

Richard Nowell

## Developing a Research Program in Youth Cinema Studies and Revising *Generation Multiplex*

*An Interview with Timothy Shary*

**Timothy Shary** is the author of *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* (University of Texas Press, 2002; revised 2014) and *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen* (Wallflower Press, 2005), as well as co-editor with Alexandra Seibel of *Youth Culture in Global Cinema* (Texas, 2007). His work on youth cinema has been published in numerous books and journals since the 1990s, including *The Journal of Film and Video*, *Film Quarterly*, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, and *The Journal of Popular Film and Television*. He has also edited *Millennial Masculinity: Men in Contemporary American Cinema* (Wayne State, 2013) and will be the co-editor of *Refocus: The Films of Amy Heckerling* with Frances Smith (Edinburgh, forthcoming). He is currently finishing a book on aging in American cinema with Nancy McVittie, to be published by Texas in 2016.

— — —

My work in youth cinema studies began as a doctoral student in the Communication Department at the University of Massachusetts in the mid-1990s. I wrote my first paper on a teen movie back in high school in 1985. It was on *THE BREAKFAST CLUB*; a film that so captivated me I was compelled to see it twice in one week, even taking notes in the theater (which I am sure made me feel especially brainy). Yet, I did not take on dedicated thought about the genre until a decade later, when I was considering my dissertation topic.

My primary reservation about pursuing teen movies before this time was that I knew that many of my academic peers, and most of my potential employers, would not take the topic seriously. This would turn out to be true; movies about children had inspired some respected studies because little kids are endearing, but movies about adolescent issues were — and still are — treated with snobbish scorn by many academics. I explained this to one of my advisors at UMass, who told me that I needed to really like the topic, because it would surround me for a few years, if not longer.



THE BREAKFAST CLUB (1985)

After all, the reasons for taking on an earnest study of the genre were abundant. I knew that teen movies would be appealing to students I taught. I also knew that this genre was richly detailed with social commentary, and I knew that little substantial work had been done outside of that written in the 1980s by David Considine and by Thomas Doherty.<sup>1)</sup> By the 1990s, Jon Lewis and a few other authors were also showing how teen movies could be appreciated, but, for a dissertation, I felt the pretentious push to advance some kind of complete genre theory in order to make this fringe form seem more worthy.<sup>2)</sup>

*What were some the challenges you encountered working in what at this point remained an under-examined aspect of cinema?*

As many dissertations will so conspire, I wrestled with a lot of theory, in both the fields of film genre and youth studies, primarily advancing an ambition to see as many representative films as I could. Doherty had thoroughly covered films of the 1950s and 1960s, and Considine was comprehensive until the early 1980s ... and that was just when I saw the genre taking on its latest relevance. At this time, teen sex romps had begun to replace

1) David Considine, *The Cinema of Adolescence* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1985); Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988).

2) Jon Lewis, *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992). See also Jonathan Bernstein, *Pretty in Pink: The Golden Age of Teenage Movies* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997); Lesley Speed, 'Tuesday's gone: the nostalgic teen film', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1998), pp. 24–32; Elayne Rapping, 'Youth cult films', in *Media-tions: Forays into the Culture and Gender War* (New York: South End Press, 1999), pp. 88–99.

the wave of slasher films of the late 1970s, and were soon to be followed by John Hughes's sensitive middle-American kids in *THE BREAKFAST CLUB* (1985) as well as other trends. I wanted to start my study in the early 1980s and go to the present, planning to see every teen film made in that time.

Little did I realize at first that such an agenda would be unfeasible if only because I could not possibly find all the examples that I identified. At that time, so-called search engines for movies were scant, so I compiled my filmography by combing through a wide range of catalogs. I aligned with Considine in defining adolescent years as primarily the teens; in wanting to incorporate junior high up to the start of college, I set my age range for protagonists as 12 to 20 years of age. I also wanted to include some movies that were not often labeled for teens but were nonetheless about them, which necessitated tracing young actors across numerous films that fell outside of the genre's popular trappings. After a few months devoted to this aspect of the project, my filmography ran to about 1,000 examples. Yet, even with a few years of dedicated viewing thereafter, I only managed to screen about 420 of them, despite my best efforts raiding the video stores of western Massachusetts. With equal levels of exhaustion and resignation, I reached a point where I felt that my sample pool was at least sufficiently large to provide general commentary, and relevant enough to conduct closer readings.

In addition to incorporating a wide scope on the genre, I knew that many films about teenagers used different conventions based on their subject matter and styles. This led me to identify subgenres, which were easiest to codify in their most extreme incarnations — the slasher (*FRIDAY THE 13TH* /1980/, *A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET* /1984/) and the sex romp (*GOIN' ALL THE WAY!* /1982/, *PRIVATE RESORT* /1985/) — yet at the same time it demanded more nuanced appraisal when looking at diffuse topics such as delinquency (*LESS THAN ZERO* /1987/, *BOYZ N THE HOOD* /1991/) and schooling (*LUCAS* /1986/, *CLUELESS* /1995/). And there had been a prominent wave of sci-fi thrillers featuring teens (*WARGAMES* /1983/, *SPACECAMP* /1986/); even if they were fading by the 1990s, this subgenre was at least worth exploring for its intellectual phobias.

Thus I settled on five subgenres: school, which was generically diffuse but elemental in identifying teen characters; delinquency, with its wide scale of moral consequences; horror, which went beyond the stock slasher victims to the supernatural; science, still pertinent to 1990s youth; and love/sex, an awkward moniker I used to signify the even more awkward complications of young romance. I sifted through the hundreds of titles I had uncovered in an effort to understand just how each film conveyed its particular subject matter and how it served generic interests, demonstrating through this process the very subjective and slippery nature of genre research that I had anticipated. The dissertation reached an excessive length, which my committee kindly tolerated, and saw fit to approve in early 1998.

*Could you explain the process of transforming this doctoral research into the first version of your book *Generation Multiplex*?*

Soon after graduating, I queried the major university presses in Film Studies to see if any of them would be interested in publishing the manuscript as a book. While a few expressed interest, I was most impressed with the University of Texas Press, because their ac-

quisitions editor, Jim Burr, responded with an enthusiastic phone call. The document I submitted for review, alas, was far too much like the original dissertation, despite my efforts to follow the publisher's recommendations. My first reviewer, who turned out to be David Considine, made clear that the manuscript was still far too long and needed a clearer structure.

I edited it over the next year, and by the end of the year 2000, after being reviewed by Kathy Merlock Jackson, one of the notable authors on children in cinema, the revised version was ready for publication. As is customary in academic publishing, the book still needed to be approved by the press's editorial board, another hurdle that I cleared in early 2001 to make *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* a reality. Soon thereafter, I asked Considine to write the foreword, because he had had such an influence on both the field and my own work. He generously agreed. The production process of the book still required many more months, as I acquired images and went through copyediting before sending the entire package to Texas at the end of summer 2001. The final phase before publication was the review of page proofs, which I did with industrious detail, knowing that every word choice and punctuation mark would soon be out of my control.

In many ways, letting the book pass from an ongoing project for six years into the fixed result of a permanent volume was quite intimidating. A much higher level of responsibility set in for me when I thought of those readers who might take me to task on my claims, like the many students I had taught in genre classes at UMass and Clark University; students who naturally had a vested interest in the representation of a population they felt they knew well. I knew that scholars who published work on, for instance, silent or European cinema, were not routinely challenged by recent teenagers.

Even after the book arrived in late 2002, I could not quite feel comfortable that it was complete, especially as I lamented that so many new movies about youth were appearing and, in some cases, changing my ideas about past trends. I had expressed this sense of frustration in my preface when I called out some of those titles in a disclaimer that voiced my frustration at the continually evolving teen movie genre. This is of course an issue that any critic of contemporary culture must face: you must agree to let the present study end, even as the field develops. Some of my tensions were at least relieved by the positive reviews that came out months later and more so when Jim Burr notified me in 2004 that the book had sold well enough to go into a second printing.

*What led you to revise Generation Multiplex some years after its initial publication?*

By 2004, I had begun work on a more concise yet chronologically expanded history of American movies about adolescence for Wallflower Press, which would appear in 2005.<sup>3)</sup> I had also been in discussion with a colleague from NYU, Alexandra Seibel, about co-editing a collection on the youth film from an international perspective, which had yet to be done in English.<sup>4)</sup> I was fortunate to again work with Jim as my editor at Texas, and we saw through on that anthology in 2007.

3) Timothy Shary, *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen* (London: Wallflower, 2005).

4) Timothy Shary and Alexandra Seibel (eds), *Youth Culture in Global Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).



In subsequent years, I moved away from the topic of youth in movies and took on other projects, yet the turn of another decade had brought many more compelling films about adolescence, as well as changes in the industry's style and output of the youth genre. Having seen the rise of many courses on teen films, I thought that a completely revised and expanded edition of *Generation Multiplex* was warranted for the 2010s.

The thesis from the first edition would remain essentially intact, and now it seemed even more certain: "American films about youth are dynamically and diversely representative of adolescents, to the point that these films constitute their own genre and have engendered individual subgenres with particular and often consistent codes for that representation."<sup>5)</sup> So I would still examine films set in or around school, which tend to employ one to five recognizable character types, as well as teen horror films, which tend to care less about characters and focus more on the types of abuse and murder portrayed in their stories. Teen films about juvenile delinquency continued to employ a similar method of concentrating on the crimes and misdemeanors of youth, and their etiology, while films about young people having sex and falling in love continued to be preoccupied with moral messages about their perils and pleasures; in this case, I was happy to jettison the cumbersome "love/sex" label and simply call this subgenre "romance". And I could reconsider past releases while incorporating new films up to 2013.

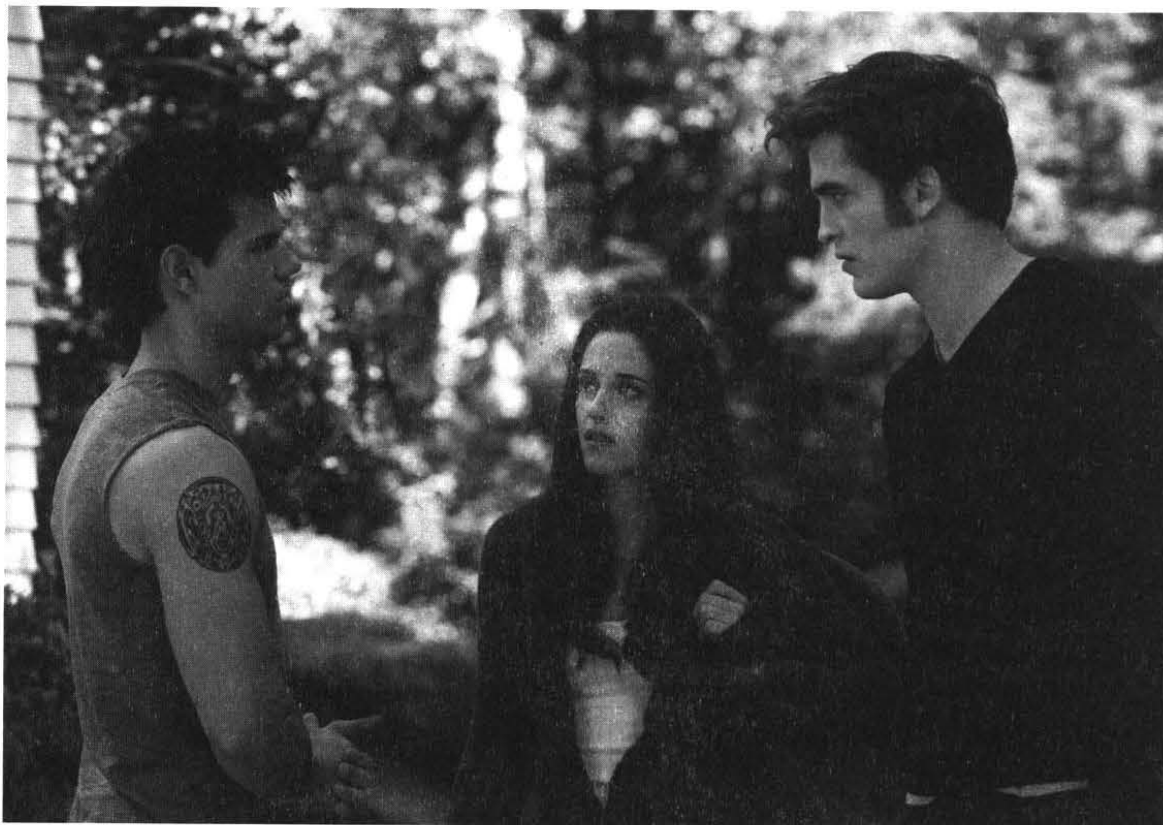
*What do you feel are the principal differences between the two editions of Generation Multiplex?*

The most significant chapter change I wanted to make from the first edition was the elimination of the chapter on science films. The subgenre had declined by the end of the 1980s and was obsolete by the 2000s. For all the ongoing use of technology by children in real life, the topic is now almost entirely elided by Hollywood, most likely because youth do not find it nearly as dramatic or as fearful as it was in the past. The novelty has certainly worn off, and today kids use computers and other machines (phones, pads, tablets) in a seamless, confident connection to their personal lives.

A few sections of chapters also needed to be reconfigured, or in the case of the "Patriotic Purpose" category, excised. These were films that I had listed as components of the delinquent subgenre in the 1980s. They explored Reagan-era militaristic revolts by youth, achieving warped infamy in examples such as *RED DAWN* (1984) and *IRON EAGLE* (1986). Yet, like the science subgenre, these films expressed topical concerns of the 1980s, and did not see a revival after the 9/11 attacks and the renewed jingoism of the George W. Bush presidency.

Conversely, I wanted to expand certain sections. When I wrote about queer youth at the start of the 2000s, there had been some burgeoning examples, but in the new decade the topic was more common, with many films featuring queer protagonists and many ensemble films incorporating gay roles for supporting characters. Within the school subgenre, there had also been an evident effort to increase the realistic roles that girls have in athletics; at least 20 films have depicted girl athletes since 2000 compared to less than five in

5) Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema Since 1980* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), p. xiii. I made the slight title change to avoid using the ambiguous term "contemporary" again.



The TWILIGHT Series (2008–2012)

all the years before. Movies about proms had always fallen into a liminal space between the other subgenres, while usually maintaining an emphasis on the dating ritual, so I felt that they needed their own section within the romance chapter. Clearly, the realm of fantasy had expanded enormously in recent years, especially with the success of the HARRY POTTER series from 2001–2011 (which were US–UK co-productions), and then the TWILIGHT series (2008–2012); films that ostensibly fell within the horror subgenre, and were now achieving wider popularity and cultural commentary than ever before.

I returned to my previous method of building the filmography, which was now substantially aided by the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), although its “keywords” and plot searches remained less than comprehensive. The IMDb system requires users to compile these terms, which results in a great deal of subjective slippage and loss between categories, which meant that I needed to be even more diligent about including and excluding titles. The terms that I found most relevant were: adolescence, adolescent, coming-of-age, high-school, junior-high-school, juvenile, middle-school, school, teen, teenage, teenager, teen-angst, tween, 12-year-old, and youth. A number of films listed in the IMDb have never been released, or have had such limited releases that no descriptions are available. I therefore only included films that had at least one external review.

*How did the rise in academic interest in youth-oriented cinema after the publication of the first edition of Generation Multiplex affect the new edition?*

Along with the increased attention to the youth genre at the college course level came further helpful scholarship in the field, which I wanted to cover in the new edition. Murray

Pomerance and Frances Gateward edited two youth cinema anthologies, the first on girls (2002) and the second on boys (2005).<sup>6)</sup> Other studies appeared on familiar topics such as school movies (Bulman, 2004), girls (Hentges, 2006), and horror (Nowell, 2011), while new approaches led to books on goth (Siegel, 2005) and queer boys (Dennis, 2006), as well as appreciations of teen movies in the 1970s (Brickman, 2012) and Generation X (Lee, 2010).<sup>7)</sup> Meanwhile, starting in 2008 at Brigham Young University, Mark Callister was part of prodigious sociological research on youth movies, both as an author and a supervisor of graduate work.<sup>8)</sup>

Two books on teen films in general appeared since the first edition, one by Stephen Tropiano (2006) and the other by Catherine Driscoll (2011), both of which were quite impressive.<sup>9)</sup> I enjoyed Stephen's infectious spirit for the genre, and I was struck by how Catherine had so thoroughly critiqued my ideas and those of others. So, in keeping with the spirit of the first edition, I thought it would only be fitting to invite them to comment on my manuscript, in a foreword and afterword, respectively. I asked Stephen to consider the genre and its future, and I asked Catherine to write about research trends and opportunities. I still feel that too many academics are in competition with each other when what we really need is greater collaboration. I was honored to have them be a part of this new volume.

*What do you think has been the legacy of Generation Multiplex?*

My greatest gratification in studying youth on screen has been in lending to the genre some semblance of legitimacy. While I argue for the quality of certain films over others, teen films in general have given us an opportunity to appreciate a large section of society that has been gaining authority yet in most cases still relies on adults to speak for it. In fact, the politics of age representation demand further study, because the young and old, while

- 
- 6) Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward (eds), *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Contemporary Cinemas of Girlhood* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002); *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005).
  - 7) Robert C. Bulman, *Hollywood Goes to High School: Cinema, Schools, and American Culture* (New York: Worth, 2004); Sarah Hentges, *Pictures of Girlhood: Modern Female Adolescence on Screen* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2006); Richard Nowell, *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Cycle* (New York: Continuum, 2011); Carol Siegel, *Goth's Dark Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Jeffery P. Dennis, *Queering Teen Culture: All-American Boys and Same-Sex Desire in Film and Television* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Barbara Jane Brickman, *New American Teenagers: The Lost Generation of Youth in 1970s Film* (New York: Continuum, 2012); Christina Lee, *Screening Generation X: The Politics and Popular Memory of Youth in Contemporary Cinema* (London: Ashgate, 2010).
  - 8) Emily Bennion, 'Sexual content in teen films: 1980–2007' (M.M.C. thesis: Brigham Young University, 2008); Sarah Coyne, Mark Callister, and Tom Robinson, 'Yes, another teen movie: three decades of physical violence in films aimed at adolescents', *The Journal of Children and Media*, vol. 4, no. 4 (2010), pp. 387–401; Mark Callister, Lesa Stern, Sarah Coyne, Tom Robinson, and Emily Bennion, 'Evaluation of sexual content in teen-centered films from 1980 to 2007', *Mass Communication and Society*, vol. 14, no. 4 (2011), pp. 454–474; Jason Beck, 'A comparison of male athletes with teenage peers in popular teen movies' (M.A. thesis: Brigham Young University, 2011); Mark Callister, Sarah Coyne, Tom Robinson, John J. Davies, Chris Near, Lynn Van Valkenburg, and Jason Gillespie, "'Three sheets to the wind': substance use in teen-centered film from 1980 to 2007", *Addiction Research and Theory*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2012), pp. 30–41.
  - 9) Stephen Tropiano, *Rebels and Chicks: A History of the Hollywood Teen Movie* (New York: Back Stage Books, 2006); Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Berg, 2011).

very influential, creative, talented, and vocal, remain disenfranchised. This is why I have been moving into studies of aging at the other end of the scale in recent years, the so-called old and elderly, or in formal parlance, the senescent. Given all the studies devoted to certain populations in cinema and media, age is a universal quality to all characters, one that nonetheless remains in need of much more analysis.