Ronna becomes the loaded signifier of disaffected youth. Issues of class and gender inequality are played out on her body. With no money, prospects or future, Ronna's second-class citizenship becomes even more apparent in relation to the male characters around her. She lacks the resources for upward mobility. While Simon and

⁷⁸ Naglazas, "Get ready, go for some pulp action", p. 97.

⁷⁹ See Chapter One "A tale of three cities: Detroit techno, Chicago house and New York garage, 1980-90" in Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, pp. 12-39.

⁸⁰ Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, p. 143.

his posse of friends are able to escape to Las Vegas for a weekend of debauchery, and Zack and Adam are urban yuppies who cruise the cityscape in their stylish Miata, Ronna has no means of escape. For this character, there is no Ibiza – only the promise of the potentiality of Christmas Eve night where anything could happen.

Ronna is no blissed out raver on the dance floor. She is not a consumer of the pleasures of dance, drugs and delirium – that shimmering fac(ad)e of rave. Instead, she has traded her pumps for the heavy Doc Marten boots of industry and production to become an Ecstasy dealer. The narrative skirts around the sordid back alleys and secret rooms of the scene. The hippie trippy vibe of rave is pried open from the onset of the film and left exposed like a deep lesion for the duration of the story. There is nothing romantic about Ronna's situation. It reveals the gritty underbelly of the capitalist creature that lurks beneath the surface of the 'funhouses' of youth. Although Ronna's age (she is seventeen years old) and inexperience are integral to the blunders and mishaps that befall her, her gender is the defining factor that shapes the course of the events. By extracting this character from the customary mould of raver, crack-whore, chanteuse or the accessorising girlfriend, Ronna's body transforms into a problem. In a business recognised as a male-dominated genre – from the organisers of events, to the DJs and the dealers – Ronna wedges herself like a splinter in the finger into the role of cultural producer as opposed to consumer.⁸² This is underscored in a conversation between Ronna and her two hesitant sidekicks, Mannie (Nathan Bexton) and Claire (Katie Holmes), en route to Todd's apartment.

⁸¹ Andrew Ross. "Andrew Ross' weather report", *Artforum International*, Vol. 32 (9), May 1994. Accessed on Expanded Academic Database 18 January, 2004.

⁸² Lori Tomlinson. "'This ain't no disco' ... Or is it? Youth culture and the rave phenomenon" in *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World*. Jonathon S. Epstein (ed.) Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. p. 198.

Mannie: But it's an evolutionary leap ... You're moving up the drug-food chain without permission.

Claire: You shouldn't do this Ronna.

Ronna: Why can't you chill the fuck out, okay? It's just once. When Simon gets back, we can still overpay for quarters if it makes you feel all warm and happy, alright? But this is my deal. Just sit back and relax.⁸³

Ronna resides at the lowest rungs of rave culture's pecking order. She joins the ranks of a population of women rendered invisible, harmless or lacking credibility.⁸⁴ It is a case of paradise lost, or never found in the first place. The Dionysian dreamworld of rave in *Go* reads more like Dante's inferno for Ronna's character. Her movements are monitored and scrutinised within misogynistic spheres. After Ronna agrees to fill in for Simon's shift, he ends the conversation by offering her twenty dollars for a blowjob which she rejects. When Ronna meets with Todd, he demands she strip down to her underwear to check if she is an informant hooked up with a microphone. Later he tries to kill her after she has replaced his drugs with over-the-counter prescriptives. Burke (William Fichtner), the police officer, unsuccessfully attempts to arrest Ronna for possession of drugs, referring to her as a "crack whore".⁸⁵ He employs the bullying tactics that his position of authority grants, as an officer of the law and an older man. Adam and Zack, after enlisting Ronna to supply them drugs, later accidentally run her down in their motor vehicle. They absolve responsibility for their actions by dumping

⁸³ Mannie, Claire and Ronna in *Go*.

⁸⁴ Fiona Measham points out that the drug trade – its production, supply and consumption – is highly gendered. Prior to the 1980s, the scant body of research into women and drugs was primarily within the medical, social and child welfare, and criminal discourses. Illegal drug use was a sign of pathology inherently linked to sex issues for women (Measham, 2002, p. 343). Measham's study furthermore accentuates the disadvantaged position women occupy as drug suppliers, still subjected to institutionalised sexism as they are "more likely to be involved in the high-risk, low-reward aspects of drug cultures, with resulting health, financial and legal implications" (2002, p. 346). This gender bias extends to the marketing of respected female DJs as sexual icons in music magazines which does little to promote their talent as producers (Rietveld, 2000, p. 30). Hillegonda Rietveld's own recollection of women's assumed roles in dance music production is telling, "When I mention my experience in an electronic dance music group (as a programmer and keyboard player), the first question I often hear is: 'Were you the singer?'" (2000, p. 30).

Fiona Measham. "'Doing gender' – 'doing drugs': Conceptualizing the gendering of drugs culture", *Contemporary Drug Problems*, Vol. 29, 2002 (Summer). pp. 343, 346.

Rietveld, "The body and soul of club culture", p. 30.

⁸⁵ Burke in *Go*.

her unconscious body first into a ditch thinking she is dead, and then onto the hood of a nearby car when they realise she is alive. Ronna's body is continually seen as positionless. Her femaleness instigates and justifies the violence that is inflicted on her. Ronna has, in Mannie's words, made an 'evolutionary leap'. However, it is a precarious jump with no place for her to safely land.

Ronna practises an unpopular politics in a presentist discourse. The background of the rave becomes the site of struggle. Instead of using the space to assert her presence, she employs hard economics to define self and subjectivity. Community gives way to the importance of the individual. Wrenching the opportunities and resources from the hands of the socially and economically privileged, it is meritocracy Ronna's way. As Collin writes, "The dance-drug scene, as it did with technology, reappropriated libertarian capitalism and puts it to uses for which it wasn't intended".⁸⁶ Ronna's real achievement is that she has inserted a young, white female of the working class into this picture. Refusing to ride pillion, Ronna pushes the driver out of his seat and commandeers the capitalist vehicle. She exploits entrepreneurialism to create tangible, material results. By the film's end, she has made enough money to pay for her rent and with some to spare.

When Ronna is first introduced to the audience, she is listlessly working the cash register and bothered by a middle-aged customer and her toddler. It is a dismal job, endured only because of financial necessity. It is reminiscent of Jip's (John Simm) complaints in *Human Traffic* as he bemoans the nature of work to his fellow colleague.

Jip: We spend nine hours a day, five days a week incarcerated in this wanky, fucking store, having to act like C3PO to any twat that wants to condescend to us, do you know what I mean? We have to brown-nose the customers, then we get abused

⁸⁶ Collin, *Altered State*, p. 7.

by some mini-fucking Hitler who just gives a stick all day ... I take the corporate cock-shafting like the next person because I need to pay the rent. But if you ask me, the anti-Christ has been with us for a long time and he means business. Big business.⁸⁷

Unlike Jip, Ronna does not have the luxury of “forty eight hours off from the world”, or “seventy three quid in [the] backburner”.⁸⁸ If the promise of rave is to disconnect from the outside world and plug into an alternate one, Ronna is denied this basic opportunity. Soon to be evicted, even the lukewarm space of a squalid apartment and television set robs her of the ‘twilight domestic world’ of housebound daydreaming. Ronna’s response is urgent, fuelled by her own impromptu plan for reversing the injustices of having to work Christmas Eve, being destitute and facing possible homelessness. Although Ronna’s agenda is a purely self-centred one, its commentary on the disenfranchised is no less relevant. The symbolic creativity that Willis advocates is not sufficient. Ronna’s discontent with her socio-economic situation cannot remain privatised – the insolent pout of dissatisfaction, the vitriol directed towards customers, or the cigarette shared during a five minute work break. It must effect change. For Ronna, there is no other option. In an act of desperation, she employs the means normally unavailable to someone of her social ranking and violates the unspoken order of the drug trade.

Ronna refutes the notion of the disappearing, anonymous subject within rave. Unable to lose herself under the influence of Ecstasy or in the throes of abandoned dancing, this function is carried out by the antagonistic male characters around her. They attempt to erase Ronna literally via imprisonment or death. Ronna floats between the spaces of the store, the drug dealer’s den, the site of a narcotics sting, the dance floor

⁸⁷ Jip in *Human Traffic*.

⁸⁸ Jip in *Human Traffic*.

and ditch like an airborne, viral agent. She evades capture, refusing to simply go away. Figures of authority, illegal or legitimate, are incapable of monitoring and controlling Ronna's constant movement. Mobility is disruptive as it allows the trespassing and transgression of demarcated, ordered spaces⁸⁹ As Daniel Martin states, "A disciplinary map cannot be constructed over an object which refuses to remain static".⁹⁰ Ronna uses those attributes that brand her as the marked sign to her advantage. After learning she has been set up by Burke, she flushes the Ecstasy tablets down the toilet before making a hasty exit from the premises. When Burke badgers her to make a deal, she swigs the Cerveza beer he offered upon her arrival and subverts the situation by threatening *him*.

Ronna: Do you know I'm only seventeen? I probably shouldn't be drinking this beer, should I? Seeing as I'm so underage and all.⁹¹

Ronna proceeds to down the contents of the bottle, keeping her watchful eye over Burke. She implicates him in the supply of alcohol to a minor. The tools of his trade – the law – are wielded against him. Ronna's problematic ambiguity and her transgressions allow her to slip between the cracks of systems of power, only to resurface later out of their reach.

The myth of the androgynous body in the space of rave is exposed in *Go*. As the catalyst for a chain of events that spiral out of control before returning to an abrupt normalcy, Ronna reveals the gendered saturation of the dance-drug scene. She articulates women's problematic position, defined against the (typically) unmarked sign of the masculine. In *Go*, there is something extremely suspect about the masculinities that are paraded. Traditional sites of male roosting – economics and the

⁸⁹ Tim Cresswell. *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. p. 87.

justice system – become the domains of contestation over structures of power. Like peacocks strutting on the runway of rave, aggressive and flamboyant exhibitions of machismo result in a narrative mess as each stumbles over the one before him. Adam and Zack turn out to be a squealing, homosexual couple. Burke never succeeds at capturing the criminal. His manliness is further compromised by his sexually suggestive remarks to Zack and Adam, and the fact that he has a passion for selling Confederated Products, which he vehemently insists is “not Amway”.⁹² When Simon and his three companions go to Las Vegas, their simple plans go awry. Tiny (Breckin Meyer) and Singh (James Duval) become incapacitated and confined to their hotel room, suffering a chronic bout of buffet-induced food poisoning and diarrhoea. Meanwhile, Simon and Marcus’ (Taye Diggs) visit to the Crazy Horse strip club for an evening of manly indulgence ends up with them shooting one of the bouncers, Victor Jr. (Jimmy Schubert), before making an escape. Upon returning to Los Angeles, Simon is tracked down by the wounded thug and his boss (who is also his nagging father), Victor Sr. (J. E. Freeman). Both are seeking bloodlust revenge. The scene is not a gladiatorial fight, but the hesitant bantering and clumsy philosophising over which part of Simon’s arm should be shot. By this point, the adversarial stand-off has been reduced to an afternoon nattering session held in Todd’s apartment. Todd himself has transformed from a frighteningly psychopathic dealer into an obliging, happy host.⁹³

⁹⁰ Martin, “Power play and party politics”, p. 84.

⁹¹ Ronna in *Go*.

⁹² Burke in *Go*.

⁹³ Todd’s ‘about-turn’ is comically captured when he is first accosted by the Vegas ruffians. Todd politely advises the two as to the most efficient route to Simon’s apartment. He obligingly draws a map and points out the finer details, such as possible delays from road constructions. The scene reads like a parodic quilting bee. When Claire, who has been held hostage, sarcastically remarks, “Why don’t you just drive him yourself? You could help him pull the trigger”, the irony is lost on Todd.

In *Go*, masculinity as an unstable formation is exemplified by Marcus who is clearly the film's most competent male. He is educated, physically well-built, dressed in the uniform of authority – the suit – and confident. This specimen of masculinity however, is not perfectly sealed. As the only African-American character in *Go*, his influence is intermittently undermined by his being mistaken for a low-level labourer – first as a washroom attendant and then a parking attendant – based on his skin colour and attire. The false notion of a singular, absolute masculinity is further stressed by Marcus' definition of 'good sex'. When he informs his companions that he practises tantric sex, the others are in disbelief and awe that a protracted orgasm need not culminate in ejaculation. When Marcus admits that he has not done so in six months, this symbol status of discipline and (self) control is read as perversity and reason to humiliate him.

The inadequacies and defective façades of maleness in *Go* are not isolated. In *Human Traffic*, Jip is hounded by the fear of impotence. While his insecurities stem from a lack of control over his own body, Moff's (Danny Dyer) results from an imagined loss of control over an external one. He is paranoid that his girlfriend is promiscuous. It is his male ego that renders him irrational and infantile at times. In *Groove*, a plurality of masculinities is displayed and problematised.⁹⁴ Colin (Denny Kirkwood) proposes to his partner Harmony (Mackenzie Firgens) at a rave party. After ingesting Ecstasy, his inhibitions are loosened and he makes out with another man. When he is caught by Harmony in this compromising position, she later initiates sexual intercourse out of fury, exasperation and a need to reinstate his heterosexuality. The following day she is seen crying in her bed with Colin remorseful in the bathroom. The hedonism of rave is

⁹⁴ *Groove*. Directed and written by Greg Harrison. Columbia Tristar Pictures, 2000.

neither fair, nor utopic. These acts of free love and freedom have ramifications long after the warehouse has been emptied and the sun has risen.

The history of rave is an untidy narrative. This is succinctly encapsulated by

Reynolds' description of rave as:

riddled with Zen-like paradoxes. It's music of resistance and acquiescence, utopian idealism and nihilistic hedonism. It's both escape route and dead-end, orgasmotron and panopticon, space and cage.⁹⁵

Rave occupies that area of overlap between pop and politics, resistance and appropriation. It is defined by its complexities and contradictions. *Go* enters this perilous terrain, exploring problematic representations of sexuality and gender, youth and class, and the hierarchy of rave culture and its associated industries of the drug trade. *Go* provides no resolutions. The film's ending does not reach a final place, a clean-cut ending. Time and space are granted an extension, even if it is but a marginal one. The story continues even after the final credits have started rolling. When Mannie casually asks, "What are we doing New Year's?" the day after the rave party, Ronna grins.⁹⁶ She knows there is always next weekend, and that she will be there, "going for broke, going for more, or, maybe, just going".⁹⁷ Unlike Rae's dancing girls, this Go (Go) girl is not staying at home.

⁹⁵ Reynolds, "Rave culture", p. 110.

⁹⁶ Mannie in *Go*.

⁹⁷ Mark Olsen. "Riding shotgun: *Go* review", *Film Comment*, Vol. 35 (3), May 1999. p. 7.

Masters of the Temporal Universe

The control of time is the ultimate apparatus of those in power. It not only regulates how bodies move in restrictive temporal and spatial planes, but also how events unfold, are recorded and remembered. We are either bound to its constraints and shackled to the global timekeeper of the clock, or pushed outside of it altogether to become the ghosts of the past. The time traveller – whether it is the historian or the character imagined in science fiction – commands an unparalleled authority to reimagine narratives and vault through dimensions of time. It is not surprising that these scholarly and creative domains have been dominated by men, from the scientific genius of Stephen Hawking to Superman. The oppressive impact of time upon gendered relationships is rarely interrogated, with critical discussions pivoting around issues of inequalities of race, nation and commerce. The power granted to masculine institutions is camouflaged by talks of the ‘global community’, ‘developed nations’ and ‘the West’.

This chapter focuses attention on the strained relationship between masculine power, time and history. This paradigm is explored through the rites of passage narratives in youth cinema. By mapping the young boy’s entrance into the adult world of manhood, these texts serve pedagogic functions for the formation of identity and the rightful inheritance of power. I employ the time travel films *Back to the Future* and *Donnie Darko* as case studies of the (temporary) loss of control over time as experienced by the teenage male. Conventionally, outcomes of time travel films are predictable. Humanity is saved, order is restored and the hero is victorious. The space-time

continuum is always realigned. When temporal borders are loosened and (masculine) control over history begins to buckle, alternative narratives of experience become possible and significant. It rewinds and fast-forwards through time, creating a non-linear, hopscotch history of youth. The chapter investigates the generational gap between Generation X and the Baby Boomer in and through film, commenting upon the social, cultural and political environments from which they arose.

Chapter 7

Boys to Men and Back Again The Historian and the Time Traveller

I'm still trying to figure out why men are in such trouble.

Oh, come on, you know you are. You're bewildered, insecure, and terribly nervous. You're confused not only about how to act with women, but how to relate to the entire world. You've been buffeted by constant social and sexual conflicts and have lost control of all inner equilibrium ... I say it's time for a masculine revolution.¹

~ Cynthia Heimel ~

Writing on time travel is an exercise in technology and social progress. The ability to rewind, fast-forward and alter the speed at which time unravels not only reveals our fascination with the limitless potential of scientific theory, but also our own dreams, desires and demons. For instance, reversal to the past is symptomatic of nostalgia and/or regret – longing for a safer and less complicated period in our lives, or wishing we could change events. Time travel is also invariably a study of (masculine) power. It presents histories of conquests, but beneath its steely exterior, its veneer is riddled with hairline stress fractures.

In this chapter, I direct my attention to representations of masculinity in youth cinema. It is tempting to retread the familiar grounds of the rites of passage cliché – the boy becomes a man. While careful not to discredit the importance of this linear journey, I am more intrigued by the assumption of the natural unfolding of events. Time travel films in particular provide a visual window into a jump-cut progression of events. When history is disrupted, this has implications for those who control dominant narratives and time. The exploration of this idea is developed in the tripartite structure

¹ Cynthia Heimel. *Get Your Tongue Out of My Mouth, I'm Kissing You Good-bye!* Sydney: Macmillan, 1993. pp. 119, 122.

of the chapter. It firstly discusses the socio-temporal context that has given rise to men's studies and the men's movement of the 1990s. Secondly, I align cinematic portrayals of boyhood to provide a bridge between imagin(eer)ed conceptualisations of youth, masculinity and lived experience. The final section concludes with a parallel discussion of two films, *Donnie Darko* and *Back to the Future*, as case studies into the discursive overlap of time, history and identity.²

Violent (Inter)actions: Angry White Men

Touted as the flavour of the decade, men's studies and masculinity as a topic of discussion has enjoyed an increasing visibility in academia and in common parlance.³ Men's studies, as a discipline of scholarly pursuit, originated as part of the profeminist movement in the 1970s – a period of significant social and ideological upheaval.⁴ The second wave of feminism intervened in masculine gender genres and implicated the injustices of male privilege. The rapid advancement of technology and lack of trust in

² *Donnie Darko*. Directed and written by Richard Kelly. Pandora, 2001.

Back to the Future. Directed by Robert Zemeckis. Written by Bob Gale and Robert Zemeckis. Twentieth Century Fox, 1985.

³ The 'metrosexual' – defined as "sophisticated urban male consumers in touch with their feminine side ... meticulously groomed men" – has garnered considerable attention, stretching from the classroom to the café ("The metrosexual revolution is upon us", 2004, p. 24). David Beckham has become the iconic pinup of metrosexuality, encapsulating the interplay between the machismo of sports personality and the glamourama of superstar. As Garry Whannel comments, "[Beckham] changes appearance more often than football clubs change their away strip, moving effortlessly from being a fop to a family man to a hard man" (2002, p. 2). The infamous Mohawk, pink nail polish and sarong that the footballer donned at various points in his career have generated as much debate as has his athleticism on the soccer field.

The fascination with the metrosexual has become further intensified with lifestyle programmes such as *Queer Eye For the Straight Guy*. In this series, five overtly homosexual men are set with the task of 'improving' a hapless, style challenged heterosexual male each week. The transformation is witnessed through coaching in the areas of personal grooming, fashion, culture (both arts and social etiquette), fine wine and dining and interior design of living space. Although the distinction between camp gayness and heterosexuality is never confused, *Queer Eye For the Straight Guy* accentuates the multiplicity of maleness. It impresses the importance of appearance and the looked-at-body upon the interface of the stoic, macho man.

"The metrosexual revolution is upon us", *DSN Retailing Today*, Vol. 43 (5), 8 March, 2004. p. 24.

Garry Whannel. "David Beckham, identity and masculinity", *Sociology Review*, Vol. 36 (1), February 2002. p. 2.

Queer Eye For the Straight Guy. Created by David Collins. Brava. Originally aired on 15 July, 2003 (USA). The series is currently in its third season.

government and cultural institutions compounded a social anxiety concerning masculinity's legitimacy as the default sign of power.⁵ Where Fordism had once revolutionised the workplace by dispensing the independent producer for interdependent labourers – those comprising one segment of a vast assembly line and who often never see the finished product of their efforts – post-Fordism further cleaves this divide. Technology, specifically digitalisation, has made redundant a vast population of workers and steered the emphasis from the physicality of manual labour to the control of information flow. The international stock exchange is an archetype of the transference of electronic data superseding the production of tangible goods. Money is not so much made as it is simply moved around from one account to another. Those unable to adapt (fast enough) in the informational environment become employment liabilities. Worse still, their knowledge and skills are rendered outdated. The worker's worth has an expiration date. As James Catano comments, "In a culture that valorizes not simply self-control but self-making, job loss has deep identity consequences even more powerful in the rhetoric of masculinity than anti-institutionalism".⁶ The indignation of unemployment denies a large cohort of men from earning a living, and compromises their ability to fulfil the traditional role of provider and authoritarian for the family.

The weakened bastions of patriarchy manifested itself also at a governmental, supranational level. The Watergate affair and failure of American forces in the Vietnam War crushed public confidence. Military might had shown itself to be

⁴ Mark E. Cann. "Ongoing tensions between men's studies and women's studies", *The Journal of Men's Studies*, Vol. 8 (3), 2000 (Spring). p. 414.

⁵ Joanne K. Urschel. "Men's studies and women's studies: Commonality, dependence, and independence", *The Journal of Men's Studies*, Vol. 8 (3), 2000 (Spring). p. 408.

⁶ James V. Catano. "Entrepreneurial masculinity: Re-tooling the self-made man", *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures*, Vol. 23 (2), 2000 (Summer). p. 4.

vulnerable outside the country. Corruption in the White House was symptomatic of its eroding power on the inside. With the power-houses of machismo in a volatile state, men in society began to feel dislocated and perturbed, “caught between norms that were no longer appropriate for the changing times”.⁷ Although the playing field had remained relatively the same, with men still occupying the centre, the playing positions had altered dramatically.

The disparity between the ideologies of conventional masculinity and the changing context of the 1970s led to the voicing of a crisis. Although sociological shifts in feminine ideals, the workplace, families and leisure practices had been identified as a problem in the 1950s, it was not until two decades later that it was regarded as a serious threat with impending, disastrous repercussions for the common man. As Anne McLeer points out, postwar cultural texts established and popularised narratives of domestic bliss and the new nuclear family, while “[r]ace, youth, and gender revolt foment[ed] under the surface of the American dream in the 1950s” before exploding in the 1960s.⁸ It is important to note that the 1950s has featured as a mainstay in personal and collective memory as a safe and glorious time, despite evidence indicating otherwise. Literature, television, cinema and public celebrations then and today continue the illusion of a model decade that boasted dignified glamour and playful innocence. It was the era of Lucille Ball and Marilyn Monroe, John Wayne and Frankie Avalon. Technological and medical advancement was a sure sign of future progress and higher standards of living. The first commercial computer and internal pacemaker had been invented, and colour broadcasting on television and coloured

⁷ Urschel, “Men’s studies and women’s studies”, p. 408.

⁸ Anne McLeer. “Practical perfection? The nanny negotiates gender, class, and family contradictions in 1960s popular culture”, *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 14 (2), 2002 (Summer). pp. 82, 83.

kitchen appliances were introduced into homes.⁹ The patriarchal, heterosexual family unit was proof of stability and order – where Father always knew best. With their neatly manicured front lawns and sit-down family meals, the Cleavers and the Andersons *were* middle America. The 1950s is captured and contained as Pleasantville.

In that historical recount, there is little room to dwell upon the Korean War which left the country divided into north and south, and the conflict largely unresolved. As William O’Neill, an historian at Rutgers University concedes, Americans had expected to “win total victory, that it could be like World War II, and when it didn’t turn out that way, people wanted to forget it”.¹⁰ While History classes include the Civil Rights Movement in their curriculum and cite landmark events such as the Montgomery bus boycott and the desegregation of a white high school in Little Rock, 1950s America was *not* the black neighbourhoods where poverty was rife and racial discrimination was concentrated. It is peculiar that the paranoia surrounding the Cold War, McCarthyism and the A-bomb factors minimally in recollections and popular reconstructions of this nostalgic period. Slapped with a vintage tag, history has ignored the imperfections of the 1950s to uphold it as a fashionable designer decade. This preoccupation with the golden 1950s has provided a familiar iconographic palette in cinema, especially time travel films and rites of passage narratives.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the imagined community of the nation state – embodied by the

⁹ Candace Rich. “Pop history: Inventions of the fifties”, 2000-2002.

<<http://www.fiftiesweb.com/pop/inventions.htm>> Accessed online on 22 June, 2004.

¹⁰ William L. O’Neill quoted in E. J. Dionne, Jr. “The forgotten veterans: Men and women who fought in Korea deserve their due”, *Washington Post Writers Group*, 23 May, 2003.

<<http://www.workingforchange.com/article.cfm?ItemID=15045>> Accessed online on 22 June, 2004.

Euro-American, middle-class man – was seen to be under siege by historically marginalised groups that extended from the housewife returning to the workforce, to the Communist Charlies hundreds of miles away who were winning *their* war.¹¹ The integrity and (previous) indestructibility of American sovereignty was being assailed from foreign agents and hearth. The apprehension and fears became discernible in cultural representations that sought to re-erect a patriarchal structure and boundaries that would repair the social disequilibrium. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the uber-masculine action films of the late 1970s and 1980s.

The residue after-shocks of the Cold War and Vietnam paved the way for a generation of hulking heroes whose bodies seemed as indomitable as their spirits. Sylvester Stallone's characters in the *Rocky* and *Rambo* films, Jean-Claude Van Damme's recycling of a life-size G. I. Joe in his numerous roles, and Arnold Schwarzenegger's personalities in *Commando*, *Predator* and the *Terminator* oeuvre impressed an image of ardent American patriotism.¹² The rupture of the corporeal – a gun shot wound, the knife slash into flesh, the pummelling of muscle – became an affront to the psyche of the nation state. The mutilation of the masculine was redeemed only by a rebuilding of the body that would witness Rocky rise time and again from a blood and sweat-drenched floor from a near ten count humiliation, and Schwarzenegger's alter egos to

¹¹ Andrew Walzer. "Narratives of contemporary male crisis: The (re)production of a national discourse", *The Journal of Men's Studies*, Vol. 10 (2), 2002 (Winter). p. 210.

¹² *Rocky*. Directed by John G. Avildsen. Written by Sylvester Stallone. MGM/United Artists, 1976. *First Blood*. Directed by Ted Kotcheff. Written by Michael Kozoll, William Sackheim and Sylvester Stallone. Based on a novel by David Morrell. Lionsgate/Fox Studios, 1982.

Commando. Directed by Mark L. Lester. Written by Steven E. DeSouza. Twentieth Century Fox, 1985.

Predator. Directed by John McTiernan. Written by Jim Thomas and James Thomas. Twentieth Century Fox, 1987.

The Terminator. Directed by James Cameron. Written by James Cameron, Gale Anne Hurd and William Wisher. MGM/United Artists, 1984.

Ironically, only Sylvester Stallone was born a citizen of the United States of America, with Arnold Schwarzenegger hailing from Graz, Austria and Jean-Claude Van Damme from Berchem-Sainte Agathe,

overcome exhaustion and injury to avenge the wrongdoings done unto him (and country). The perfect body was iconic of brute strength, discipline, endurance, industrialisation and the successful colonisation of public space. While the films presented fictional narratives that inhabited the realm of fantasy, they reinjected into the public imagination the legends of heroes of the past that exist in history books, folklore and popular memory – the early frontiersmen, Wild Bill Hickok, Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) in *Casablanca*, the loner cowboy in *Shane*.¹³ Violence was justified on the grounds of restitution, with Father rightfully at the head of the nuclear family, the righteous President at the helm of the nation state, and America commanding the free world.

By the 1990s, the narratives of ‘crisis’ legitimated a culture of activism that would reclaim men’s entitlements as the figureheads of home and country. In this state of quasi-emergency, the 1990s was “declared the time of the men’s movement, a time for American males (primarily straight, white, and affluent) to bond together and affirm themselves as males”.¹⁴ A salient body of literature began to flood bookshelves in the style of self-help manuals to bolster awareness of the plight faced by men, and advise actions to rectify the predicament. Such titles included *Absent Fathers, Lost Sons: The Search for Masculine Identity*; *A Circle of Men: The Original Manual for Men’s Support Groups*; *Fire in the Belly: On Being A Man*; *In A Time of Fallen Heroes: The Re-creation of Masculinity* and *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies, and*

Belgium. The embrace of the latter two as bona fide Americans became even more pronounced with Schwarzenegger’s successful political campaign to run for Governor in the state of California.

¹³ *Casablanca*. Directed by Michael Curtiz. Written by Julius J. Epstein, Philip G. Epstein and Howard Koch. Warner Bros., 1942.

Shane. Directed by George Stevens. Written by A. B. Guthrie, Jr. Paramount Pictures, 1953.

¹⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether. “Patriarchy and the men’s movement: Part of the problem or part of the solution?” in *From Women Respond to the Men’s Movement*. Kay Leigh Hagan (ed.) New York: Harper Collins, 1992. p. 13.

Realities.¹⁵ Robert Bly's book *Iron John: A Book About Men* exemplifies the nostalgic masculinity that is echoed throughout these writings.¹⁶ The author proposes a re-embrace of a "deep masculine" of ancient and exotic tribal rituals and mythology to counter the effects of (post)industrial, capitalist and consumer society.¹⁷ While Bly's veneration of the primitive "Wild Man" and "interior warrior" is overstated, his relaying of current sentiments regarding contemporary emasculation, and a resurrection of an archaic, gendered hierarchy is not.¹⁸

The trajectory of the men's movement is tracked through the history of the Promise Keepers, a non-profit Christian organisation originated and based in the United States. On the official website "Promise Keepers: Men of Integrity", the vision is "Men Transformed Worldwide".¹⁹ The mission statement dictates the adherence to seven promises that embody a religiously pious doctrine. The vows include worship, discipline and discipleship, the development and maintenance of a brotherhood of men, the practicing of "spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity" and a commitment to the building of community and family.²⁰ The idea of "a revival among Christian men who were willing to take a stand for God in their marriages, families, churches,

¹⁵ Guy Corneau. *Absent Fathers, Lost Sons: The Search for Masculine Identity*. Boston: Shambala, 1991.

Bill Kauth. *A Circle of Men: The Original Manual for Men's Support Groups*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.

Sam Keen. *Fire in the Belly: On Being A Man*. New York and Sydney: Bantam Books, 1992.

R. William Betcher and William S. Pollack. *In A Time of Fallen Heroes: The Re-creation of Masculinity*. New York: Atheneum, 1993.

Roger Horrocks. *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies, and Realities*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994.

¹⁶ Robert Bly. *Iron John: A Book About Men*. Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1990.

¹⁷ Bly, *Iron John*, p. 8.

Sharyn Pearce. "'Secret men's business': New millennium advice for Australian boys", *Mosaic*, Vol. 34 (2), June 2001. pp. 51-52.

¹⁸ Bly, *Iron John*, pp. 6, 146.

¹⁹ Promise Keepers. "Promise Keepers: Official website. Welcome to Promise Keepers". <<http://www.promisekeepers.org/core/core10.htm>> Accessed online on 14 April, 2004.

²⁰ Promise Keepers. "Promise Keepers: Official website. Seven promises".

<<http://www.promisekeepers.org/faqs/core/faqscore24.htm>> Accessed online on 14 April, 2004.

and committees” was germinated on 20 March, 1990.²¹ In July that same year, a core group of seventy members was established. In 1991, the first Promise Keepers conference held at the University of Colorado Events Centre attracted 4,200 men. By 1995, this number had swarmed to 738,000 participants at various gatherings throughout the nation. By the end of the decade, the organisation had developed into a full-fledged corporation, with an escalating membership nationally and abroad, regular conferences and assemblies, mentoring programs, and its own print and audio-visual publications.²² The success of the Promise Keepers was not coincidental. It functioned to create a space for the modern man to return to his roots. While Bly encouraged a reversion to an almost primal state of manhood, unhindered by the trappings of contemporary society, the Promise Keepers paralleled this with a return to biblical times. The past represents an idyllic place where an essentialist model masculinity is to be rediscovered.

Public shows of male solidarity – hundreds of men descending upon a city to preach and praise a fraternal brotherhood, the lingering backlash against feminism in the 1980s – were bolstered by the military machismo of American forces in the 1993 Gulf War that “exultantly declar[ed] that it had ‘kicked’ the last remnants of the ‘Vietnam syndrome’”.²³ The diversity of representations of masculinity in the 1990s presented a very different, often conflicting, picture. Cinema, as a potential ruse for conveying dominant discourses of manhood, was undercut by a burgeoning breed of films that

²¹ Promise Keepers. “Promise Keepers: Official website. The history of Promise Keepers”. <<http://www.promisekeepers.org/genr12>> Accessed online on 14 April, 2004.

²² Promise Keepers. “Promise Keepers: Official website. The history of Promise Keepers”. <<http://www.promisekeepers.org/genr/genr12.htm>> Accessed online on 14 April, 2004.

²³ Ruether, “Patriarchy and the men’s movement”, pp. 14-15.

Although women are not excluded from institutions and groups such as the Promise Keepers and the armed services, they constitute such a marginal subpopulation that the establishments firmly remain male-dominated.

problematised the assumed relation of masculinity and control. The genre of ‘office movies’ became symptomatic of a “‘disempowered’ middle-class white male: the drone of the new corporatized, managerial late capitalist culture ... caught in the mid-rungs of an increasingly corporate culture”.²⁴

In *Falling Down*, William Foster, also known as D-FENS (Michael Douglas), embarks on a mission to ‘return home’ after a day at work.²⁵ The character is introduced in the exposition as caught in gridlocked traffic. Trapped in his car and tormented by the sweltering heat, a pestering fly, the cries of children in a nearby vehicle and the sensory overload of blinking road signs, William’s sanity snaps. Abandoning his car, he enacts his own warped justice upon those he encounters en route to his ex-wife’s, Beth’s (Barbara Hershey) abode. He causes grievous bodily harm, destroys public property and commits murder. In his “cubicle-class” uniform of horn-rimmed glasses, short-sleeved shirt and tie, he is a frightening vision of suppressed, shrunken masculinity.²⁶ Like an incomplete greenstick fracture, William teeters on the razor’s edge of rationality, restraint and manic fury. The image of a man — more computer geek than commando — brandishing a shotgun in gangland suburbia, is a grating and disturbing portrait of American masculinity attempting to reclaim the homeland. The character’s quest is doomed from the onset. He is estranged from his ex-wife and young daughter Adele (Joey Hope Singer). A restraining order prevents him from seeing them. There is literally no homecoming for him. The master has been ousted from his manor. At the film’s conclusion, William’s only means of redemption is his

²⁴ Latham Hunter. “The celluloid cubicle: Regressive constructions of masculinity in 1990s office movies”, *The Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 26 (1), March 2003. p. 72.

²⁵ *Falling Down*. Directed by Joel Schumacher. Written by Ebbe Roe Smith. Warner Bros., 1993.

²⁶ Hunter, “The celluloid cubicle”, p. 72.

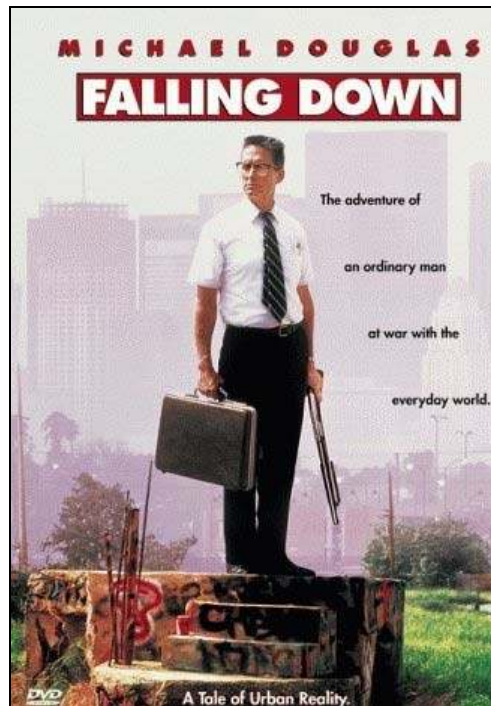


Figure 1: William Foster/D-FENS (Michael Douglas) in *Falling Down* (1993). It is a disturbing portrait of male frustration and disgruntled office drone.

own death. In his final confrontation with the police, he is fatally shot when he reaches for his firearm which turns out to be a plastic water pistol.

In *American Beauty*, the theme of a dysfunctional America in the corporate age is played out through the film's protagonist.²⁷ Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) is a middle-aged, apathetic writer at an advertising magazine company. He lives a dull existence without determination or fulfilment. Lester joins the ranks of a growing, expendable workforce. His family life is miserable. He despises his wife, Carolyn (Annette Bening), as much as she does him. His only child, Jane (Thora Birch), rejects him as a credible mentor. He is, in his own words, "a gigantic loser".²⁸ Lester's failure is not an isolated case, but suggestive of a wider societal ailment. He quits his job, but not without firstly blackmailing his supervisor, Brad Dupree (Barry

²⁷ *American Beauty*. Directed by Sam Mendes. Written by Alan Ball. Universal Studios, 1999.

Del Sherman), for an impressive severance package. When Brad accuses him of being “one twisted fuck”, Lester replies that he is “just an ordinary guy, with nothing to lose”.²⁹ He takes back the masculine authority that middle-management has stripped from him. Lester becomes the American (anti)hero.

Cue the music. Lester strides past the cubicles and out of the office, pumping a fist triumphantly in the air. Every time I hear this “ordinary guy” line, I think about *American Beauty*’s color scheme: the frame is frequently washed in reds, whites and blues.³⁰

Lester reinvents himself. He sheds his timid office demeanour, alters his physique by lifting weights in the garage (surrounded by tools and a workbench), reasserts his presence in the home, pursues his daughter’s teenage friend as an object of lust, and begins smoking marijuana with the neighbour’s son. He becomes the epitome of the self-made man through a regression to his youth. This is evident in a scene midway through the film. Carolyn returns home from work to find a new vehicle parked in the driveway. Lester is toying with a remote control car in the living room. The ensuing icy conversation contrasts Carolyn’s frustration and petty nagging with Lester’s simultaneous cool (teenage) defiance and husbandly arrogance and confidence.

Carolyn: Uh, whose car is that out front?
Lester: Mine. 1970 Pontiac Firebird, the car I’ve always wanted, and now I have it. I rule!
Carolyn: Uh-huh. Where’s the Camry?
Lester: I traded it in.
Carolyn: Shouldn’t you have consulted me first?
Lester: Hm. Let me think. No.³¹

Lester’s reclamation of manhood is juxtaposed alongside a line-up of ‘aberrant’ masculinities – an openly gay couple, a closet homosexual ex-marine and an artistic loner who is more interested in philosophy than frat parties and football.

Paradoxically, it is Lester who meets a gruesome demise at the film’s conclusion. The

²⁸ Lester in *American Beauty*.

²⁹ Brad and Lester in *American Beauty*.

³⁰ Hunter, “The celluloid cubicle”, p. 79.

ex-marine, Colonel Frank Fitts (Chris Cooper), shoots the protagonist in the back of the head after he has mistaken Lester for a homosexual and had his advances rejected. *American Beauty* offers no convenient manifesto for an ideal masculinity, and no easy resolution for the characters' separate journeys.

Both *Falling Down* and *American Beauty* present masculine identities that shift uneasily in their boots. Whereas the 1970s and 1980s action films asserted a calculated violence that was integral to a system of domination, the disorganised violence of the 1990s office films was a sign of its entropy.³² Aggression and forcefulness had morphed from an exhibition of control, to become signs of desperate struggle of competing masculinities. It is clear that the crisis of a definitive masculinity is an over-simplified and flawed paradigm. The paradox of gendered identity is accentuated by Jeff Hearn's observation that:

'Masculinity' has itself been transformed as a concept to that plural 'masculinities', which may be 'hegemonic' or 'subordinated' or presumably contradictory. Above all, masculinities are no larger individual possessions, but are institutional practices located in structures of power.³³

Dominant masculinity becomes a point of friction that elucidates the slippages, cracks and contradictions of the centre. When the William Fosters and Lester Burnhams of the world – white, middle-class, heterosexual, married men – can no longer be relied upon to reconstitute the imago of familial and societal bliss and harmony, this does not signify a disintegration of previously functional definitions of gender roles. It is not a recent crippling of masculinity that we witness. The so-called 1990s crisis, as Latham Hunter writes, "is symptomatic of an ongoing process through which the patriarchy

³¹ Carolyn and Lester in *American Beauty*.

³² R. W. Connell. *Masculinities*. St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1995. p. 84.

³³ Jeff Hearn. "Is masculinity dead? A critique of the concept of masculinity/masculinities" in *Understanding Masculinities*. Máirtín Mac an Ghail (ed.) Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996. p. 206.

broadcasts a fragility that has never really come to fruition”.³⁴ The root fear of the crisis of masculinity resides not in its ultimate loss, but in its *potential fluidity*.

Although masculinity has always been a fluid construct, recent decades have revealed a deepening awareness of its mobility. The flawed structure of a singular masculinity can no longer be patched and performed without showing stress signs. The boundaries demarcating accepted masculinities from divergent strains are becoming more permeable. Outlaws at the borders are increasingly able to reappropriate aspects of dominant masculinities. The centre and margins morph, bleed out and seep in.

Men’s studies has made significant headway in acknowledging the complexities of masculinities. Its methodologies offer a means of working through past and present definitions of identity. In conjunction with women’s studies, men’s studies tugs at the loose threads of history and unravels a section of its fabric. As an academic discipline, it has contributed to a more textured understanding of gendered relations and social formations. Its progressive potentiality, however, has become hampered by the reciprocal paradigm of blame that permeates both men’s and women’s studies, culminating in a culture of comparison.³⁵ The separateness of the disciplines has failed to achieve, or even aspire to reach, a mediated middle-ground. The dilemma stems from a need to assign causality to events and circumstances. Problems and solutions are sought in the ‘real’ world of workplace and home. Meanings become literal, making negotiative interpretations awkward and difficult. In men’s studies, the linkage between actual experience and representation is a flimsy one. I argue for a more galvanised symbiosis. Representations, from comic books to celluloid, provide the (un)conscious conduits for a more open dialogue of masculine identity formation –

³⁴ Hunter, “The celluloid cubicle”, p. 74.

imagined and real. While Andrew Tolson speaks of the “limits of masculinity”, I swing in the opposite direction.³⁶ Cultural texts present possibilities for masculinity which can be as frightening as they are liberating.

Exit Wounds: The Self-Made (Te en a g e) Boy

This discussion of men’s studies and the surfacing of the men’s movement serves as a prelude to the study of masculinity in youth cinema, focusing upon the teenage boy. The coming-of-age films serve a pedagogic function by showing young boys what the model male *is* by what it is *not*. Masculinities are paraded, then validated or castigated. In *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*, the “free nation” of American boy culture after the nineteenth century is described by E. Anthony Rotundo as “a distinct cultural world with its own rituals and its own symbols and values ... boys were able to play outside the rules of the home and the marketplace”.³⁷ Such a recognition acknowledges the liminal, ambiguous zone between childhood and adulthood, but perpetuates the idea that boyhood is a condition of natural development that is relatively impervious to outside influences. Boyhood does not exist within a social vacuum devoid of socio-cultural influence. In David Greven’s research concerning masculinity in contemporary teen comedies, he describes this genre as a veritable pageantry of “boys in men’s drag, donning and discarding codes of manhood that have dominated our culture for so long that they seem ‘natural’”.³⁸ While boyhood offers temporary relief from adult responsibilities, the baggage of gendered identity is never lost. The

³⁵ Urschel, “Men’s studies and women’s studies”, p. 409.

³⁶ Andrew Tolson. *The Limits of Masculinity*. London: Tavistock Publications, 1977.

³⁷ E. Anthony Rotundo. *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*. New York: Basic Books, 1993. p. 31.

³⁸ David Greven. “Dude, where’s my gender? Contemporary teen comedies and new forms of American masculinity”, *Cineaste*, Vol. 27 (3), 2002 (Summer). p. 15.

investment in frivolity and freedom is so intense and extreme because it will not last.

The future hangs like an overshadowing cloud over the present. It is never escaped or forgotten.

Crammed with disorientating, occasionally bracing and shocking forays into socially perverse sexual and gendered territories, [the films] nevertheless squarely situate these forays in the primeval forest of teendom, from which boys emerge as men.³⁹

The teen film enacts an equivalent of the construction of the self-made man. The teenage boy gains autonomy through experience and the passing of time. He exits from the ‘primeval forest of teendom’ – a path of discipline, punishment and reward – that grooms his wayward boyhood tendencies and impulses into acceptable forms of adult masculinity and mastery. Young men demonstrate the tightly policed and protected borders of gendered identity by actualising the rifts and rigours of masculinity. Alternative masculinities are either expelled, rendered harmless or erased. In *40 Days and 40 Nights*, Matt’s (Josh Hartnett) vow of celibacy for forty days *must* reach an end.⁴⁰ His ‘perverse’ bout of abstinence is nullified when he gets the girl, and they have sex for thirty eight hours. Matt’s male friends are obviously impressed by his performance, which re-establishes his credibility. In each of the films of the *American Pie* trilogy, Jim’s (Jason Biggs) various conquests bring him one step closer to accomplished manhood.⁴¹ In the first film, he succeeds in losing his virginity in high school. In the second, he undergoes emotional maturation in college when he is able to admit his feelings of love for his girlfriend. In the final film, Jim marries his sweetheart and assumes the role of the family man.

³⁹ Greven, “Dude, where’s my gender?”, p. 21.

⁴⁰ *40 Days and 40 Nights*. Directed by Michael Lehmann. Written by Robert Perez. Universal Studios, 2002.

⁴¹ *American Pie*. Directed by Paul Weitz. Written by Adam Herz. Universal Studios, 1999.
American Pie 2. Directed by J. B. Rogers. Written by Adam Herz. Universal Studios, 2001.
American Wedding. Directed by Jesse Dylan. Written by Adam Herz. Universal Studios, 2003.

Literature surrounding teenage boys in cinema tends to equate problems of male identity to milestones en route to manhood, from the farcical comedy to the staid drama. For instance in *Dude, Where's My Car?*, Jesse (Ashton Kutcher) and Chester (Seann William Scott) spend the entire movie trying to find their vehicle which contains anniversary gifts for their girlfriends.⁴² Inspired by the promise of what they believe will be sexual treats, the two dim-witted Dudes become embroiled in an intergalactic mission that sees them pursued by 'hot alien chicks', a sect of science fiction fanatics, a transsexual, and Barbarella-esque Martian men amongst others. Although the Dudes are hardly mature men by the film's conclusion, they do succeed in saving the universe and redeeming themselves before their girlfriends. This reinstates their heteronormativity against the 'abnormal' sexualities that surround them, and nullifies the homosocial bond between Jesse and Chester.⁴³

At the opposing end of the spectrum is a film such as *Dead Poets Society*.⁴⁴ A drama set in 1950s Vermont, it depicts the lives of a group of senior students at Welton Academy (a private boys' school) and their development towards autonomy. Encouraged by their English teacher, Mr Keating (Robin Williams), their personal conquests overcome obstacles that pave the way to manhood. Knox Overstreet (Josh Charles) transcends his fear of rejection to pursue a seemingly unattainable girl, Chris (Alexandra Powers), who later accepts his advances. Neil Perry (Sean Robert Leonard) opposes his right-wing domineering father (Kurtwood Smith) to follow his

⁴² *Dude, Where's My Car?* Directed by Danny Leiner. Written by Philip Stark. Twentieth Century Fox, 2000.

⁴³ In a brief scene, Jesse and Chester's car pulls up alongside that of uber-man Fabio (played by himself) at a set of traffic lights. Displaying his enviable machismo, Fabio revs up his car engine, extends his arm around the female in his passenger seat to boast his ownership, and finishes by kissing her lasciviously to parade his sexual prowess. Unwilling to be showed up, the Dudes mimic and respond to each of Fabio's challenges. The scene culminates in Jesse and Chester hilariously locking lips. The comedic effect derives from their lack of awareness that they have pushed their homosocial relation into the realm of the homosexual.

acting passion.⁴⁵ Todd Anderson (Ethan Hawke) transforms from a self-deprecating, meek student into a confident individual and admirable leader. After Keating has been unjustly blamed for Neil's suicide, Todd stands on top of his desk in defiance of the academy's headmaster, Gale Nolan (Norman Lloyd), to show his support of Keating's teachings. This offers a strong critique of an uncomplicated, wondrous 1950s. In spite of the tragic death of Neil, *Dead Poets Society* models an ideal masculinity that is not based on slavish adherence to oppressive regulations, but one that revels in the primal impulses that sustain life.

The beginning of the group's journey is sparked by their formation of a secret club called the Dead Poets Society. Meetings are convened in an old Indian cave deep in the woods where, as Keating describes, "spirits soared, women were wooed, and gods were created".⁴⁶ It is a literal translation of Greven's primeval forest of teendom inclusive of rituals, bongo drums and chants. Heightened masculinity is imagined and then practised. In one instance, the rebel of the collective, Charles Dalton (Gale Hansen), draws a lightning bolt on his chest with red lipstick which he claims is an ancient Indian warrior symbol for male virility. As an inspiratory narrative of the trials and tribulations of male adolescence, *Dead Poets Society* is also a cautionary tale of identity formation.⁴⁷ The rousing music and pride that the film's finale edges towards does not smokescreen the fact that Keating has been fired for his

⁴⁴ *Dead Poets Society*. Directed by Peter Weir. Written by Tom Schulman. Touchstone Pictures, 1989.

⁴⁵ As an intellectual associated with cerebral pursuits and pastimes, such as the school annual and academic study sessions, Neil's role as Puck in a local production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may appear a further extension of his 'soft' masculinity. Instead, the demands of the part accentuate his physicality and vigour.

⁴⁶ Keating in *Dead Poets Society*.

⁴⁷ Anne Cranny-Francis and J. R. Martin explore the masculinist discourse of *Dead Poets Society* through the lens of class, gender and education. See: Anne Cranny-Francis and J. R. Martin. "In/visible education: Class, gender and pedagogy in *Educating Rita* and *Dead Poets' Society*", *Interpretations: Journal of the English Teachers' Association of Western Australia*, Vol. 27 (1), May 1994. pp. 28-57.

unconventional teaching methods, that Neil's suicide arose from desperation (his outraged father is about to send him to military school after he learns Neil has disobeyed him), and Charles is expelled for his resistance against the school board. As Jonathon Rayner comments, "Keating's return to Welton to replay his adolescent revolt only reinforces the gap between youth and age, and the compromises the former vilifies only to accept them at a later stage".⁴⁸ The safety of the primeval cave cannot last forever. Punishment and discipline awaits those who emerge from the (literal and metaphoric) wilderness. The severity of their exit wounds is proportional to their deviation from acceptable, conventional masculinity.

Rites of passage films rarely question crises of masculinity because there is the assumption that 'things will sort themselves out' and boys will become men outside the narrative's temporal diegesis. It is, however, much more complex than a seamless progression to heteronormative success. In the masculine life cycle, a moment of male teenage angst is frozen and the image captured and carried within youth cinema. It is grounded and invested in history. By hitting the proverbial pause button, this chapter intervenes in the 'truth' of a naturalised, linear narrative from boyhood to manhood. In doing so, it unsettles the idea of an inevitable end point of model masculinity. As it is difficult to offer alternatives to masculine ideologies, films are frequently set in the (mythic) past or nostalgic times.

Time Travelers: Masters of the Universe

Time, and the concept of time travel, has long been the subject of fascination for scientists, philosophers, writers and historians. In a crude framing, it can be book-

⁴⁸ Jonathon Rayner. *The Films of Peter Weir. Second Edition*. New York and London: Continuum,

ended by H. G. Wells' novel *The Time Machine* and the physics-based theorisations propounded by the likes of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*.⁴⁹ Time that is not bound to the workings of the clock, that master timekeeper, presents a plethora of possibilities. For instance, events are no longer recorded according to seconds, minutes, hours and days. They may depend upon a sensory memory for recall. It is a foreigner's visit to some Tuscan hillside town where the wristwatch is willingly abandoned. Experiences will be measured by the pungent aroma of fresh coffee when the cock crows, the warmth of the skin at the hottest point of the day, the fatigue in the legs and the setting of the sun. In this example, the urgency and immediacy of (keeping) time is loosened.

In his seminal essay entitled "Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism", E. P. Thompson discusses the impact of 'time-sense' in modern society.⁵⁰ Tracking the structural changes in the workforce since the thirteenth century, Thompson identifies the intimate relation between notions of time, labour and hegemonic order. The movement from pre-industrial to (post)industrial society has witnessed a transition from a task-oriented to time-oriented economy.⁵¹ The former, most common in domestic and village industries, is characterised by an individual's investment in the completion of daily tasks and a natural work rhythm, "sheep must be attended at lambing time and guarded from predators; cows must be milked; the charcoal fire must

2003. p. 202.

⁴⁹ H. G. Wells. *The Time Machine*. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1949 (1895).
Stephen Hawking. *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*. London: Bantam, 1988.
Although H. G. Wells' novel is regarded as the first book to include a time machine, Clifford Pickover cites an earlier, lesser known book by Edward Page Mitchell entitled *The Clock That Went Backward* which appeared in 1881.

Clifford Pickover. "Traveling through time", *Nova Online*.

<<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/time/through.html>> Accessed online on 2 May, 2004.

⁵⁰ E. P. Thompson. "Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism", *Past and Present*, No. 38, December 1967. pp. 56-97.

⁵¹ Thompson, "Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism", pp. 60-61.

be attended and not burn away through the turf ... once iron is in the making, the furnaces must not be allowed to fail”.⁵² With the advent and widespread implementation of the timekeeper (both the apparatus and the wardens who were in charge of the clock and time-sheets of employees), a new form of regulation was imposed which “entailed a severe restructuring of working habits – new disciplines, new incentives, and a new human nature upon which these incentives could bite effectively”.⁵³ The onus of productivity had been transferred from personal responsibility to the pressures of external forces over which the labourers had no control. This is exemplified in the following excerpts from the late eighteenth century of workers in various trades.

There we worked as long as we could see in summer time, and I could not say at what hour it was that we stopped. There was nobody but the master and the master’s son who had a watch, and we did not know the time. There was one man who had a watch, I believe it was a friend who gave it him. It was taken from him and given into the master’s custody because he had told the men the time of the day.⁵⁴

... in reality there were no regular hours, masters and managers did with us as they liked. The clocks at the factories were often put forward in the morning and back at night, and instead of being instruments for the measurement of time, they were used as *cloaks* for cheaterly and oppression. Though this was known amongst the hands, all were afraid to speak, and a workman then was afraid to carry a watch, as it was no uncommon event to dismiss any one who presumed to know too much about the science of horology.⁵⁵

The ruthless manipulation and withholding of time shows the restrictions of being time-bound. The leash between employer and employees in the industrial age is shortened. A distinction exists between those who own and wield time, those who are chained to it, and those who are located outside of it and therefore remain in the past.

⁵² Thompson, “Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism”, p. 60.

⁵³ Thompson, “Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism”, pp. 82, 57.

⁵⁴ Alfred [i.e. Samuel Kydd]. *The History of the Factory Movement from the Year 1802 to the Enactment of the Ten Hours’ Bill in 1847*. London: 1857. Cited in Paul Mantoux. *The Industrial Revolution in the Eighteenth Century: An Outline of the Beginnings of the Modern Factory System in England*. London: Jonathon Cape, 1961 (1928). p. 417.

This secondary citation has been included as it illustrates the power of time-keeping. Due to the dated nature of the source, I have been unable to access the original text but consider it invaluable to the current argument.

Time carries with it a host of ideologies of power and progress that is coded by gender and class. This is captured by Thompson's following observations:

A clock or watch was not only useful; it conferred prestige upon its owner, and a man might be willing to stretch his resources to obtain one ... despite school times and television times, the rhythms of women's work in the home are not wholly attuned to the measurement of the clock. The mother of young children has an imperfect sense of time and attends to other human tides. She has not yet altogether moved out of the conventions of "pre-industrial" society.⁵⁶

A timepiece that segments events into measurable units does not create a universal and egalitarian sense of global time, where business hours in Tokyo find their equivalent in London shifted nine hours ahead. The myth of absolute time gives way to the idea of time as a more personal concept, in which "clocks carried by different observers would not necessarily agree".⁵⁷ Hierarchies are emphasised and solidified. Time dredges up, but also masks, inequalities of social ranking. This becomes even more evident when history, and history writing, is mixed into the fold.

History has become the shorthand for truth and reality of the past. Artefacts and documentation provide the evidence of a logical chain of events. Educational institutions teach approved histories of conquests and colonisation by forefathers in the heartland, epic battles, industrial advancement and the exoticism of ancient cultures. This problematically ignores subsidiary, unpopular narratives. While the expeditions of Sir James Cook and the perseverance of Australia's early (white) settlers feature as a mainstay in most of Australia's primary and secondary school curricula, brutality against the nation's indigenous peoples – the Aborigines – remains largely untouched and untold. As an ideological construct, history perpetuates relations of power and powerlessness through the validation and discreditation of versions of the past. Keith

⁵⁵ James Myles. *Chapters in the Life of a Dundee Factory Boy: An Autobiography*. Dundee: James Myles, 1850. pp. 12-13.

⁵⁶ Thompson, "Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism", pp. 69, 79.

Jenkins draws attention to the importance of distinguishing between the past as “all that has gone on before everywhere”, and historiography as the “writings of historians”.⁵⁸ Writing history is not an exact (human) science. It produces a jigsaw puzzle (in)complete with missing sections, parts that are forced together and pieces that are buried beneath others.

One cannot recount more than a fraction of what has occurred and no historian’s account ever corresponds precisely with the past: the sheer bulk of the past precludes total history ... As the past has gone, no account can ever be checked against it but only against other accounts ... there is no fundamentally correct ‘text’ of which other interpretations are just variations; variations are all there are.⁵⁹

History is a selective process of reconstruction and recovery of the past that can never be perfect, whole and irrefutable. It cannot claim an objective distancing between the subject of interest, and the stance from which it is observed and written from. As E. H. Carr points out, “The historian belongs not to the past but to the present”.⁶⁰

Narrative recounts of yesterday are saturated with the ideologies of today. If history is written by the victors, it is an important project to interrogate the voices and views that jut into official narratives, written by the “dead hand of vanished generations of historians, scribes and chroniclers”.⁶¹ It is an even more difficult project to reclaim, reinvest and reinfuse those people and places who are unrecorded and underwritten.

‘Doing’ and writing history functions as a type of time travel. It permits a visit to a past with an assured return ticket back to the present. The excursion is never without an agenda. The historian and time traveller are like the tourist who frames events and people and has “the power to reshape culture and nature to its own needs”.⁶²

⁵⁷ Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, p. 151.

⁵⁸ Keith Jenkins. *Re-thinking History*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991. p. 6.

⁵⁹ Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, p. 11.

⁶⁰ E. H. Carr. *What is History? Second Edition*. London: Penguin Books, 1987 (1961). p. 25.

⁶¹ Carr, *What is History?*, p. 14.

⁶² Dean MacCannell. *Empty Meeting Grounds*. London: Routledge, 1992. p. 1.

Historiography allows the present to write (over) the past. It is temporal and spatial (neo)colonisation at its most efficient. The long hand of the historian reaches back to a bygone time, takes what it wants, and in doing so permanently alters the landscape. It is not unexpected that the domains of science, science fiction and historiography remain largely dominated by the usual suspects fitting the profile of educated, white, middle-class males. While historical record and the impact of time-discipline may provide the fertile grounds for exploitation to fester, it is also the site where resistance can occur.⁶³ Alternative narratives surface which, in questioning the objectivity of scientific time, fragment the foundations of a (presumably) irrefutable history.

Time travel has featured as a viable way of correcting space, identity and social organisation in science fiction and fantasy films. The protagonists are often male, such as the Time Traveller (Rod Taylor) in the 1960 film adaptation of *The Time Machine*, Superman (Christopher Reeve) in the self-titled films, the cyborg and human renegade, Kyle (Michael Biehn), in *The Terminator*, and the main characters in *The Time Bandits*.⁶⁴ The outcomes are predictable. Humanity is saved, history is returned to its natural state and the hero is triumphant. Time travel provides the means for dominant masculinity to assert control over the past, present and future. The Other is rarely granted this privilege. One of the few films to showcase a female time traveller is *Peggy Sue Got Married*.⁶⁵ The title character (Kathleen Turner) is transported back to 1960 after she suffers a heart attack at her high school reunion. Time travel in this

⁶³ Thompson, "Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism", pp. 93-94.

⁶⁴ *The Time Machine*. Directed by George Pal. Written by David Duncan. Based on a novel by H. G. Wells. Warner Bros., 1960.

Superman. Directed by Richard Donner. Written by Mario Puzo, David Newman, Leslie Newman and Robert Benton. Based on the comic series by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. Warner Bros., 1978.

The Time Bandits. Directed by Terry Gilliam. Written by Michael Palin and Terry Gilliam. HandMade Films, 1980.

⁶⁵ *Peggy Sue Got Married*. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Written by Jerry Leichtling and Arlene Sarner. Columbia Tristar Pictures, 1986.

case is not intentional. Peggy Sue's ticket to the past serves to alleviate her feelings of depression, associated with middle-agedness and her failed marriage, by reinvigorating her youthfulness. She does not rewrite public *history*, but rather her own personal and private *experience*. Even in the slapstick teen film, the concept of time travel as an extension of masculine authority is not lost. In *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, two simpleminded high school students embark on an odyssey through time when they are presented with a telephone booth-time machine.⁶⁶ In danger of failing History, Ted (Keanu Reeves) and Bill (Alex Winter) collect historical personages for their class presentation. This includes Socrates (Tony Steedman), Joan of Arc (Jane Wiedlin) and Abraham Lincoln (Robert V. Barron).

In an amusing series of extended gags, historical figures are let loose on modern society – Joan of Arc ends up leading a Jazzercise class, Napoleon pigs out at an ice cream parlor, Beethoven admits Bon Jovi's *Slippery When Wet* among his favourite pieces of music, and there is that ever so delightful moment when a cop asks Sigmund Freud "Why do you think you're Freud?" to which the natural rejoinder is "Why are you so certain I'm not Freud?"⁶⁷

Bill and Ted are modern-day historians who literally take from the past for their own purposes. As intellectually vacant as the two Valley dudes are, Bill and Ted manage to improve social conditions and culture. They invent a radical philosophy that helps unite all life forms in the universe to create peace and harmony.⁶⁸

Time travel functions as a sci-fi rite of passage in youth cinema. The forest of teendom extends to and accentuates the metaphor of time as teacher. Vaulting between past, present and future becomes the ritualistic determinant of maturity. The focus of this final section is an analysis of *Donnie Darko* as a critique of history, identity and power

⁶⁶ *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*. Directed by Stephen Herek. Written by Chris Matheson and Ed Solomon. MGM/United Artists, 1989.

⁶⁷ Richard Scheib. "Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure: Review", 1992.

<<http://members.fortunecity.com/roogulator/sf/bill&ted.htm>> Accessed online on 8 May, 2004.

⁶⁸ Scheib, "Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure: Review".

in a post-Generation X environment. To effectively contextualise this film, I precede it with a brief juxtaposition to *Back to the Future*. *Donnie Darko* and *Back to the Future* present a rare moment in cinema history, in which coincidence becomes a juncture of poetic synchronicity. With the benefit of hindsight, both films travel back to the past to cover half a century of American history. The 1980s overlap of the two texts becomes a site of divergence and differentiation between the Baby Boomers and the elusive Generation X. The films bear traces of the climates they were borne out of. The chasm is vast.

In *Back to the Future*, Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) is a high school student living in 1985. During the test trial of a time travel contraption – a souped-up DeLorean – that the scientist Doc Brown (Christopher Lloyd) has invented, the pair is hunted down by Libyan terrorists. Doc has stolen plutonium from them to fuel the machine. After Doc is fatally gunned down, Marty flees in the DeLorean and is dispatched thirty years back to the past. He seeks out a young Doc to help him return to 1985. The mission is complicated when Marty's mother, Lorraine Baines (Lea Thompson), falls in love with him rather than her future husband George McFly (Crispin Glover). This jeopardises Marty's very existence. He must manipulate events so that they are able to run their natural course. Equilibrium is only restored when his parents are brought together at the Enchantment Under the Sea Dance.

When we are first introduced to Marty and the community of Hill Valley in 1985, the situation is depressing. Marty's father is a spineless geek terrorised by the local bully Biff (Thomas F. Wilson). His mother is a dispirited alcoholic. Marty's own self-worth is questionable. When his band, The Pinheads, audition to play at the annual prom,

they are dismissed as devoid of talent. He is chastised by a tyrant of a teacher, Mr Strickland (James Tolkan), who cruelly taunts, “No McFly ever amounted to anything in the history of Hill Valley”.⁶⁹ Marty’s defensive reply is, “Yeah, well history is gonna change”.⁷⁰ In order to realise this, Marty must travel back in time for this change to occur. Riding the tail end of the Baby Boomers era, *Back to the Future* looks to the 1950s for solutions to a 1980s of rising divorce rates and unemployment.

When Marty is transported to 1955, he is faced with the same condition of defective masculinities. Biff is still a detestable lout and George is the resident fool and underdog. They embody the extremities of destructive machismo and cowardly weakness. Marty’s function as time traveller allows him leverage to intercept history, as well as reform individuals. Befriending his father, Marty cajoles George into believing that Lorraine has affections for him. A plan is devised in which George will, upon cue, rescue her from Marty’s advances to flaunt his manly competence. The plan is botched when Biff tries to take advantage of Lorraine instead. This forces George to overcome his fear of the thug and deal with the situation for real. Romance is kindled between George and Lorraine, leading to that critical kiss on the dance floor which will guarantee Marty’s existence in the future. Marty’s intervention seals a quintessential 1950s of Sunday roast dinners, true romance and chivalry. The boundless potential of the future is reinstated. This is hinted at in the political nuances that run throughout the film. The mayor of 1985 Hill Valley is African-American Goldie Wilson, who is running for re-election. His slogan reads, “Progress is his middle name”. In an almost identical fashion in 1955, we witness the current mayor’s election van doing rounds in the town square. On the van is a poster of Red Thomas, a middle-aged WASP. In a

⁶⁹ Mr Strickland in *Back to the Future*.

scene where a teenage Goldie Wilson (Donald Fullilove) is sweeping the floor of the local diner, he lectures George on standing up to Biff's coercive tactics and having self-respect. When Marty accidentally divulges that Goldie will one day become mayor, the kitchen-hand begins to seriously contemplate the idea despite the constant put-downs by his boss, Lou (Norman Alden).

Goldie: No sir, I'm gonna make something out of myself. I'm going to night school and one day I'm gonna be somebody.

Marty: That's right! He's gonna be mayor!

Goldie: Yeah, I'm – mayor. Now that's a good idea. I could run for mayor.

Lou: A colored mayor, that'll be the day.

Goldie: You wait and see, Mr Curruthers, I will be mayor and I'll be the most powerful mayor in the history of Hill Valley, and I'm gonna clean up this town.⁷¹

The comical nature of the scene relies upon our knowledge that Goldie will in fact become a successful political figure. Progress is imminent. It is comforting to know that an even better future is approaching.

Marty's effect upon the future is no less than miraculous. By the end, he has improved it altogether. Doc's death has been prevented. Lorraine and George have transformed from an unhappily married and dowdy couple into attractive, highly respected members of the community. Lorraine is no longer a frumpy, dissatisfied housewife. George is a reputable science fiction writer. Biff has been reduced to an emasculated sycophant doing odd jobs for the family. Marty's siblings, Linda (Wendie Jo Sperber) and Dave (Marc McClure), have also morphed from dead-end job losers into hip young adults with enviable jobs and social clout. This scenario is testament of Reaganite meritocracy and Boomer opportunity. The template of the 1950s has been grafted onto the 1980s. At the conclusion of *Back to the Future*, Marty and his girlfriend, Jennifer (Claudia Wells), are whisked off to the future by Doc on another mission. It is history

⁷⁰ Marty in *Back to the Future*.

in the making, once again. In the DeLorean, Marty experiences the ultimate apparatus of power. As the living hand of history, he is the scribe and chronicler of tomorrow, today and yesterday.

The function of time travel and the role of the teenage boy as time traveller in *Back to the Future* and *Donnie Darko* is considerably different. While the former basks in the optimism of the 1980s, the latter sketches a darker, more cynical portrait of the decade. Whereas Marty McFly's travels take him eventually back to contentment in the present, Donnie Darko's journey is locked in the past (of 1988) where the future is uncertain.⁷²

Produced in 2001 and set in October 1988, *Donnie Darko* tells the story of a disaffected teenager who must save the universe from collapsing in on itself when the events of one parallel universe momentarily, but catastrophically, collide with another. Donnie (Jake Gyllenhaal) escapes death when a plane engine mysteriously falls from the sky and crashes into his bedroom. This short-circuits the natural course of events. Guided by a six-foot rabbit named Frank (James Duval), a macabre traveller from the future, Donnie is instructed to carry out a series of increasingly violent acts that appear unrelated. Vandalism turns to arson, and eventually murder. The events culminate in a final solution. The realignment of the space-time continuum is possible only through the protagonist's gruesome death. The ending is déjà vu of the film's beginning. The plane engine plummets from the sky, but this time crushes Donnie in his bed as he sleeps.⁷³

⁷¹ Goldie, Marty and Lou in *Back to the Future*.

⁷² *Back to the Future* is a commentary of 1985 and 1955 from the perspective of 1985. *Donnie Darko* is a retrospective piece that explores 1988 from the viewpoint of the year 2001.

⁷³ Deleted scenes on the DVD release show Donnie impaled by a metal spike from the jet engine.

Donnie hails from a well-to-do family in Middlesex. The grand chandelier in the foyer of the Darko residence is a recurrent motif, emblematic of the success of his Boomer parents. Donnie's privileged background grates with his diagnosed borderline schizophrenia that is never convincingly proven. Donnie's mystifying illness is a psychosomatic manifestation of the wider ailments that plague society. Beneath the "dreamily, idyllic neighborhood, full of leaf blowers, power-walkers and double-sided refrigerators", a sinister scepticism of the present and future lurks.⁷⁴ There is a "creeping sense that something is amiss, as if the skewed, off-kilter sensibility of David Lynch had moved in across the street from John Hughes' well-adjusted sensitivity".⁷⁵ As Mark Olsen comments:

If last year's *Ginger Snaps* mapped the trials of female adolescence through the bloody bodyshock and revulsion of the horror film, then *Donnie Darko* applies the mind-warping possibilities of science fiction to teenage male development, exploring alternate worlds hidden within the fabric of everyday adolescent reality.⁷⁶

Donnie Darko does not paint a picture of conventional boyhood and the prototypical passage to adulthood. There are few models of adult masculinity to be admired and aspired to. Jim Cunningham (Patrick Swayze), a self-help guru, bears the external signs of masculine success. Exuding confidence, he is followed like a spiritual leader by a large contingency of the community. His stately home punctuates the film. It is a constant reminder of his looming presence. This paragon of power is hollow on the inside. Donnie's incessant jibes at Cunningham show the latter to be a sham. Like the travelling medicine man of old, with his suitcase of potions and bogus serums, Cunningham's mottos and steps towards empowerment have no real effect. When he

⁷⁴ Mark Olsen. "Discovery: Richard Kelly", *Film Comment*, Vol. 37 (5), September-October 2001. p. 16.

⁷⁵ Olsen, "Discovery", p. 16.

⁷⁶ Olsen, "Discovery", p. 16.

Ginger Snaps is a coming-of-age horror story. A teenage girl must choose between becoming a werewolf and joining her sister in a murderous pact, or relinquishing the tight bond with her sibling. *Ginger Snaps*. Directed by John Fawcett. Written by Karen Walton. Artisan Studio, 2000.

is exposed as being part of a child pornography publishing ring after Donnie has set his house on fire, the public's impression of this outstanding citizen crumbles.

Donnie's father, Eddie (Holmes Osborne), is the archetypal WASP. He embodies the Great American Dream, replete with the impressive home, the white picket fence and double garage, a doting wife and three children. The idealism of this existence unravels as the pleasantries and civility of a "sitcom family mealtime discussion" about daily events goes askew.⁷⁷ Talks of the upcoming presidential election between George Bush and Michael Dukakis, and the eldest daughter's, Elizabeth's (Maggie Gyllenhaal), aspirations to enter Harvard escalate into caustic name calling and accusations of mental illness. Eddie's reaction is a muffled laugh. Similarly, when Eddie and his wife, Rose (Mary McDonnell), are called in to see Principal Cole (David Moreland) after Donnie has verbally abused one of his teachers, it is Eddie who chokes back his laughter as his wife looks on in consternation. There is something off-centre with his authority. Unlike Cunningham, Eddie's is not a gaudy, publicly paraded masculinity. His command and knowledge only surfaces in private moments – those knowing glances shared between a select few. This is most telling in a deleted scene from *Donnie Darko*. In a father-to-son conversation in which he tries to convince Donnie that he is not demented, Eddie unloads a stream of clichéd morals. Realising that his hackneyed phrases are placebos for an otherwise complex situation, Eddie strips his paternal advice of its nonsense to reveal the root of Donnie's predicament.

Eddie: Be honest. Tell the truth. Even if they do look at you funny. They will. They'll call you fool. Tell you wrong. But there's something you gotta understand son, and that's almost all of those people are full of shit. They're all a part of this great big conspiracy of bullshit. And they're scared of people

⁷⁷ Philip Kerr. "The curious case of the six-foot rabbit", *New Statesman*, Vol. 131 (4611), 28 October, 2002. p. 45.

like you. Because those bullshitters know that you're smarter than all of them. You know what you say to people like that? Fuck you.⁷⁸

Donnie and Eddie share a moment of bitter truth that no other character in the film is able to understand or confront. In an environment where the most popular person is a fraudulent, self-help celebrity and paedophile, Donnie and Eddie's sanity is seen as a threat and must therefore be labelled as clinically insane and unsuitable parental material respectively. Eddie's constant laughter and inability to take matters seriously do not show a lack of decorum and authority, but an acknowledgement of the ludicrous socio-political milieu.

The most credible of male models in *Donnie Darko* is Professor Kenneth Monnitoff (Noah Wyle), a physics teacher at the high school. As an intellectual and disciplinary figure, he is rational and emotionally controlled. As one of the few characters able to comprehend time travel, Monnitoff's validation of Donnie's theories of pre-ordained destinies reinforce the plausibility of Donnie's visions as real rather than delusional. As with Eddie, revelations of the awful truth (that Donnie may not be deranged) are only to be experienced in an empty classroom. There is no place for its public acceptance. When the Professor later informs Donnie that his encouragement of such progressive thinking may result in his dismissal, it is a defining moment in the film. Scheming politics, tradition and protocol take precedence over the pursuit of truth and knowledge.

Donnie's shrink, played by Katherine (*Butch Cassidy*) Ross is working on the assumption that her patient is borderline schizophrenic, rather than the witness to a phenomenon first described by Stephen Hawking. Wherein lies the true significance of the movie's initially puzzling time period, for September 1988 was when Hawking's book *A Brief History of Time* was published, and in which he described the possibility of time travel through worm holes. Indeed, it has been suggested elsewhere

⁷⁸ Eddie in *Donnie Darko*.

that the possibility of time travel can only logically exist once the possibility has been logically described.⁷⁹

Donnie's madness is significant to the narrative. It suggests that life in the 1980s was far from perfect, and that its modelling of a more nostalgic time in America is equally troubling. There is a brutal honesty to Donnie's sarcastic quips and disengagement from the wider community. Not only are the Partridges and Cleavers absent in this neighbourhood and time. It is questionable whether they ever existed at all. The façade of an ideal society is exposed in a scene which intercuts between a school concert and Donnie's arson attack. As the dance troupe, Sparkle Motion, takes to the stage to perform to Duran Duran's "Notorious", Donnie is torching Cunningham's house.⁸⁰ It is the former that seems more sinister. With their silvery lycra dresses and adult pouts, the dance troupe is a repulsive image of endorsed child exploitation, capitalism and excess. The paradox of this situation cannot be revealed or admitted. Mental illness functions as a quick fix to conceal deeper social problems. As Jill Julius Matthews writes, the distinction between a 'mad' and 'sane' person is "one of degree, not of kind".⁸¹ Donnie's awareness and knowledge is reduced to the ramblings of a mad man. The medical diagnosis of borderline schizophrenic has legitimately repositioned the parameters of deviation and depravity. Blame has been transferred away from a dysfunctional society and relocated onto the individual. The symptoms, not the cause, have become the focal point.

⁷⁹ Kerr, "The curious case of the six-foot rabbit", p. 45.

⁸⁰ Duran Duran. "Notorious", *Notorious* album. Capitol, 1986.

⁸¹ Jill Julius Matthews. *Good and Mad Women: The Historical Construction of Femininity in Twentieth-Century Australia*. Sydney, London and Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1984. p. 4.



Figure 2: Donnie (Jake Gyllenhaal), Gretchen (Jena Malone) and Frank the Rabbit (James Duval) in the 1980s dystopia of *Donnie Darko* (2001).

As an “effective period piece”, *Donnie Darko* captures 1980s conservative America as a time of pseudo-psychobabble and profitable sloganeering.⁸² It relays the concerns and fears of a Generation X filmmaker (Richard Kelly) and a post-Gen X audience that is driven by an apocalyptic, “eschatological anxiety”.⁸³ *Donnie Darko* foreshadows the social and political unease that would pockmark America throughout the 1990s. It critiques the greed and carelessness of a post-World War II generation that enjoyed the spoils of their success, but left behind the debris of an American dream that was no longer relevant to its progeny. Blind faith in the virtues and strength of the nation, the fairness of meritocracy and a promising future would soon become suspect, and its premature optimism criticised.

⁸² Lucius Shepard. “Dark, darker, Darko”, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, Vol. 102 (4), April 2002. p. 113.

The musical score of *Donnie Darko* is crucial in creating a sense of authenticity and connectivity to the 1980s. The soundtrack includes artist groups iconic of the decade, such as Echo and the Bunnymen, Joy Division and Duran Duran.

⁸³ Jason Cowley. “The time of fear”, *New Statesman*, Vol. 132 (4647), 21 July, 2003. p. 20.

The glories of the children of the (1950s) revolution are clearly conveyed in Francis Fukuyama's 1992 monograph *The End of History and the Last Man*.⁸⁴ In an impressive but misguided display of empirical facticity, the author cites the rise and fall of regimes – from monarchies and aristocracies, to fascism and socialism, and with specific reference to the collapse of communism in the Soviet bloc in 1989 – that have left liberal democracy as the only “competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potentially universal validity”.⁸⁵ This signalled the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution” in which primitive governments had been, or would be, superseded by the superior paradigm of uniform liberalism and equality.⁸⁶

Fukuyama’s thesis erects, at its core, a simplistic binarism. It clumps an Ameri-centric socio-political formation with technological advancement, economic prosperity, moral integrity, unity and power. The Other is (mis)aligned with rampant backwardness, a fragmentary state and a defective, weak infrastructure. As Mark Poster comments, “Fukuyama’s celebration of the end punctuates more than anything else the era of unselfconscious patriarchy”.⁸⁷ Basking in the afterglow of America’s supremacy in the 1991 Gulf War, Fukuyama’s book pays homage to this superpower as the virile, virtuous protector of not only the sovereign state, but also the entire world.

Fukuyama further proposed that modern societies would witness the end of history, that is, it would be “understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process”.⁸⁸

Borrowing from the works of Hegel and Marx, Fukuyama’s application of this idea to

⁸⁴ Francis Fukuyama. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Avon Books, 1992.

⁸⁵ Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, p. 42.

⁸⁶ Francis Fukuyama. “The end of history?”, *The National Interest*, Vol. 16, 1989 (Summer). pp. 3-18.

⁸⁷ Mark Poster. *Cultural History and Modernity: Disciplinary Readings and Challenges*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. p. 64.

⁸⁸ Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, p. xii.

(American) liberal democracy is not only dubious, but dangerous. By streamlining history (not histories) to a dominant narrative, it claims an authority and authenticity of, and over, the past. It discards those uncontrollable, disparate threads of events that do not neatly fit into the template of the modern democratic state. The tidying of a messy past and present serves to preserve the image (and myth) of stability and order by regulating the movements of its citizens. Fukuyama's 'end of history' is a resplendent structure made of glass and ersatz metal – beautiful and dazzling to gaze at. When the foundations are shaken however, this utopic creation begins to slide and topple to reveal its flimsy scaffolding. Liberal democracy and the American way is left vulnerable and naked. Its flaws are exposed as the dust rises and eventually engulfs it.

Reports in 2004 of deplorable prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq by American troops are examples and (unfortunately) timely reminders of Fukuyama's overzealous championing of what he regarded as the pinnacle of liberal democracy. Graphic pictures of male detainees forced to lie naked on top of one another in a human pyramid, with bags over their heads and slanderous statements scrawled over their bodies as soldiers stare on in pride, amusement and mockery, are a disturbing portrait of perverted power, military might and acts of machismo gone horribly wrong.⁸⁹ They are devoid of the dignified victories popularised by the raising of the American flag at Iwo Jima. Instead, they register as desperate clawing at the reins of control that have already become loosened from the hands of the captors. This event

⁸⁹ Gaining particular notoriety in the debacle was Private Lynndie England whose face graced many of the released pictures of prisoner abuse. While she remained one of the few females featured in the photographs, her tomboy appearance and aggressive postures sustained an image of rough machismo. In one photograph, she is holding a leash tied around the neck of a naked prisoner who is supine on the floor. In another, she is shown with a cigarette hanging from her mouth, smirking and gesturing a thumbs-up sign and cocking her finger at the genitals of a naked prisoner with a bag over his head. See: "Prisoner photos", *CBSNews.com*, May 2004. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/elements/2004/05/06/iraq/photoessay615914.shtml>> Accessed online on 14 May, 2004.

plays like a Shakespearean drama that can only lead to tragedy. Although the Coalition of the Willing has ardently maintained the impression of a clean, fair fight for freedom and peace, there is something rotten in the state.

Although *Donnie Darko* was released three years prior to the Abu Ghraib reports and several months before September 11, it was privy to the impeachment of then-President Bill Clinton in 1998 for his sexual misconduct with Monica Lewinsky, and the marathon murder trial of former football star-turned actor OJ Simpson in 1995.⁹⁰ Unlike the Watergate scandal which decimated public trust and demanded severe reparations, the court cases demonstrated that less than two decades later, perjury and homicide would function as fodder for a media circus. Ratings and infotainment had become the currency of a new world order, supplanting the search for truth and justice. With polls indicating greater support for Clinton after his affair was made public and Simpson's acquittal, moral bankruptcy was no longer a symbolic skeleton in the closet to be ousted. It was to be expected. The distinction between right and wrong had become relative, easily swayed by the convincing words of a high-priced team of attorneys. Echoing Eddie Darko's reactions, audiences can but only laugh at the situation or remain dismally detached for there is little else to do. This futility is underscored at the end of *Donnie Darko*. A montage sequence shows the main characters as they lie awake at night. It is a simultaneous lament. Among them are Jim Cunningham sobbing uncontrollably and Kenneth Monnitoff who cannot sleep. They remain troubled and with no mode of expression. The sombreness is conveyed

⁹⁰ The 1990s was also marred by the civil unrest in California in 1992. Four officers of the law were acquitted of using excessive force when they beat a black motorist, Rodney King. This sparked riots and looting which lasted four days, and resulted in an estimated fifty to sixty fatalities, between \$800 million to \$1 billion worth of damage, and triggered racial hostility on a mass scale that would become the centre of attention in the world's media.

"1992 civil unrest in Los Angeles", *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*.

by the track that accompanies the scene. It is a rendition of the 1982 Tears For Fears song “Mad World” that describes “familiar faces, worn-out places, worn-out faces” that go nowhere because there is “no tomorrow”.⁹¹ It is significant that the original song was re-recorded, slowed and simplified to increase its elegiac quality and activate popular memory.

Straddling the tripartite dimensions of time, Donnie’s ability to reverse events allows him to become the self-made man and to assert control, but it also requires him to relinquish it. The irony and tragedy of *Donnie Darko* is that Donnie’s revelations and psychological and emotional maturation are the most developed and astute of all the characters, but it is also the most incomplete of journeys with a broken ending.

Donnie’s visions offer two outcomes, neither of which provides the impetus to rush towards the future. The destruction of the tangent universe is paralleled by a future of corruption, a sense of impending doom and lack of faith in conventional bulwarks of integrity and strength. Fukuyama’s grand vision of a unified liberal democracy will never arrive. Furthermore, there is no halcyon past for Donnie’s regression. There is no model society or nostalgic masculinity to be found. Unlike Bill and Ted, Donnie is unable to completely reimagine history. His ability to navigate the space-time continuum is restricted. The frustration of being wedged between a dysfunctional past and an even more defective future manifests itself in Donnie’s bouts of violence. As with D-FENS in *Falling Down*, the desperation of the characters’ actions are guided by esoteric missions to return home. Both offer less than favourable end points.⁹²

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1992_civil_unrest_in_Los_Angeles> Accessed online on 5 June, 2004.

⁹¹ Gary Jules. “Mad World”, *Donnie Darko* album. Original track by Roland Orzabal. Current version released by Sanctuary and Adventure, 2001.

⁹² Near the film’s conclusion, Donnie watches dark clouds gathering in the distance like an ominous black vortex as his girlfriend, Gretchen (Jena Malone), lies dead in the passenger seat of his car.

Captured in the lyrics of “Mad World”, “The dreams in which I’m dying / Are the best I’ve ever had”, it is a fitting epitaph for Donnie’s final moments before his death. It does not get any better, or worse, than this.

In order to save the universe, Donnie must extract himself from the future through self-sacrifice. Though there is no fanfare to salute his heroism, Donnie’s time travelling is far from insignificant, nor is it negated of actual social change. Although he is unable to dent the shape of the future or rewrite history, his power derives from what he leaves behind – a consciousness and sensory memory. After he has reversed time, characters relive the same events with no recall, only a vague emotional trace that they have experienced it all before. It is an unidentifiable familiarity. When Gretchen (Jena Malone), Donnie’s girlfriend in the parallel universe, joins a crowd that has gathered outside the Darko home the day after he has been killed, she waves to Rose. Donnie’s mother returns the wave and a knowing look. There is recognition that their existences are interlocked, even though they have never met in this parallel present. The potency of Donnie’s actions resonates in his last words, “I hope that when the world comes to an end, I can breathe a sigh of relief because there will be so much to look forward to”.⁹³ His historical legacy is to ensure that the “hours of pain and darkness” will not be forgotten.⁹⁴ This semi-consciousness ensures that history will not repeat itself *exactly*. The inevitability of events is no longer seen as random coincidence. They will be invested with meaning. The blind acceptance of ‘the way things are’ gives way to the curiosity of why they are so.

Counting down the time before the world will come to an end, he says with a sense of relief, “I’m going home”.

⁹³ Donnie in *Donnie Darko*.

⁹⁴ Donnie in *Donnie Darko*.

The relationship between time, history and (masculine) authority is a taut one.

Employing the teenage boy as the time traveller, this chapter slows down the life cycle so that the impact of social context upon the personal journey can be observed. While issues of masculinity have been used to anchor the discussion, the proposals asserted here go beyond any crisis of sexuality alone. The marked changes that characterise the last half century of American history can be illustrated with reference to Alan

Lightman's poetic imagining of a world where:

time is like a flow of water, occasionally displaced by a bit of debris, a passing breeze. Now and then, some cosmic disturbance will cause a rivulet of time to turn away from the mainstream, to make connection backstream. When this happens, birds, soil, people caught in the branching tributary find themselves suddenly carried to the past.

Persons who have been transported back in time are easy to identify. They wear dark, indistinct clothing and walk on their toes, trying not to make a single sound, trying not to bend a single blade of grass. For they fear that any change they make in the past could have drastic consequences for the future.⁹⁵

While Marty McFly fears destroying the future as he knows it, he nevertheless struts through the 1950s with a confidence and cockiness. He already knows how things will end. His only surprise is that the future proves to be so much better than what he could have conceived. Donnie Darko is more like the time traveller in Lightman's book who wears 'dark, indistinct clothing', but he is also paradoxically the one given an axe to drastically hack away at the present and past so that the future will arrive. As his bloody end approaches, Donnie's final laughter is a haunting reminder that the crises and tragedies of contemporary society and identity are inevitable – a case of history repeating itself – but also that they will be learned from. That is the future of his hopes.

⁹⁵ Alan Lightman. *Einstein's Dreams*. New York: Warner Books, 1993. pp. 13-14.

Thanks For the Good Times Where to Now?

Completing a full rotation, the final chapter of this thesis returns to its start – with a discussion of Generation X as an imagined collective, personal identity, social practice and ideology. Claiming the term ‘Generation X’ is akin to entering a landmine. It is dangerous territory, fraught with trip wires presided over by theorists, social analysts and irritated others protesting that it was a figment of the public’s imagination manipulated by the media. To ignore that it existed however, is an even more hazardous undertaking as it writes out the stories and experiences of a whole population.

This final chapter fills the historical void by mapping the trajectory of Generation X. Writing a definitive account is an impossible task that is complicated by the workings of popular memory, shared experiences and private moments. How can the intensity of the ephemeral and liminal be documented? Cinema expands the possibilities of history beyond the printed word. It sketches versions of the past and present that more accurately convey the plurality of meanings beyond a singular account. This chapter tracks the movement of Generation X from the 1980s to the present through the cinematic vision of Richard Linklater, whose films have functioned as a type of living photo album of post-1970s youth in middle America. While Quentin Tarantino, Steven Soderbergh and Kevin Smith are regarded as the most influential and progressive filmmakers to have emerged from the 1990s with a distinctive ‘Generation X sensibility’, it is the films of Richard Linklater that most lucidly capture the postmodern experience of youth. Linklater’s incessant experimentation with style and

densely layered narratives gives uncanny expression to an archaeology of (post) youth and (post) Generation X culture.

Chapter 8

Another Sunrise, Another Sunset Beyond Generation X

Memory is a wonderful thing if you don't have to deal with the past.¹

~ Celine [*Before Sunset*] ~

As I commenced writing this final chapter, the independent feature *Before Sunset* had just been released and was screening in theatres throughout Australia. There was an evocative synchronicity between the parallel journeys of this dissertation and the characters in the movie. They had both travelled through time in film, and arrived at the same final destination at the exact same moment. After the inevitable detours and delays along the way, they had come to the end of Generation X as an historical period and mindset. The world has changed once again. A new cycle has started. The paranoia of the Y2K bug has been replaced by the threat of terrorism. A new world war is upon us. The age of analogue has been superseded by the digital era. Flares and *The Dukes of Hazzard* are back in fashion.² Now when we say 'youth', we are no longer referring to ourselves. Generation X no longer signifies the present, but the past. It is history.

This final chapter marks out the arc travelled by Generation X. It maps a narrative of representations, as viewed and projected through the cinematic lens. I focus upon the oeuvre of Richard Linklater, whose seminal works have (inadvertently) become the

¹ *Before Sunset*. Directed by Richard Linklater. Written by Richard Linklater, Julie Delpy and Ethan Hawke. Warner Independent Pictures, 2004.

² *The Dukes of Hazzard*. Created by Gy Waldron. CBS. Originally aired on 26 January, 1979 (USA). The series ran for seven seasons.

unofficial historical landmarks for post-1980s American youth.³ In a relatively short career spanning from 1988, Linklater has directed and written ten feature-length films. They are *It's Impossible to Learn to Plow by Reading Books* (1988), *Slacker* (1991), *Dazed and Confused* (1993), *Before Sunrise* (1995), *SubUrbia* (1996), *The Newton Boys* (1998), *Tape* (2001), *Waking Life* (2001), *School of Rock* (2003) and *Before Sunset* (2004).⁴ With the exception of *The Newton Boys*, Linklater's movies offer a critique of contemporary American society. Social and personal responsibility, private and collective experience, generationalism and identity formation are explored through the eyes and cameras of adolescents and young adults.⁵ Each film paints a portrait of (sub)urban existence that is painfully poetic in its philosophical ramblings, confessions and admonitions that appear seductively arcane and random. As auteur, Linklater's unusual and eclectic style has pioneered innovative ways of filmmaking in terms of visual presentation and narrative development. The texts are not only reflective of the postmodern present, but also pre-empt the future of post-Generation X youth.

³ While Richard Linklater is recognised as the originator of the 1990s slacker iconography in cinema and the vanguard of a generation, his background is not strictly classified as atypical Generation X. As John Pierson writes:

As the multibrats, like his doppelganger Kevin Smith, were massing at the gates, Rick was the last of the Mohicans. His inspiration came from Ophuls' *La Ronde* and Buñuel's *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*. You'll find Antonioni and Fassbinder one-sheets on his walls, and he'd much rather talk about Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac* than either *Jaws* or *The Brady Bunch* (1995, p. 186).

John Pierson. *Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes: A Guided Tour Across A Decade of American Independent Cinema*. New York: Hyperion and Miramax Books, 1995. p. 186.

⁴ *It's Impossible to Learn to Plow by Reading Books*. Directed and written by Richard Linklater. Detour Filmproduction, 1988.

Slacker. Directed and written by Richard Linklater. Detour Filmproduction, 1991.

Dazed and Confused. Directed and written by Richard Linklater. Universal Studios, 1993.

Before Sunrise. Directed by Richard Linklater. Written by Richard Linklater and Kim Krizan. Warner Bros., 1995.

SubUrbia. Directed by Richard Linklater. Written by Eric Bogosian. Based on a play by Eric Bogosian. Castle Rock, 1996.

The Newton Boys. Directed by Richard Linklater. Written by Richard Linklater, Claude Stanush and Clark Lee Walker. Based on a novel by Claude Stanush. Twentieth Century Fox, 1998.

Tape. Directed by Richard Linklater. Written by Stephen Belber. Based on a play by Stephen Belber. Lionsgate/Fox Studios, 2001.

Waking Life. Directed and written by Richard Linklater. Twentieth Century Fox, 2001.

School of Rock. Directed by Richard Linklater. Written by Mike White. Paramount Pictures, 2003.

Linklater creates a living history, or rather an historical rendition, that is as invested in ‘hard politics’ as it is in memories, dreams and emotions.

Linklater’s films capture the progression of youth in middle America from the 1970s to the present. He balances between the extremities of the violent, bitter and cynical world of Larry Clark and the romantic idealism of John Hughes. Unlike the works of Quentin Tarantino and Kevin Smith, Linklater’s characters do not sprout snappy pop culture references, nor do they exhibit an air of ultra-cool bravado. Conflicting ideas among characters provide the friction and opportunities for debates which do not seek to resolve the great issues of life but indicate the need for their further discussion. The stories progress at a languid pace and often without any definite goal or destination. The final fade to black before the end credits is the only sign that the narrative has come to a close, but never an end. Resolutions, if there are any, are ambiguous. The films do not stress conclusiveness but continuity. This is evident in the way the same characters and actors are weaved through several of Linklater’s films, serving as recognisable reference points. For instance, Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy star in *Before Sunrise*, the sequel *Before Sunset* and *Waking Life*. In the former two, they play the parts of Jesse and Celine. Although it is never made obvious if they resume these fictitious personas in *Waking Life* (they are nameless), it is the tacit assumption and hopeful fantasy of the audience that they have. The narrative’s meaning relies on the spectator’s deeper engagement in building a history for the characters and their transient situations. This is suggested in *Before Sunrise* when Celine theorises the moments shared between people. It is an analogy that extends to the relationship that exists between the illuminated faces onscreen and the darkened ones before it.

⁵ Although middle-aged and elderly characters play a significant role in several of Linklater’s films, they

Celine: You know, I believe if there's any kind of God it wouldn't be in any of us, not you or me but just this little space in between. If there's any kind of magic in this world it must be in the attempt of understanding someone, sharing something. I know it's almost impossible to succeed but who cares, really? The answer must be in the attempt.⁶

It is through the affinities made, maintained and broken that carry (on) the narratives in the Linklater films. Their significance lies not simply in the explicit words and actions of the characters, but also in those unseen experiences where subtle connections and causal relations are imagined. There is always the feeling that every dialogue remains unfinished and that we have left a conversation midway. The fragmented narrative strands perpetuate the idea that they are ongoing even without our presence as spectators. To illustrate this, I present two parallel analyses which juxtapose *Slacker* with *Waking Life*, and *Before Sunrise* with *Before Sunset*. The films capture a collective consciousness and historical identity of a generation on celluloid through unconventional narrative structures and stylistic elements.



Figure 1: Art imitating life. Julie Delpy and Ethan Hawke as nameless characters in *Waking Life* (2001).

act more as interlocutors who intervene briefly in the narratives.

⁶ Celine in *Before Sunrise*.

Slacker and Waking Life

Slacker was Richard Linklater's critically acclaimed debut in the independent film circuit in 1991. The narrative commences with a young traveller on a Greyhound bus who disembarks at a station in Austin, Texas. He catches a taxi back to his residence. During the ride, he engages in a lengthy one-way conversation with the driver as to the nature of his dreams. He contemplates the idea that the choices not taken in life splinter into alternate realities. Soon after, he encounters a hit-and-run victim who is sprawled on the road with her groceries strewn around her. This marks the end of Episode One and the traveller's involvement in the narrative.

The camera tracks backwards down the road, away from the accident scene. A car enters the frame and parks on the side of the street. A man exits the vehicle and enters a house. We discover he is the victim's son and also the one who has committed the crime. He begins to cut out pictures from a glossy book and burn them on a makeshift altar adorned with religious iconography. Using a television screen as his canvas, he projects looped footage of a little boy on a child's toy car being pushed along by a woman. From the poor quality of the film stock, we assume it is a home movie of the young man and his mother. There is an unhurried tempo to the scene, even when the police arrive to arrest him. As he is escorted to the squad car, two male pedestrians pass. It is the end of Episode Two.

The narrative turns its attention to one of the pedestrians who is carrying a guitar. The next scene shows him busking on the street. The camera lingers momentarily on him before focusing upon a young woman who drops some change into his guitar case. Like the busker, she functions as a vehicle – a link in a chain – to proceed from one

situation to the next. *Slacker* continues this connective narrative throughout the entire film.⁷ It concludes with a group of youths romping around a hilltop. One of them tosses a camera off a cliff. The final shot is a dizzying image from the perspective of the camera of shapes and eddies of light swirling together before the final black screen.

A superficial reading of *Slacker* sees a linear progression of arbitrary encounters with no climax. Events do not culminate in a single defining moment, nor are characters developed. They are, as Linklater writes in his production notes on *Slacker*, “People without a history or dramatic evolution”.⁸ Characters and their unique circumstances are never revisited and are rarely named. For instance, they are identified in the end credits with descriptions such as ‘Should have stayed at the bus station’ (Richard Linklater), ‘Roadkill’ (Jean Caffeine) and ‘Street musician’ (Keith McCormack). Certain episodes are accorded more screen time and emphasis, where there is an exchange of detached monologues. The relative anonymity and brief appearance of the characters prevents the audience from building attachments and accepting the transitory nature of the narrative.

The episodic structure of *Slacker* and the blasé demeanour of its characters was unsavoury to many audience members and film critics who complained of the “affected and dull” narrative.⁹ This was captured by the following complaint, “Why are the lives of these unproductive, pretentious, and boring people documented on

⁷ There are almost three dozen separate scenarios in *Slacker*.

⁸ Richard Linklater. “From the notebooks” in *Slacker* booklet. Detour Filmproduction, 2004. p. 32. The *Slacker* booklet is a sixty four page accompaniment to the Special Edition DVD release of the movie. It is a compendium including production notes and stills, review extracts and essays from several authors including the director. As it is untitled, I have credited this source as the *Slacker* booklet.

⁹ Peter Hanson. *The Cinema of Generation X: A Critical Study*. Jefferson and London: McFarland and Company, 2002. p. 63.

film? The movie does not mean anything”.¹⁰ The overriding criticism was that *Slacker* was meaningless. In one scene, ‘To be buried in history’ (Nolan Morrison), ‘Masonic malcontent’ (Dan Kratochvil) and ‘Going to catch a show’ (Kyle Rosenblad) criticise the “Masonic pyramid bullshit” that has skewed social history and perpetuated a hierarchy determined by a male-dominated, privileged elite. They proclaim, “the slate of American history needs to be wiped clean”, and propose putting “Larry Feyman in the history books” and “Squeaky Fromme on the one-dollar bill”.¹¹ The topic of their vehement disgust quickly switches when one of the men suggests they buy more beer. The new pursuit of pleasure ends their lecture in politics without further development. In another scene, ‘Pap smear pusher’ (Teresa Taylor) relays the antics of a suicidal gunman on the freeway to bystanders. She then tries to peddle a Madonna pap smear sample that was retrieved from a gynaecology laboratory in Hollywood. This absence of forward momentum and satisfying resolution was sufficient reason for critics to slate the film as a series of trite suburban tales without (conventional) form.

Vilifications of *Slacker*’s aimlessness missed the point that the deliberate structure of the film *was* the point. While the narrative moved at a lethargic pace, this rendered the separate scenes all the more intense. The audience is asked to not simply tune in and tune out, but to tune in and turn up the volume. Philosophical theories of existence, insane grand ideas and astute observations of the mundane are placed on the proverbial table where “vignettes in Linklater’s picture accumulate into a statement from which viewers can choose to extract meaning if they so desire”.¹² *Slacker* is, to quote

¹⁰ Letter of complaint (author unknown) cited in Pierson, *Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes*, p. 189.

¹¹ ‘Going to catch a show’ and ‘Masonic malcontent’ in *Slacker*.

¹² Hanson, *The Cinema of Generation X*, p. 64.

Linklater, a “film of posing problems, even in a confused state (possibly to be solved or addressed differently elsewhere)”.¹³ Conversations pivot around notions of reality, personal and ideological fantasies, and the very core of existence, using a cornucopia of subjects that at times verge on the inane, delusional and the paranoid. One of the most memorable scenes in *Slacker* involves ‘Video backpacker’ (Kalman Spelletich). A chair-bound recluse with a monitor strapped to his back, Video backpacker works in a claustrophobic room that is overcrowded with television sets playing looped footage of disasters and scenes of violence. When he is visited by ‘Cadillac crook’ (Clark Walker), Video backpacker expounds his fascination with the televisual medium.

Video backpacker: Well, we all know the psychic powers of the televised image. But we need to capitalize on it and make it work for us instead of us working for it ... Well, like, to me, my thing is a video image is much more powerful and useful than an actual event. Like back when I used to go out, when I was last out I was walking down the street and this guy like came barrelling out of a bar, fell right in front of me and he had a knife in his back. Landed right on the ground. And I have no reference to it now. I can’t refer back to it. I can’t press rewind. I can’t put it on pause. I can’t put it on slo-mo and see all the little details. And the blood, it was all wrong. It didn’t look like real blood and the hue was off and I couldn’t adjust the hue. I was seeing it for real, but it just wasn’t right. And I didn’t even see the knife impact on the body. I missed that part.¹⁴

In this seemingly isolated and strange sequence, this odd character becomes the street philosopher and poet. Melding televisual literacy with personal observations, Video backpacker articulates the cross-over of fact and fiction within a postmodern discourse. Experiences of the everyday bind the characters, where “the coffee houses and beer gardens of Austin are stand-ins for the agora of Athens”.¹⁵ Their musings eschew the derogatory archetype of the lazy, unproductive slacker. Far from the losers that the term connotes and which Linklater plays upon, the individuals are modern-day

¹³ Linklater, “From the notebooks”, p. 31.

¹⁴ ‘Video backpacker’ in *Slacker*.

¹⁵ Ron Rosenbaum. “*Slacker*’s oblique strategy” in *Slacker* booklet. Detour Filmproduction, 2004. p. 17.

theorists and activists. They find reason for, and meaning in, their existence despite their derelict condition. Upward mobility is virtually non-existence, unemployment is rife and the American Dream has long soured for youth. The characters in *Slacker* do not dwell in the present because they fear the future, but because there is no future. It is fitting that the film's final image is taken from a camera hurtling down a cliff. All recordings of today – tomorrow's past – are destroyed. The linear timeline of history is severed. This moment – right here, right now – is all they have.

Slacker is not a dystopic narrative, contrary to the often numbed demeanour of the characters and the dejected urban landscape of rundown apartment blocks, littered streets, seedy clubs and dingy coffee houses. While the episodes remain incomplete, the film's structure points to the journey – as opposed to the destination – as the most significant aspect of the narrative and life. There is a deliberate attempt to avoid the modernist predicament that T. S. Eliot captured in his poem "Four Quartets".¹⁶

We had the experience but missed the meaning,
And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form, beyond any meaning
We can assign to happiness.¹⁷

The Generation X youth in *Slacker* live a postmodern experience that is conveyed through the fragmented style and content of the movie. They do not however, 'miss the meaning' searching for the myth of sublime happiness. The purpose of existence resides in the questions asked, rather than the answers sought. There is a reflexivity

¹⁶ Paula E. Geyh. "Assembling postmodernism: Experience, meaning, and the space in-between", *College Literature*, Vol. 30 (2), 2003 (Spring). p. 2.

¹⁷ T. S. Eliot. "Four Quartets" in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1969 (1941). p. 186.

By referring to T. S. Eliot's poem which was written during the Second World War, I do not imply that the tumultuous period finds its equivalent in the era of Generation X. I have included it because "Four Quartets" reflects upon individual struggle, experience and the search for meaning in a time of dramatic social change.

that makes every discussion, point of contact and situation a site of higher understanding. The grimy bars, sidewalks and crowded diners have become the mobile classrooms for the youths. As Chris Walters states:

Evidence that twentieth-century radicalism has long been at the end of its tether pervades the movie; the people who inhabit it are overwhelmed by a sense of waiting for the fullness of time to bring word of something – anything – new. Most of them are too young to remember a time before official culture devoured or colonized everything that once held out a promise of vitality; they've claimed inertia as their birthright. The all but total decay of public life has atomized others into subcultures of which they are the only member, free radicals randomly seeking an absent center as the clock beats out its senseless song.

The movie buries its treasures here, in the crevasses of its drollery and craziness. Nothing in the current climate is more permissible than mocking or reducing such people; *Slacker* celebrates their futility as a sign of endurance and mourns the passing of time by marking it with emblems of affection and empathy: the only prizes worth having.¹⁸

While the established institutions of education, government and economy have failed these Texan citizens, they maintain a wry sense of humour. Their sardonic and offhanded quips are indicators of fortitude in the face of futility.¹⁹ The detritus of an ailing society and troubled history becomes the material for new debates, knowledge and ideas. Paula Geyh notes that postmodernist irony is “about ‘play’, both in the sense of enjoyment and in the poststructuralist sense of a production of possibilities of interpretation without end or definitive resolution”, which stands in stark contrast to modernist irony which is “pervaded by a sense of nostalgia, of loss and longing beneath the surface archness”.²⁰ The endless possibilities for interpretation produce a multiplicity of narratives that are in constant flux.

¹⁸ Chris Walters. “Freedom’s just another word for nothing to do” in *Slacker* booklet. Detour Filmproduction, 2004. p. 25.

¹⁹ This fortitude amidst futility echoes the politics of desperation that was discussed in Chapter Five. Lacking the necessary cultural capital to effect direct change, words and simple actions are all the youths in *Slacker* have to structure their days which are reduced to fleeting moments. There is no other option.

²⁰ Geyh, “Assembling postmodernism”, p. 19.

A ten year period separates *Slacker* and Linklater's 2001 production *Waking Life*. Although a completely different story set in an unspecified locale, the premise of *Waking Life* is so similar to its predecessor that it is arguably the auteur's response to his earlier project.²¹ While *Waking Life* continues the episodic structure, it stresses the idea of connectivity and progress narratively, thematically and stylistically that was absent from *Slacker*. The film opens with two young children (Trevor Jack Brooks and Lorelei Linklater) playing a game with a piece of paper folded up and inscribed with words and messages – one of which is “Dream is destiny”. Shortly after, the boy watches a falling star and begins to float upwards. He holds onto the handle of a nearby car door to stop himself drifting into the sky. The following shot is of Wiley Wiggins' character – the only consistently recurring character in the entire film – waking up on a train.²² We assume he has dreamt the previous scene. His many encounters are with nameless characters that enter the story briefly, and are never revisited.²³ They “pontificate, rather than converse” a wide array of subjects that initially appear to have little cogency, from “the nature of consciousness, to theories of film, to grisly fantasies of murder”.²⁴

As with *Slacker*, *Waking Life* has a sedate pace. Wiggins' character floats through time and space in a seemingly random sequence of events. Each new encounter appears to have no bearing on the previous, or the following. The only constant is Wiggins' presence and his growing anxiety as to whether his waking life is actually a

²¹ Shot in New York, Austin and San Antonio, *Waking Life* shifts fluidly through this hybrid cityscape that is concurrently ‘everywhere and nowhere’.

²² Wiley Wiggins featured in *Dazed and Confused* as the character of Mitch.

²³ Whereas characters are identified by obscure descriptives in *Slacker*, they are devoid of names altogether in *Waking Life*. Images of the characters are paired with the actors' real names in the end credits.

²⁴ Erica Abeel. “Dream project: Richard Linklater breaks new ground with *Waking Life*”, *Film Journal International*, Vol. 104 (11), November 2001. p. 26.

permanent state of dreaming or reality. Each time he rouses from sleep, he discovers he has not escaped the dream world. Light switches do not work and the numbers on his digital alarm clock keep morphing and swirling into incomprehensible patterns. The closing scene of *Waking Life* is déjà vu of its beginning. Wiggins' character levitates. He grasps onto the handle of a car door, but then releases it. The film ends ambiguously "with an image perfectly pitched between transcendence and terror".²⁵ Wiggins drifts into the stratosphere until he eventually disappears from view altogether.

Waking Life functions as a type of ten year reunion. It is a continuation of unfinished business that bears the scars and memories of grudges, ecstasy, repulsion and fascination with the past, but it does not dwell in yesterday. The film resumes the contemplative conjectures of *Slacker* but with a more defined quest and mature reception of the inevitable finale. As Kent Jones states:

Waking Life takes a deceptively simple path, segueing, like *Slacker*, from one idea, inspiration, and pronouncement to the next, each reckoned definitive by the person voicing it. On the surface, this procession may seem repetitive and hopelessly collegiate, a gaggle of earnest professorial types and eccentrics with big theories about the nature of existence blended with sociopathic malcontents and inner-journeying slackers. But it's the resounding certainty behind their statements more than their actual content that counts, the poignant folly of banking on ideas that promise to Explain It All.²⁶

While *Waking Life* exhibits many of the trademarks of *Slacker*, its philosophical quandary is more overt and its stylistics more refined. *Waking Life* is an experimental piece of art amalgamating animation and photography. The film was originally shot on location with consumer-level digital cameras. Each individual frame was then illustrated over using specially designed interpolated rotoscoping software to create

²⁵ Kent Jones. "Dream whirl", *Artforum International*, Vol. 40 (1), September 2001. p. 39.

²⁶ Jones, "Dream whirl", p. 39.

“paintings in motion”.²⁷ The visual images manipulate perception with their “shifting planes of space appear[ing] isolated, as if there were discrete strata between foreground and back”.²⁸ With over thirty artists contributing to the animation aspect of the project, each scene has a distinctive texture and appearance which swings between a real-life likeness to the phantasmagoric.²⁹ The hallucinatory wavering effect is an apt and deliberate metaphor for the film’s overarching theme of the enigmatic spaces between the imagined and the actual. The “fundamental questions about reality, unreality, existence, free will” are explored and captured through a sophisticated visual mode where form becomes crucial to meaning.³⁰

The hyper-reality of *Waking Life* draws attention to itself as pure artifice in the making. As Linklater was quoted in an interview, the mantra of the film was “process, not product”.³¹ This is crystallised in a scene in which a young woman (Kim Krizan) is conversing with Wiggins. She claims, “creation seems to come out of imperfection ... a striving and a frustration”.³² Arguing that words are dead symbols incapable of expressing the intangible, it is only through conscious effort to interpret and construct meaning that they attain any significance. This analogy parallels the process by which the audience reads the film. In one of the more life-like portrayals of human characters in *Waking Life*, the allusion of realism is disrupted by ‘thought images’ which appear intermittently throughout the discussion. For instance, when the woman details the path of the spoken word from the speaker’s mouth to the receiver’s brain, a sketch of

²⁷ Barbara Robertson. “Life lines”, *Computer Graphics World*, Vol. 25 (2), February 2002. pp. 13-14.

²⁸ Chris Chang. “Cosmic babble”, *Film Comment*, Vol. 37 (5), September-October 2001. p. 22.

²⁹ Chang, “Cosmic babble”, p. 22.

³⁰ Richard Linklater quoted in Gary Arnold. “Movies in the mind”, *Insight*, Vol. 17 (44), 26 November, 2001. p. 28.

³¹ Richard Linklater quoted in Abeel, “Dream project”, p. 28.

³² Kim Krizan in *Waking Life*.

the auditory canal materialises to illustrate the trajectory. As with the inert nature of language, the visuals are incongruous planes of colours and shapes that only make sense in the attempt to assign them with some sort of alternate logic. We become implicated in the visual construct through the self-conscious processing, rather than consumption, of the image.³³

If the characters in *Slacker* are on the cusp of posing critical questions of existentialism, those in *Waking Life* provide diverse responses that range from rational exegeses to obsessive diatribes, poetic musings to political rants. The film articulates “the way that life can seem to keep turning over another page, forever promising that it’s bringing us one step closer to some ultimate reality” but without ever reaching that elusive end.³⁴ The satisfaction of each new encounter in *Waking Life* is momentary, with each riposte lasting long enough only to be superseded by the next. This is lucidly illustrated in a scene in which Wiggins is in an empty theatre watching a documentary entitled *The Holy Moment*. Actor and director Caveh Zahedi (the only identified character in the film) discusses André Bazin’s theory that reality and God are essentially the same. He explains that the power of cinema is its ability to capture versions of reality that are varying manifestations of God. Zahedi then suggests to his companion (David Jewell) that they have a ‘Holy moment’.

Caveh stops speaking and locks eyes with his friend. His hair has been moving in wave-like patterns throughout his speech, but it now takes on supernatural pulsations. His pupils dilate wildly. It’s as if they have indeed become one with the moment. They begin to speak, the moment is broken, and at the end of the scene the characters morph into clouds.³⁵

³³ Cynthia Fuchs. “*Waking Life*: Review”, *Pop Matters*, 2 November, 2001. <<http://www.popmatters.com/film/reviews/w/waking-life2.shtml>> Accessed online on 17 November, 2004.

³⁴ Jones, “Dream whirl”, p. 39.

³⁵ Chang, “Cosmic babble”, p. 24.

The divine experience is brief but no less intense. There is the implicit proposition that the ‘meaning of Life’ is not to be found in the search for certainty, but in those transitory moments of spiritual transcendence where connections are made between individuals and their surrounds. The free-floating style of *Waking Life* is a poetic and literal translation of this basic principle. The quest for truth is the creation of meaning and progressive thought. This invitation for self cultivation however, can never be complete. Idealism and notions of truth are relative and ever-changing. It is significant that Zahedi and his friend transform into clouds at the end of the episode. The tangible evidence of their holy moment has vaporised, leaving behind only the shared memory of the experience between the characters and the audience – both Wiggins and our own selves. This sense of connectedness in *Waking Life* is a slow evolutionary step from the “disconnect between society and the individual, and between one another” that defined *Slacker*.³⁶ Narrative structure and stylistic elements suggest a movement away from self-imposed alienation.

As with many of Linklater’s works, motifs of movement and transition function significantly in *Waking Life*. Characters are the eternal travellers. As the boat-car driver (Bill Wise) describes it, they are “in a state of constant departure while always arriving”.³⁷ In *Waking Life*, we are introduced to Wiggins asleep on a train. *Slacker* opens with Linklater’s character arriving at the bus station. In *It’s Impossible to Learn to Plow by Reading Books*, the main character (Linklater) is first shown aboard an Amtrak train. The narrative follows him as he roves from one place to the next, carrying out mundane tasks. Early in *Waking Life*, Wiggins hitches a ride with the

³⁶ Richard Linklater quoted in Peter Keough. “Dream weaver”, *ThePhoenix.com*, 2002. <<http://www.bostonphoenix.com/boston/movies/documents/01978298.htm>> Accessed online on 17 November, 2004.

boat-car driver from the train station. Inside the vehicle is a fellow passenger played by Linklater. In a short conversation between all three men, the ethos of this postmodern *Bildungsroman* comes to the forefront.

- Wise: So, where do you want out?
Wiggins: Ah, who me? Am I first? Um, I dunno. Really anywhere is fine.
Wise: Well ... just give me an address or something, okay?
Wiggins: Ah.
Linklater: Tell you what. Go up three more streets, take a right, go two more blocks, drop this guy off at the next corner.
Wiggins: Where's that?
Wise: Well I don't know either, but it's somewhere and it's gonna determine the course of the rest of your life.³⁸

The importance of the journey – of going ‘somewhere’ – is paramount to the text’s interpretation. Characters are not static. The landscape is never permanent. Long tracking shots, smooth crane flyovers and the tilting and panning of the camera continually transport us from one situation to the next in the cityscape. We unobtrusively traverse different spaces, from the intimate setting of a couple’s bedroom to the jail cell of a violent inmate. Visitations are only long enough to pique our curiosity, fascination or disgust before we are whisked away. The seemingly directionless roaming underscores the film’s ideology that human survival and sanity is incumbent upon the impulse to continue forwards, even though the end destination is not known. The vignettes are the microcosmic threads of a greater journey. Departures signify a voyage towards the future and the desire to question what lies beyond the immediate. The arrival is the acceptance and awareness of the present. While the characters in *Slacker* philosophise their existence without ever really posing ‘those questions’, there is a more willing acknowledgement of the mutual “struggle for meaning and purpose, for a destination or goal – or at least for a way of reconciling

³⁷ Bill Wise in *Waking Life*.

³⁸ Bill Wise, Wiley Wiggins and Richard Linklater in *Waking Life*.

themselves to the absence of these things” and of endless possibilities in *Waking Life*.³⁹

If *Slacker* is an exploration of the digressions of Generation X youth, *Waking Life* is the older, more self-aware version of itself one decade later, where the past meets directly and converses with the present. Wiggins – whose character is the alter ego of Linklater’s persona in *Slacker* – encounters Linklater for a second time towards the tail end of *Waking Life*. The latter cannot recall their first meeting. When Wiggins attempts to extract a coherent answer from Linklater as to his permanent dream state, he receives yet another philosophical tangent on existentialism. While Wiggins is finally able to utter the questions that Linklater could not in *Slacker*, hindsight, experience and time still cannot provide the answers.

References to characters, scenarios and locations featured in other Linklater films, such as *Slacker*, give *Waking Life* a strange familiarity with its layered texture. It is akin to a living photo album that is constantly being added to. The film captures private experiences which map out and record an incomplete, ongoing collective memory and shared history. It creates its own popular meta-memory. As the narrative progresses, *Waking Life* gradually drifts into a more troubling and mysterious realm where “the nature of time seems to be urgently imparting itself, *through* dreaming” to the protagonist.⁴⁰ The preoccupations with the present in *Slacker* give way to a fluid, moving timeline that reconnects the past, present and future in *Waking Life*. Without

³⁹ “On the brink of falling skyward”, *Metaphilm*, 2002-2003.

<<http://www.metaphilm.com/philms/wakinglife.html>> Accessed online on 17 November, 2004.

⁴⁰ Kent Jones. “To live or clarify the moment: Rick Linklater’s *Waking Life*”, *Senses of Cinema*, March 2002. Italics in original text.

history or future projections, the Now is absolved of social responsibility. While the youths of *Slacker* have no dreams for the future, dreams become the very (im)material of existence, identity and meaning in *Waking Life*.

Before Sunrise and Before Sunset

The narrative continuation of *Slacker* and *Waking Life* is revisited in *Before Sunrise* and its sequel *Before Sunset*. The opening images of *Before Sunrise* are of railway tracks receding into the distance, and the landscape rushing by. The narrative pivots around two characters, American traveller Jesse (Ethan Hawke) and French student Celine (Julie Delpy), who meet on the train. Jesse proposes that they spend the evening together in Vienna, Austria where he is to catch a flight back to the United States the next day. In their short time together, the couple wander through the foreign Viennese landscape in an extended discussion where they expound their beliefs, personal philosophies and concerns about the future. Throughout the evening, they encounter several minor characters resembling the transitory and enigmatic faces of *Slacker* and *Waking Life*. They include a palm reader (Erni Mangold) who tells Celine, “You need to resign yourself to the awkwardness of life. Only if you find peace within yourself will you find true connection with others”, and a street poet (Dominik Castell) who composes poetry that will “add to your life” in exchange for money.⁴¹ By sunrise, Jesse and Celine have become lovers. The two vow to meet again in six months at the same train station platform. In the final scene of *Before Sunrise*, a montage sequence of places the pair visited is shown in the early light of day – a train overpass, a secluded alleyway, a gravesite, an empty café, a public park

<<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/19/waking.html>> Accessed online on 17 November, 2004.

where the remnants of an empty bottle of wine and glasses mark where they spent the night. We cut to Jesse aboard a bus headed for the airport. He falls asleep with a gentle smile on his face. This is followed with Celine onboard the Eurail bound for Paris. The framing of the image suggests a type of shot-reverse-shot in metaphoric dialogue with Jesse, even though they exist in separate spaces. Celine too smiles before surrendering to sleep.

Before Sunset does not pick up the narrative of *Before Sunrise* so much as it overlays the present on the past. Time bends cyclically. Nine years have elapsed since the initial meeting between Celine and Jesse, in screen time and in real time between the release of the first and second film.⁴² *Before Sunset* opens with shots of the Parisian landscape, before coming to rest at the famous Shakespeare and Company bookshop where a press conference is taking place. Jesse is completing the last leg of his European tour to promote his new book. As he fields questions as to the relative fictional or factual nature of the book, it becomes apparent that its subject is based on the romantic liaison in Vienna. The scene intercuts with footage from *Before Sunrise* to simulate his memories. It is significant that “[i]n the midst of a complicated thought

⁴¹ Palm Reader and Street Poet in *Before Sunrise*.

⁴² The cross-over between fictional and actual events in *Before Sunset* has a poetic resonance. As with his character of Jesse, Ethan Hawke is a published novelist who lives in New York City. He penned the novels *The Hottest State* and *Ash Wednesday*. Hawke’s own marital breakdown with actor Uma Thurman further informed his heated diatribes in the film. Like Celine, Julie Delpy spent time studying at New York University in the years leading up to *Before Sunset* and is an ardent activist.

Ethan Hawke. *The Hottest State*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.

Ethan Hawke. *Ash Wednesday*. New York: Vintage Books, 2002.

See:

Vanessa Grigoriadis. “In his own hothouse”, *New York Magazine*, 28 June, 2004.

<<http://newyorkmetro.com/nymetro/arts/features/9373/>> Accessed online on 25 February, 2005.

Bernard Zuel. “A French delicacy”, *www.smh.com.au*, 14 August, 2004.

<<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/08/13/1092340453918.html?from=storylhs&oneclick=true>> Accessed online on 25 February, 2005.

involving the idea that ‘time is a lie’, Jesse glances over to see Celine herself ... smiling shyly at him”.⁴³ With less than two hours before Jesse must leave for the airport, the film’s eighty minute drama occurs mostly in real time.

The narrative structure of *Before Sunset* proceeds in a similar fashion to *Before Sunrise*. The two characters spend their time together navigating through the landscape of cafés, parks and secluded backstreets, engaged in a protracted dialogue of their life events since 1995. Both project images of success. Celine is an environmental activist and in a steady relationship. Jesse is the accomplished writer, blissfully married and with a five year old son. The façade soon breaks down as each confesses the loneliness and despondency of their current situations, and the regret at not having fulfilled their promise of a reunion.⁴⁴ It becomes obvious that the chemistry between the two has not waned. Their conversation reprises the romantic idealism that characterised the first film. *Before Sunset* concludes at Celine’s studio apartment. By the time Jesse must leave to catch his flight, neither is prepared to bid adieu. Midway during a playful impression of Nina Simone, Celine remarks to Jesse, “You are going to miss your plane”, to which he grins and replies with content resignation, “I know”.⁴⁵ As Celine dances around the apartment, the screen fades to black with the suggestive promise of a future relationship as Simone’s “Just in Time” plays in the background.⁴⁶

⁴³ Eddie Cockrell. “Vienna daydreaming: ‘Sun’ still hasn’t set”, *Variety*, Vol. 394 (1), 16-22 February, 2004. p. 36.

⁴⁴ During the initial awkward stage of their re-encounter, they feign relief that neither had kept to the promise. Celine later admits that the death of her grandmother prevented her from reaching the rendezvous, to which Jesse confesses that he in fact did turn up.

⁴⁵ Celine and Jesse in *Before Sunset*.

⁴⁶ Nina Simone. “Just in Time”, *Nina Simone At The Village Gate* album. Colpix, 1962.

As with *Slacker* and *Waking Life*, *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset* stress the idea of a continuing journey. There are the recurring motifs of planes, trains and automobiles, and meanderings through foreign cityscapes. The leisurely pace of *Slacker* and *Waking Life* is reprised in *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset*, with few dramatic interludes and bursts of narrative momentum that normally typify the romance genre. The latter two are only slightly hurried by a deadline that expires in several hours – to catch that flight or train home. The most divergent feature of *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset* is that they follow a more conventional narrative form with their in-depth character studies of Celine and Jesse. While *Slacker* and *Waking Life* are abstractions of social experiences, *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset* provide a more grounded and tangible account of the postmodern experience of youth, specifically Generation X. The uniqueness of the two projects becomes all the more apparent when compared with a film such as Ben Stiller’s *Reality Bites* – a story of a group of friends in their twenties who are struggling to preserve their identities in corporate culture and avoid turning into their parents.⁴⁷ The film tackles issues including AIDS, youth unemployment, the slacker mentality and generational confusion.⁴⁸ *Reality Bites* is distinctly ‘Generation X’ with its MTV-flavour and popular culture retorts.⁴⁹ Despite its laudable attempts to capture the verve of Generation X in a fashion they could identify with, the moralistic keystone of the film undermines its effectiveness.⁵⁰

As Peter Hanson points out:

Reality Bites was an attempt to document a generation that had yet to mature. In that light, it makes sense that some conjecture was required, and that some wishful thinking manifested onscreen. Just as Linklater walked on virgin terrain in 1991 when he made *Slacker*, Stiller and his collaborators had to think ahead of societal curves in order to

⁴⁷ *Reality Bites*. Directed by Ben Stiller. Written by Helen Childress. Universal Pictures, 1994.

⁴⁸ The character, Todd Dyer (Ethan Hawke), is the archetypal slacker. He is constantly unemployed and philosophising the banal. Todd is a cynical freeloader.

⁴⁹ The reference to MTV takes form in the parodied *In Your Face TV* program featured in *Reality Bites* which one character, Lelaina (Winona Ryder), describes as “MTV but with an edge”.

⁵⁰ Hanson, *The Cinema of Generation X*, p. 65.

give their story closure. And who knows? When *Reality Bites* celebrates its twentieth anniversary in 2014, perhaps the film's vision of a tentative solidarity among the divergent factions of Generation X will seem prescient.⁵¹

Before Sunrise and *Before Sunset* trace the progression of Generation X as it happens. The stories unravel in tandem to actual societal changes as indicated in the sequel's real-time expression. The 1995 *Before Sunrise* marks the beginning of a Generation X youth. Jesse and Celine are in their early twenties. Situated in that uncomfortable zone between the innocence of childhood and the weighty responsibilities of adulthood, they struggle with their conflicting emotions of romantic optimism and sense of futility that becomes manifest in even the most trite subjects of discussion. When Jesse informs Celine that four years of learning French in high school has amounted to a less than impressive mastery of the language, there is the implicit suggestion that even the cornerstone of social progress – knowledge and information – can be rendered useless. Similarly, Celine's quixotic principles for female empowerment crumble as she confesses that her desperation for affection drives away male suitors. As with *Reality Bites*, *Before Sunrise* gives structure to the concerns of Generation X, but it does not provide easy resolutions or closure. The film's final scenario is satisfying because there is no finality. Echoing the words of the boat-car driver in *Waking Life*, the state of constant departure and arrival is the promise of a future and the infinite possibilities for new beginnings. There is solace in acknowledging and accepting that there are no definitive answers.

In *Before Sunset*, Jesse and Celine are older and more mature. They are the image of post-youth and post-Generation X. Their projections in the past have come to fruition.

⁵¹ Hanson, *The Cinema of Generation X*, p. 64.

The future has arrived. Jesse has become the type of author he revered in his youth. His memories of boyhood are now replaced by recent recollections of his own son. The divorce of his parents is mirrored in Jesse's own miserable marriage. Celine has become the independent woman she admired.⁵² As an activist for several causes, she has put her creativity and political agendas into action. She balances a career and a long-term relationship. Both characters have, as Celine foreshadowed in *Before Sunrise*, converted their "fanciful ambition[s] into these practical moneymaking ventures".⁵³ While the first instalment is a more optimistic portrait of the hopefulness of youth, an undercurrent of bitterness and anger flows beneath the darker, more sombre sequel. As the duo's angry confessions escalate, it becomes clear that the end of Generation X has not resolved the existential quandaries that troubled them as youth. The hallmarks of success in adulthood are not sufficient. If there were no answers to 'the meaning of life' a decade ago, the 'solutions' now are equally obscure.

Herein lies the most profound parallel of *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset* to *Waking Life*. The films reconnect time by overlapping past, present and future. They weave an ongoing, living history collated from personal memories, collective experiences and a generational conscience. Time, as with history, is threaded together by the common denominator of humanistic connection. Grand narratives give way to more important micro-narratives composed of revelatory and mundane moments shared between individuals. This (re)connection finds expression in the narrative development of *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset*, but also in their distinctive style. Both films utilise

⁵² This is a subtle reference to *Before Sunrise*. The palm reader foretells Celine, "You are interested in the power of the woman. In the woman's deep strength and creativity. You're becoming this woman".

⁵³ Celine in *Before Sunrise*.



Figure 2: The nine year reunion of Celine (Julie Delpy) and Jesse (Ethan Hawke) in *Before Sunset* (2004).

the Linklater trademark of fluid camera movements. As Jesse and Celine amble through Vienna and Paris, the camera similarly snakes its way through the landscape. Lengthy tracking shots are complemented by uninterrupted long edits. The effect of this unobtrusive style of filmmaking is that we are pleasantly eavesdropping on their conversation.⁵⁴ The constant movement of camera and character through time and space is a literal and allegorical metaphor of the life passage from youth to young adulthood and post-Generation X. The dream-like cadence is counterbalanced by the incessant need to resist inertia, while at the same time slowing down long enough to gaze back at the past and to contemplate the present. John Frow argues, “Place is a marker and guarantee of the continuity of personal identity; memory is a way of identifying, and perhaps repairing, loss”.⁵⁵ When place is in a state of perpetual change, the gravity of transient moments and interactions become all the more cogent. Identity that exists in a presentist modality cannot sustain itself. It requires a back

⁵⁴ Mark Kermode. “Brief encounters”, *New Statesman*, Vol. 133 (4698), 26 July, 2004. p. 45.

⁵⁵ John Frow. *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. p. 245.

story and its own 'palm reader' to hint at the future. The spontaneity of Jesse and Celine's actions are attempts to remain in the moment. At first, they reach a mutual decision to never meet again in *Before Sunrise*, thereby savouring the brief time they have together. This vow is eventually overturned in the realisation that remaining in a constant state of the present is not liberating, but stifling.

Memory and nostalgia play a significant role in anchoring the transitory experiences of these Generation X youth in time and space. In *Before Sunset*, the Parisian landscape is virtually a replicant of the Vienna topography. While nine years and 950 kilometres separate the two films, there is a strange familiarity that is bitter and sweet. Memory takes on a concrete form. By grafting it on the present, the past is not left behind. A Viennese café finds its equivalent in Paris, and a boat cruise on the River Seine takes the place of the Blue Danube.⁵⁶ Nostalgia is no longer a yearning for what is lost, but hindsight to repair the future. While we (and they) revel in the subtle nuances and cross-overs between the films – the way Jesse likes to move Celine's hair away from her face, his penchant for cartoonish hand gestures, her endearing, impassioned arguments – we long for more, and that the story continue. Jesse and Celine embody the transition from youth to post-youth, not an *end of youth*. This is not where Generation X stops, nor where it should.

⁵⁶ As explored in Chapter One and Chapter Seven, the nonlinearity of time in the Linklater films is extremely important. Time becomes looped. Past, present and future cross-over. When Jesse first suggests to Celine that they spend the day together in Vienna in *Before Sunrise*, he forwards the proposition as an exercise in time travel.

Jesse: Jump ahead ten, twenty years, okay? And you're married. Only your marriage doesn't have that same energy that it used to have. You know, you start to blame your husband. You start to think about all those guys you've met in your life and what might've happened if you'd picked up with one of them, right? Well, I'm one of those guys. That's me. You know, so think of this as time travel from then to now to find out what you're missing out on.

Just as 'real life' is incapable of being reproduced in cinema, film is unable to (re)solve its social problems. Films can only function as short-term medications to assuage our fears and anxieties. As Henry Giroux argues, post-September 11 has witnessed an upsurge in the number of pro-military offerings from Hollywood that include the likes of *Band of Brothers*, *Black Hawk Down* and *We Were Soldiers*.⁵⁷ As these romanticised portrayals of military valour, machismo and patriotism pervade the big (and small) screens, these texts act as placebos to buffer paranoia of the outside enemy and bolster national morale, pride and prejudice.⁵⁸ Feelings of relief after a two hour screening of Hollywood's take on the war against America is little comfort if it has not incited action and social change, or at the very least stirred personal conscience. As one of the most popular forms of mass spectatorship, films and filmmakers have a social responsibility beyond uni-dimensional entertainment. Similarly, this duty of care must extend to the audience. Within an accelerating culture of rapid information and image flow, there is a great need to develop astute, critical media literacies that look beyond the superficial surface layer of texts and signs. By replacing complacency and ignorance with awareness, we are more equipped to face social inequities and conflict.

Celine later comments that she has the recurrent sensation that she is an old woman on her deathbed, whose life is made only of memories. This confession is replicated in *Waking Life*. The borders between time, text and memory have become porous.

⁵⁷ Henry Giroux. *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear*. New York and Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. p. 17.

Band of Brothers. Part One directed by Phil Alden Robinson. Part One written by Erik Jendresen and Tom Hanks. Based on a novel by Stephen E. Ambrose. HBO, 2001. *Band of Brothers* is a ten part mini-series with each episode directed and scripted by different filmmakers and writers.

Black Hawk Down. Directed by Ridley Scott. Written by Ken Nolan. Based on a novel by Mark Bowden. Columbia Pictures, 2001.

We Were Soldiers. Directed and written by Randall Wallace. Paramount Pictures, 2002.

⁵⁸ Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation*, p. 17.

If Richard Linklater's films offer versions of the trajectory of Generation X to post-youth, the narrative arc is evolving but far from complete. The transitions from *Slacker* to *Waking Life*, and *Before Sunrise* to *Before Sunset* are significant movements from detachment to interpersonal reconnection beyond the immediate present. They are positive steps forward. Identity and self cannot exist in a vacuum, devoid of social interaction and the desire to question and understand others. It is however, reliance upon divine, Godly moments to transcend our current state of despair. Jesse and Celine turn to love and the future to repair their broken past and present. By the end of *Before Sunset*, they have embraced that life will remain a mystery, but that there is integrity and purpose in striving for those elusive solutions. The film offers an ideal scenario in which the future of Generation X does not conclude in the spectacular, apocalyptic fashion that Douglas Coupland had imagined in *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*.⁵⁹ It finishes with a sultry jazz track and two individuals on the brink of renewed romance. It is a quasi-utopian recourse that can only be achieved by focusing almost exclusively upon the self. Linklater comments:

All we can do is live forward and you just do the best with everything around you. It's very much the way [*Before Sunrise*] was – just a moment in time. *Before Sunrise* was roughly 14 or 15 hours in these two people's lives at a random intersection in a town neither of them lived in. In that film, to me, they were sort of like ghosts in this city that they didn't really belong to, almost in their own world, this ethereal world of their own imagination. [*Before Sunset*] is very much about and takes place in the real world. It's Paris. [Celine] lives in Paris. It's her world, and it's very realistic.⁶⁰

The searing honesty of *Before Sunset* edges towards a remarkably poignant depiction of Generation X, only to withhold its pedagogical potential by displacing political and generational concerns into the privatised sphere of relationships. For instance, Celine's heated diatribes of the declining state of contemporary society and increasing

⁵⁹ Douglas Coupland. *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. London: Abacus, 1996 (1991).

⁶⁰ Richard Linklater. "Before Sunset – Official website (production notes)", 2004. <<http://wip.warnerbros.com/beforesunset/>> Accessed online on 30 November, 2004.

environmental problems falter into complaints of her current love life. There needs to be a “connection between private troubles and public discontents, between social transformation and democratic struggles, between political agency and public life”.⁶¹ Jesse and Celine’s difficulties are not isolated or limited to the individual. They implicate a multitude of discursive frameworks that include the social expectations and pressures imposed on young adults, stifling gender roles and ideologies of sexuality, and a breakdown in the marital institution.

Coupland’s vision of a thermonuclear cloud at the end of his novel was his conclusive, ironic imago of Generation X in 1991. The situation fast-forwarded to 2004 would be more unbelievable and dire than the work of fiction could conjure. Coupland’s mushroom cloud would become the rising dust from the imploding World Trade Centres. The threat of terrorism has made every foreigner a dangerous suspect, sanctioning discrimination against certain ethnic groups. Civil wars have escalated into international fire fight and new forms of colonisation under the banner of ‘protecting the free world’. AIDS is no longer seen as the scourge of drug addicts, homosexuals and the sexually promiscuous. It is a worldwide pandemic. While Linklater posits that ‘all we can do is live forward’, there is perhaps more need than ever to turn our gaze towards the far horizon back to the immediate present, without forgetting the past or denying the future. Social action must take place in the Now. While Celine and Jesse’s epiphanies of the value of human relationships are a marked advancement from their precursors in *Slacker*, the next step is to transfer this sense of agency and purpose into the realm of the public. The individual alone is an ineffectual figure to instigate social change. It must occur at the level of the collective.

⁶¹ Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation*, p. 120.

Representational politics in popular culture is only effective when it challenges the way we presently think. By reading Richard Linklater's filmic texts in relation to socio-temporal context, dominant discourses and histories of youth (in popular culture), there is the recognition "that the struggle over meaning is, in part, defined as the struggle over identity, agency, power relations, and the future".⁶² Private experiences cannot be separated from public affairs. As they enter their post-youth phase, Generation X has been handed the keys to the house from their predecessors. With it, comes the responsibility for the legacy they leave behind. While the party has officially ended, the cleanup – the morning after the night before – is yet to begin.

⁶² Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation*, p. 120.

Conclusion

The early onset of my love affair with the local open-air cinema had a profound impact upon the narratives I would come to expect of youth and its attendant ideologies of identity. The foreign landscape of sprawling malls, byzantine high school corridors, sororities and varsity football games were sources of intrigue and salience. When the theme song for *Footloose* was played at the local disco shortly after its theatrical release, it became an instant anthem.¹ We did not have the words to articulate the freedom of abandoned dancing, but we *felt* the euphoric intensity of the moment in which celluloid, soundtrack and (private and collective) experience converged. Kevin Bacon's character was no longer a fictional persona. He was on the dance floor with us. That moment *meant* something.

The proliferation of images of youth in the public sphere throughout the 1980s and 1990s would not only manifest itself in cinema complexes but also pulp literature, television, merchandising and the music scene. John Hughes became a tour guide in film. Molly Ringwald and the Spice Girls were household names. The smiley face logo of rave replaced the hippie V sign as the new insignia of shared identity and pride. Shifts in representation evinced a growing cognisance of the complexity of youth and youth culture. They broached issues of class, race, gender and sexuality previously untouched or facilely portrayed. The sing-song Partridges moved out of the neighbourhood to make room for the dysfunctional Simpsons. Films such as John Singleton's ground-breaking *Boyz N the Hood* and Tony Kaye's *American History X*

¹ *Footloose*. Directed by Herbert Ross. Written by Dean Pitchford. Paramount Pictures, 1984.

did not shy away from the brute violence of (inter)racial tension, while evading recourse to hackneyed images of the savage Other.² The broadening of roles for young women cleaved a space beyond the archetype of the beauty queen or the dowdy spectacle-wearing wallflower. *Freeway*, *Girlfight* and *Ghost World* exemplified a growing list of independent, aggressive celluloid femmes who refused uni-dimensionality and cinematic tropes of submissiveness.³ These progressive examples do not constitute the normative. Aesthetically pleasing and perfunctory narratives of youth are more savoury to the consumer's palate, and are more effective in moving greater units of endorsed products. There is a reason why the unglamorous *Freaks and Geeks* would only survive one season and why the air-brushed *The O.C.* will occupy prime-time for at least the next three years (or until the characters graduate from college).⁴ This recognition does not debase moments of rupture in popular culture, but reinforces their significance.

My piqued curiosity with the surge in film production of teen movies from the 1980s would be supplanted with perplexity as to the scant interest it had generated in the academy as a site of scholarly pursuit. The dearth of available literature was further broadsided by condescending reviews and critiques that lambasted the films as a waste of (the critic's) time. It was encapsulated in a two-way riposte between Noel King and Adrian Martin deliberating the merits of the teen movie. King profiles Martin as a

Kenny Loggins. "Footloose", *Footloose* album. Sony, 1984.

² *Boyz N the Hood*. Directed and written by John Singleton. Columbia Tristar Pictures, 1991.

American History X. Directed by Tony Kaye. Written by David McKenna. New Line Cinema, 1998.

³ *Freeway*. Directed and written by Matthew Bright. Republic Pictures, 1996.

Girlfight. Directed and written by Karyn Kusama. Columbia Tristar Pictures, 2000.

Ghost World. Directed by Terry Zwigoff. Written by Daniel Clowes and Terry Zwigoff. MGM/United Artists, 2001.

⁴ *Freaks and Geeks*. Based on an original concept by Paul Feig. NBC. Originally aired on 25 September, 1999 (USA). The series ran for one season.

The O.C. Created by McG and Josh Schwartz. Fox Studios. Originally aired on 5 August, 2003 (USA).

populist culture crusader more vested in wanton celebrations of enthusiasm – the “expression of the dynamic, the energetic, the volatile” – than more traditional forms of intellectual rigour.⁵ King scathingly writes:

Martin’s discussion of teen movies, after all, is a very sophisticated ethical/rhetorical exercise (though he would never call it that), one enabled by a range of education, reading and research. Which is to say that Martin’s own distinctive “critical gestures” separate *him*, as an “intelligent critic”, from *them*, the “mass audience”. It is a fantasy to imagine it could be otherwise. After all, what social group is going to agonize about whether or not the teen pic is being given its critical due?⁶

King’s abrasive reproaches point to a more generalised resentment towards the serious study of youth cinema, and from which a host of flawed assumptions surfaces. King (mis)aligns teen films with slavish populism and anti-intellectualism while tacitly elevating high culture to the point where its social and cultural relevance need not be questioned. This political division is masked by relocating blame onto Martin’s personal style as a popular cultural critic supposedly imposing an elitist analysis onto a social group that could not, and would not, care less whether the teen film was ‘given its critical due’. Martin’s sharp rebuttal exposes King’s biased posturing.

‘writing the popular’ as a critic has little or nothing to do with reaching ‘the people’, as that mob is feverishly imagined by troubled intellectuals, while it has everything to do (and this is what’s positive about it) with marking out and travelling down new lines of social exchange, and finding new connections and networks that cut across previous socio-cultural divisions. Writing about popular culture, then, isn’t doomed to be merely regressive or circular; it’s more like a ‘mutant’ form of critical activity for a changing cultural terrain.⁷

I agree with Martin that writing on popular culture, and in this case youth cinema, widens the scope and possibilities in critical cinema and cultural practice. Just as film cannot portray ‘real life’, our interpretations cannot exist at the level of the literal. The intentions of the filmmaker, as expressed through form and style, are negotiated

⁵ Noel King. “Teen movies debate: ‘Not to be an intellectual’: Adrian Martin on teen movies”, *Cinema Papers*, No. 89, August 1992. p. 46.

⁶ King, “Teen movies debate: ‘Not to be an intellectual’”, p. 46. Italics in original text.

⁷ Adrian Martin. “Teen movies debate: Mon cas”, *Cinema Papers*, No. 89, August 1992. p. 48.

through the reading strategies of its spectatorship. Images are not neutral nor do they remain in temporal stasis. The challenge for cinematic study is to forge a nexus bridging text, readership and politics to understand the gravitas of texts at various socio-temporal junctures in a 'changing cultural terrain'. Why are the John Hughes films a mainstay in our nostalgic recollections of the 1980s? Why were the Spice Girls as much revered as they were censured? Why did *Donnie Darko* resonate the paranoia and fears of post-September 11? This thesis has raised these questions and sketched provisional answers. Popularity must not be celebrated or vilified. The key for scholars is to explain the historical and political rationale and frame for popular culture. Even more effective is the function of theorists to monitor the movements between un/popular culture.

Analyses of cinematic texts are often consigned to the realm of Cultural Studies *or* Film Studies. The paradigms and language used in these separate disciplines are unique, but they are not incongruous. The original contribution to knowledge offered by this thesis is a detailed study of (post) youth cinema, building into a model for Generation X cinema, activating the interdisciplinary perspectives from film and cultural studies. This interdisciplinarity is strategic and necessary. The highly specific armature of the two disciplines provides a toolbox of theories that can be applied for a more flexible reading of texts and to overcome paradigmatic limitations. Furthermore, the amalgamation of cultural and cinema studies stems from practicality. Texts do not operate outside of context. Films exist within specific socio-temporal milieus that concurrently inform their production and reception. Approaches to studies of cinema must traverse beyond semiotic analyses alone to address its wide readership. The

diachronic analysis of a text's meaning must occur in tandem to questions of why it is *meaningful*.

The study of film has to remain current to have relevance for the Here and Now. This is not to ignore the innovative work being accomplished in other areas that are less commercial but are therefore positioned within the domain of the respectable and credible.⁸ My point is that there is a desideratum for a more balanced approach. This requires widening the range of audio-visual texts deemed worthy of study. Our analyses cannot be confined solely to the Luis Buñuels and Sergei Eisensteins of cinema. Film is a metamorphic modality that must be reflected in the theoretical paradigms that are applied. The theoretical rigours of the academy are extended to the genre of youth cinema that still remains stubbornly neglected in critical analysis.

This thesis has investigated post-1980s youth films that can (now) be broadly grouped as Generation X cinema. While the vast majority of available literature is structured around genre studies that classify films according to character types and narrative tropes, this thesis specifically employs a time frame of the last twenty five years to organise and develop its argument. Historical context becomes paramount to the critical theorisations of this project. Although the banner of Generation X is applied liberally to the texts discussed, by no means does it codify a stable, unified aggregate. Attempts to condense this elusive populace into a manageable citizenship have been hindered by stultifying debates as to whether there ever was a Generation X to even begin the analysis. This is demonstrated by the range of responses Rob Owen received when surveying young American adults in his book *Gen X TV: The Brady Bunch to*

Melrose Place.⁹ When prompted to define Generation X, the only bonding feature was the vehement reactions to the term.

A group of misunderstood twentysomethings charged with cleaning up and dealing with the messes our parents have left us. [Laurel A. Sydlansky, 22]

Marketing scam. [David Ardell, 24]

I despise that label; it excludes everyone but white upper middle-class kids. It doesn't speak to everyone because it implies no ambition, a sense of being lost, which I am not at all. [Robin Hands, 26]¹⁰

A generation that cannot agree that they do constitute a distinctive consortium poses a particularly awkward historical subject. It lacks the convenience that identifiable social formations provide, such as the partisans of the Woodstock tradition and Baby Boomers in America, the student revolutionaries of France's 1968 'events of May', and the Red Guard cadres during China's Cultural Revolution.¹¹ While voices of dissent inevitably permeate these configurations, widely circulated representations have convincingly produced streamlined versions of the past that are now regarded as common knowledge and authoritative. Endeavours have been made to similarly formulate a chronological lifeline for Generation X, whether it is the earnest ventures of twentysomethings contextualising their own experiences or the capitalist efforts to build a marketing empire around the disposable income of youth. The results are variegated and at times conflicting. This is not the white flag of defeat. Instead, it signals the plurality of meanings that require us to acknowledge the multi-dimensionality of the so-called slacker generation. The quandary that ails historians, economists and social scientists in their analyses of Xers resides not in their

⁸ The likes of the Lumiere Brothers, Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eisenstein and Luis Buñuel still occupy the epicentre of high film theory and cinema history.

⁹ Rob Owens. *Gen X TV: The Brady Bunch to Melrose Place*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997.

¹⁰ Owens, *Gen X TV*, pp. 3-4.

¹¹ I do not imply that those of Woodstock necessarily were those who claimed to be Baby Boomers. I mention both as examples of well defined, recognisable 'populations'.

methodologies and modes of study. It derives from their fundamental quest to write *the* definitive story of Generation X. The search for an absolute truth surrounding this enigma is doomed to failure. The academy is not exempt from this flaw.

The ill-fated grand scheme to map out the history of Generation X must concede to smaller-scaled projects in which marginalised accounts are no longer reprimanded as the deviant relatives of a greater narrative. This thesis has taken on this challenge. Instead of writing the history of Generation X, it is a more modest venture. It functions as a meeting point where *versions* of history and experiences of youth (imagined and real) overlap. It does not discard dominant narratives. There is little to be gained from wiping the slate of history clean to begin à la *tabula rasa*. Outright, angry denial of records of the past can be as dangerous as blissful ignorance. A more progressive methodology is to explore stories that hover in those spaces of fugue in tandem to the existing official documentation of events.

This thesis cuts up linear time to present a hopscotch history of Generation X and youth cinema. Cinematic time loops, spirals, speeds and slows, like the functions on an analogue video player. Personal and collective experiences, particularly when mediated through popular culture, cannot be so easily boxed and labelled according to natural life phases. Youth is a cultural construction. It is a product of the past and present, but also an indicator of the future. Neither fixed nor homogenous, it changes through time and space. While age is a useful marker, its taxonomical failings become apparent when applied to Generation X. Dominant discourses, socio-temporal context and the influence of, and engagement with, cultural texts must be considered as equally

significant factors in reconfigurations of what youth connotes. The parameters surrounding conventional definitions of youth must be loosened.

While this thesis departs from the class-based theorisations of subcultures expounded by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, it maintains the tenet that a society's structural inequalities and movements are manifested most clearly in its youth. As these changes ripple through a community, it is the disempowered who are subjected to the strongest pull of the undertow. Young people are often denied the clout of political office, economic power and autonomy by default of their age.

Australia's Federal Government is still the dominion of middle-aged, Anglo-Saxon men. The captains of commerce are principally established older (male) figures.¹² The alarming ratio of deaths of young indigenous men in police custody compared to the general population indicates a crisis in Australia's juvenile justice system.¹³ Images of youth in the media continue a damaging portrait of the folk devil, or they are erased completely from the picture. The scientific nature of the institutional discourses of medicine, law, economics and sociology give shape to an otherwise amorphous group, but often at the expense of isolating youth and mounting them like peculiar, taxidermal specimens. Identity becomes imposed and individual agency lost in professional argot that has little meaning for the subjects in question. Without (re)locating youth studies to sites of relevance *to* youth, we risk perpetuating a paradigm detached from its actual

¹² The digital economy is one of the few industries in which younger entrepreneurs are able to exert considerable influence. It has fewer requirements for hefty monetary outlays that characterise the more traditional Fordist production industries. A listing of the world's richest people recorded in February 2004 reveals the heavy concentration of male figureheads. See:

"List of world's richest people", *HoustonChronicle.com*, 26 February, 2004.

<<http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/ssistory.mpl/side2/2422081>> Accessed online on 3 December, 2004.

¹³ "Senate debates Aboriginal deaths in custody", *ABC News Online*, 1 December, 2004.

<<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200412/s1255851.htm>> Accessed online on 3 December, 2004.

context. It is a dilemma that depoliticises the generational divide by relegating it to the sphere of commonsense.

Youth as consumer has rendered popular culture an important source of analytical engagement. In the context of the United States, Henry Giroux states, “Representations of youth in popular culture have a long and complex history and habitually serve as signposts through which American society registers its own crises of meaning, vision, and community”.¹⁴ The representational politics of youth cinema serves pedagogical functions by relaying ideologies of acceptable behaviour and deviant digressions that are closely associated with the macro-discourses of age, race, socio-economic ranking, gender and sexuality. Hierarchies of power are reified through vilification or validation at the micro-level of narrative and characterisation that are enacted in tropes such as the high school’s resident autocrat (the bitch and the football jock), the vexed computer nerd and the outcast, unfashionable femme.

The lack of research into Generation X cinema derives not only from a reticence to include it as credible source material in the academy, but also from the difficulties it poses. Generation X is still of the present. It is easier to speak of an historical subject when it is dead and buried. Writing a presentist history is not a futile project, but it demands that its immediacy be captured through alternative modalities of writing, media literacies and meta-theorisation. A history of ephemerality necessitates the expansion of history to include the workings of popular memory. As Greil Marcus articulates:

¹⁴ Henry Giroux. *Breaking in to the Movies: Film and the Culture of Politics*. Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. p. 170.

what is history anyway? Is history simply a matter of events that leave behind those things that can be weighed and measured – new institutions, new maps, new rulers, new winners and losers – or is it also the result of moments that seem to leave nothing behind, nothing but the mystery of spectral connections between people long separated by place and time, but somehow speaking the same language? ... If the language they are speaking, the impulse they are voicing, has its own history, might it not tell a very different story from the one we've been hearing all our lives?¹⁵

Popular memory excavates those events and artefacts that remain hidden in the interstices of certified narratives. It grants significance to affective traces of private and collective memories. It permits (re)interpretations of history that are no longer shackled to rigid binarisms of fact and fiction. When such divisions are problematised, “then the search for truth is decentred”.¹⁶ The linearity of authorised historiography gives way to more complex renderings and remembering of the past and present, and a plurality of subjectivities.

Popular memory may be the result of shared (but ultimately personal) experiences, but it is carried through time via technologies and tangible artefacts where the segregation of private and public is no longer sustainable. As John Frow observes:

This whole manner of thinking of collective memory and of its relation to autobiographical memory is surely no longer tenable. It is not a useful tool for reconceptualizing the social organization of memory; it provides no mechanism for identifying its ‘technological’ underpinnings; and it cannot account for the materiality of signs and the representational forms by which memory is structured.¹⁷

Popular culture is the conduit of popular memory. Cinema offers a particularly effective medium for its expression. It is able to capture through sight and sound the seminal moments that permeate our own lives but are so transitory or intimate that they do not seem to merit public vocalisation. It is well suited to the current project as

¹⁵ Greil Marcus. *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989. p. 4.

¹⁶ Tara Brabazon. *From Revolution to Revelation: Generation X, Popular Culture and Cultural Studies*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005. p. 53.

youth is often regarded a protracted liminal phase, and therefore invalidated by its ephemerality and ambiguity. Generation X cinema cannot be discussed without detailed consideration of popular culture, from the fashions donned and the fanzines read, to the formation of subcultural identities. In particular, the inter-media relationship between cinema and music has been explored in this thesis as coterminous carriers of meaning and memory. Spaces of leisure become potential sites for protest and agency. Acts of consumption and production become invested with purpose. Employing popular memory as the stylus in which to navigate through Generation X cinema and youth culture is a negotiative process. I do not turn to magic moments to uncritically celebrate peripheral narratives. The fundamental paradox of a politics of pleasure is that unless it instigates change in social conscience and responsibility, it is relevant only for a transient period. Symbolic resolutions offer panaceas with an early expiration date. Acts of resistance also uncover hegemonic relations to the centre and the incompleteness of struggles. Nostalgic recollections are contaminated by the politics of remembering and forgetting. This thesis articulates the strained and complicated relationship between youth identity, power and culture.

This research project lies in that space of disparity between representation and our experience. We know Molly Ringwald grew up eventually, yet we obstinately refuse representations of her beyond teendom. We know that the 1980s was plagued with social and economic problems, yet we cling to its nostalgic connotations. Listening to commercial radio, I am struck by the 'classic 1980s' program slots that have bleached out sex, drugs and rock and roll, not to mention AIDS and government corruption. The events of September 11 and the war in Iraq have made candid discussions of

¹⁷ John Frow. *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*. Oxford:

American-ness even more difficult in the current climate. Dissension, or even mild disagreement, is almost untenable in this vulnerable time of political correctness and nationalism. When the words cannot be spoken, the representational politics of mediated images becomes even more important.

Occupying that space between film and cultural studies, at times this interdisciplinary position has been an uncomfortable one. The thesis has asked difficult questions beyond the immediacy of youth and the present in cinema. It has provided a critique of American social history through film and its growing underclass of youth. While the subjects of youth cinema eventually become outdated and can be safely shelved afterwards, such as rock and roll juvenile delinquents, the hippies, the ravers and slackers, dealing with post-youth is a more problematic undertaking. Where do we go from here? The future is coming. We cannot wallow in the sentimental past or the transitory present.

As an exercise in cultural time travel, this thesis leaps between past, present and future through the representational politics of cinema. Linear time is subverted into a cyclical construct. The thesis has depicted the changing and challenging iconography of youth in Generation X cinema. Providing an historical corrective, it has reinserted women into studies of youth culture and cinema where there has previously been a gaping absence. It is not limited to discussions of gender, but extends to surrounding issues of class, social history and generationalism. The highly visible bodies of females in the films looked at – spectacular, transgressive, subversive, constrained or battered – serve as the landmarks of a gateway through which I gain access to a wider

matrix of inequalities of power in public and private spheres, and in the realms of the carnivalesque and the banal. The historical personages in this thesis articulate shifts and rifts in conceptualisations of youth at specific crossroads in time.

Molly Ringwald's inclusion in the thesis functioned as the hub on which many of the arguments pivot.¹⁸ At a Cultural Studies conference held in Christchurch, Aotearoa/New Zealand in 2003, I presented a paper on Ringwald.¹⁹ During the open session that followed, one audience member queried why I had chosen her as the subject of my analysis and why not a more contemporary celebrity such as Sarah Michelle Gellar. My response was simple. In popular memory, Gellar has been type-cast as Buffy the vampire slayer. Ringwald has been time-cast as the 1980s.²⁰ There is a difference. Recollections of the Molly Ringwald-John Hughes collaborations speak volumes of our investment in popular memories of the 1980s, yet they remain strangely absent as credible references to that decade. Through a detailed analysis of one of youth cinema's most recognised yet unacknowledged figures, this chapter reinforced the relationship between the private and public spheres. Popular memory and liminal moments of youth (cinema) were not left by the wayside in preference of official histories and sanctioned narratives.

This blurring of boundaries between the private and public becomes even more evident when the notion of celebrity is involved. The Spice Girls exemplified the influence of high visibility in the media as a means of distributing their feminist ideals. More

¹⁸ Importantly, Molly Ringwald shadows the darker 1980s presented in *Donnie Darko*. The chapter underscores the synergy between youth cinema and popular memories of a certain historical period.

¹⁹ "Culture Incorporated: Bodies, Technologies, Habitats". Cultural Studies Association of Australasia Conference. Christchurch, Aotearoa/New Zealand. 6-8 December, 2003.

importantly, they signalled the importance of fandom in the formation of identity. The Spice Girls tapped into the potential of popular culture's affectivity to incite social change. It was not unlike Bakhtin's world of the carnivalesque. Microcosmic moments of pleasure and excess were revelled in. There was a desire to shatter the restraints of official culture. This chapter monitored the moment when popular culture became unpopular politics – where the music of a female pop group had meaning beyond that intended (and controlled) by corporate culture. This chapter acknowledged the polysemy of reading strategies by fans. This is especially important in youth studies where young women are either ignored or debased as pure visual titillation (in the case of the performer) or obsessive groupies in the music scene.

While images of fashionable feminism are becoming more common in popular culture with the likes of Alanis Morissette and television series such as *Alias* and *Sex and the City*, the bitch remains problematic.²¹ From the early days of James Dean, youth and anger have been equated with juvenile delinquency. It has been the domain of the masculine in cinematic representation. When the femme is added into this base equation, it becomes a case of moral reprehension rather than youth misguided. Although the action heroine and the femme fatale of noir are garnering attention in literary critiques, the angry bitch of youth cinema has yet to incite a similar trend, despite her prevalence in the movies. My comparative analysis of *Heathers* and *Freeway* has begun to fill in that void. Arguing the transgressive and political resonance of the bitch in the context of teendom, I acknowledged the difficulties that

²⁰ Studies of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* continue to be *de rigueur* in academia. I have yet to find evidence of an equivalent show of interest for Molly Ringwald.

²¹ *Alias*. Created by J. J. Abrams. ABC. Originally aired on 30 September, 2001 (USA). The series is currently in its fourth season.

Sex and the City. Created by Darren Star. Based on a novel by Candace Bushnell. HBO. Originally

this figure posed. While her fury has reason, there is no adequate outlet for its venting unless it incurs a return to prettified femininity. The bitch manifesto has caveats.

The movement from the angry bitch to the halcyon imaginings of rave culture in the following chapter of the thesis invites immediate binarisms between animosity and peace, discontent and pleasure. The similarities, however, outweigh their respective differences. While the bitch has not been written into history, female youth in rave have been largely written out of its narrative. Popular representations have been restricted to the hippie-trippy female clubber, conveniently consistent with dance culture's egalitarian ideal. The absence of women in other spheres of rave glosses over the problematic politics of partying and its inherent contradictions. This chapter in the thesis investigated those gaps where women operate in the rave scene, but are rarely visible to the public eye. Its discussions extended beyond gender identity to encompass the workings of rave economics, youth subculture and class issues.

The final section of the thesis emphasised cinematic form and meaning. The literal and metaphorical implications of corrupted time were explored through the time travel genre. Richard Kelly's film *Donnie Darko* is an opportune piece that queried the relationship between time, history, power and social identity of youth. The film's protagonist is a composite figure who documents the present by reliving the past, only to eerily forecast the future of Generation X. Juxtaposed with *Back to the Future*, the two texts articulated dramatic social, political and cultural changes over the last two decades in the United States, although their relevance is not confined to the borders of that nation state. These have influenced our ideologies of generational identity and

aired on 6 June, 1998 (USA). The series ran for six seasons.

entitlement. The movement away from the post-war Baby Boomer optimism of *Back to the Future* to the almost dystopic vision in *Donnie Darko* is suggestive of Generation X cynicism. The latter, however, is not devoid of redemption. *Donnie Darko* presents a pedagogy of how public change must be initiated at the level of personal responsibility. Hope is possible only where a culture of self-interest concedes to altruist intentions.

It is symbolic that the final chapter of the thesis concluded with the oeuvre of Richard Linklater, whose films provide micro-narratives of the social changes and experiences of youth in America over the last two decades. Linklater's characters are on a journey where the end signifies a return to the beginning, paralleling the structure of this thesis. While *Donnie Darko* advocated the need for personal responsibility to repair the social disconnection of the 1980s, Linklater's film *Before Sunset* pointed to the next evolutionary step of Generation X – action at the level of the collective. Linklater's body of work provides a tangible, visual trace of the narrative progression of Generation X to post-youth culture, stretching from *Slacker* to *Before Sunset*, youth to adulthood, personal concerns to social responsibility. While the films suggested the movement forwards of Generation X, it is not tantamount to the writing of its obituary.

The figures and narratives tracked in this thesis preclude a smooth historical arc. They are simultaneously connected by their relation to popular culture and popular memory, and divided by conflicting strategies of (re)action. The images of Generation X presented here are dynamic and evolving. Their meaning and cultural currency alters with time and through space, creating a living history of the present. It is when particular accounts are accepted as the unconditional truth – when representations of

memory and experience have become static – that we should be wary. As our visual languages of film alter, critical practice must adapt to forge new paths for social intervention. In a culture of accelerating technologies, there is an urgency to keep pace with the deluge of information and to become more conscious of how we utilise the knowledge. Generation X cinema may not provide the solutions to settle the uncertainties of our times, but it ensures that history of past and present will not be forgotten. Those intense moments of youth may not incite collective action to change the world in hand-holding rousing fashion, but they are requisite to jumpstart the process. No revolution ever began without passion and purpose. No revelation ever came without the willingness to question the status quo. Above all, it indicates a resilience of youth amidst escalating local and global concerns. Dick Hebdige comments that:

with the public sector, education, the welfare state – all the big, “safe” institutions – up against the wall, there’s nothing good or clever or heroic about going under. When all is said and done, why bother to think “deeply” when you’re not *paid* to think deeply?²²

The (post) youth in this thesis defy this resignation of defeat. Faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles, they nevertheless continue the struggle for social democracy and visibility. To reiterate the earlier words of Happy Harry Hardon, there is need for (post) youth to “go crazy, get creative” to counteract the blindness and blandness of the current climate.²³ Social intervention must incorporate the ability to laugh in the face of hardship, but to also formulate a politics that puts communal concerns into effective action. This thesis investigated the cultural significance of Generation X cinema as a physical trace of post-1980s youth and the scholarly challenges it has posed. It has argued for a more rigorous study of popular cinematic texts through a careful

²² Dick Hebdige. *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*. London and New York: Comedia, 1988. p. 167. Italics in original text.

²³ Happy Harry Hardon in *Pump Up the Volume*.

integration of film theory and cultural studies. As our own histories are being written as we speak, it is imperative that we – as cultural critics and consumers, film theorists and academic scholars – are wary of the narratives being recorded, recalled and validated. In hindsight, the past is not Molly Ringwald. In foresight, the future is not Donnie Darko. *What* will we remember after youth? *Who* will remember?

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