

Richard Nowell

American Teen Film: Something more Slippery than it used to be

An Interview with Catherine Driscoll

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Youth-centered and youth-oriented cinema and media has been a central focus of your research for many years. Could you say a little about what first drew you to this topic?

It's probably not the most obvious starting point but it started at the end of my undergraduate degree when I was writing my thesis on modernist literature, James Joyce in particular. I was particularly fascinated by the figure of the girl, yet no one seemed to talk about this essential aspect of Joyce's fiction. When I went on to do my Ph.D. that fascination remained, because everything I read at the time suggested that there was a lot more to be said about what was meant to be revolutionary about modernist literature; about the place of the new image of young women, and about a highly visible new image of adolescence in general. That's what my thesis turned into: a thesis on adolescence, for which the theoretical, philosophical, and aesthetic discourses of the time were key pieces of evidence for thinking about how central adolescence came to be in European, American, and Anglophone culture.

What were some of the main questions you felt needed answering at this time?

I started with an interest in where our current idea of adolescence came from, especially in terms of how that adolescence was gendered, and how we share ideas about it. So, as I moved into the field of cultural studies, I felt compelled to tackle contemporary instances of these topics. That's how I came to research popular media. In doing my Ph.D. on that new centrality of adolescence, and in coming to think about contemporary culture in this light, I developed certain questions that underpinned my first book *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*, as well a number of articles and papers I wrote around this time. They were: where do contemporary ideas of girlhood, adolescence, youth identity, and youth culture come from? How have they changed since they first emerged in the late nineteenth century? And when did they begin to look the way they look to us now? As I was working through these questions I became fascinated by how, in the face of social change, we maintained so many of the same ideas about youth, adolescence, and the ways they are gendered, and I became increasingly interested in the ways we shared these ideas through popular media and through discourses on citizenship and identity that are reflected in popular media as much as in theoretical literature or history books. *Girls* is very much a history of the idea of girlhood, from the late nineteenth century to when I was writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. My guiding interest was to track ideas about girls and girlhood through different kinds of cultural formation, including feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and sociology, as well as popular culture, guidance manuals, and educational literature about puberty. So really it was a big abstract question: how did we get to this point? With each of these different formations it was really that question that interested me.

To what extent do you feel you responded to these early questions you had about the topic?

How I feel about that now really depends on the type of question I am asking myself. When I think about popular media, especially media that represents girls and that is distributed to them, I still think considering the context of late modernity is crucial. The longevity of our ideas about girlhood is partly explained by the powerful figure of the girl representing late modernity. I feel that this point is still important, because such ideas are often de-historicized. But, at the same time, when I come to some of my new projects, I do feel like I was being too general back then; that such a frame is simply too big for some of the arguments I want to pursue now in relation to specific media forms, particular genres, and specific cultural locations.

How did your interest in this topic develop across the years? What were some of the new questions you found yourself asking following the publication of your first book on this topic?

I think *Girls* was too ambitious in some respects to be anything more than background, although I hope it is good background insofar as it raises several important foundational questions. After that book I consciously divided my broad interests into distinct fields about which I wanted to know more. Some of that work was directed to researching historical questions about how specific ideas related to youth, adolescence, and girlhood emerged. For example, my second book *Modernist Cultural Studies* includes chapters on the idea of adolescence, love and sexuality, the shop girl (a figure for the girl who is em-

played as an independent worker), and fashion. While the same ideas about adolescence, and how it is gendered, arise in that book, there I asked myself “why do we care about these particular things in the late modern period?”. And I take a different, more focused, approach in my work on contemporary media forms. My book *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* is an example of this. It does reflect on questions of modernity, and why the film audience and adolescence are, from certain perspectives, so closely tied together. The book also has a historical dimension, but it is mainly concerned with contemporary forms and their development. It is more focused than my discussion of teen film was in *Girls*. In fact, I don’t think the same things about teen film as I did when I wrote *Girls*, a point in time at which I was really interested in the idea that certain kinds of films for young people had girls at their center and certain ones did not. By the time I had done close work on the genre itself, this idea seemed less important. I now think that amidst the diversity of narratives about adolescence in teen films gender is a more mutable factor than I had thought in the past.

To what extent have your own research methods and conceptual approaches changed in this time — and what motivated these changes?

I now have a more targeted sense of the methods that are appropriate for particular projects; this too began with *Girls*. I interviewed some high school students in two Australian states, encouraging them to talk about how they understood girlhood. None of that material ended up in the book, because it simply didn’t fit. When I was looking at the transcripts I couldn’t decide if it mattered what a particular girl thought about girlhood. I kept asking myself “why does it matter what she thought, as compared to what Freud or Adorno thought?”, and “how am I supposed to position these girls and their ideas?” in this history. One of the things that interested me after *Girls* came out of those interviews however. I write about this in the introduction to my new book, *Australian Country Girlhood: History, Image, Experience*, in which I discuss my shock at discovering, in the process of conducting those interviews, the sheer number of differences between the girls in rural schools and those in city schools; far more than simply between wealthy private schools and disadvantaged public schools, which was the difference I expected to find. The country girl project is primarily ethnographic, conducting field work in county towns, schools, parks; interviewing girls and women who were once girls; and spending time living in those towns. This kind of ethnographic work would have been incompatible with the *Girls* book, and I would never have attempted it with *Teen Film*.

What is more, certain theoretical frameworks that seemed crucial at a certain point in time stopped feeling all that enlightening to me. When I started my Ph.D. back in the early 1990s I was really quite fascinated by the Lacanian-feminist approach, which was very much a product of the time when I finished my undergraduate degree. I was particularly interested in the criticism of Lacanian ideas about gender and representation, in feminist politics, in the appropriation of Marxism, and in what critiques of psychoanalysis might say about adolescence — in contrast to what still seems to be a dominant assumption about the psychoanalytic story of adolescence in both an academic and broader public sense (educational policy and so forth). In the years following, and right up to *Girls*, it seemed crucial to me to combat psychoanalytic accounts with every reading I made of

girls' magazines or movies about girls or children's story books. I have noticed that such ideas are still quite pervasive, with scholars in many fields that might talk about youth and youth culture continuing to work with those tools. But arguing for or against psychoanalysis is definitely not a major focus for me any longer. After that I spent a long time using a Foucauldian framework to explore discourses of adolescence and institutional apparatuses around adolescence. Right now, my work is more pragmatic than it used to be. I am quite self-conscious about using pragmatist philosophy, and to a certain extent I've also been experimenting with phenomenological approaches. I think that, from a pragmatic point of view, it no longer matters to me quite as much whether the psychoanalytic model is correct. More important are the effects of the models we take for granted.

What do you think remain the most pervasive misunderstandings about youth and cinema?

The first way I would like to answer this question relates to the category of teen film. I think we should use this category and term to talk about cinematic representations of youth that are oriented primarily around ideas about youth and the youth audience. The first major misunderstanding is that teen film is a purely American phenomenon; that it is produced in America for Americans. When Timothy Shary was doing the second version of *Generation Multiplex*, he asked me if I would write an afterword to that book as a kind of reply. I was happy to, but not for the reason he expected. He had felt that I didn't like his book because I spent so much time in *Teen Film* saying "this phenomenon is not American" and Shary, of course, does talk about it being American and about the American-ness of teen film. I actually think Shary's book is incredibly useful, but I certainly do think that if we fail to acknowledge that teen film is not just American we neglect the full range of historical and contemporary forms of this genre. Youth-oriented media in general can never be defined by where it is produced, and that's not just a matter of its being consumed in many places. Rather, this is about the internalization of an idea of adolescence: about youth as a subject, an object, and as a field in which media is circulated. For example, it is not unusual to see a scholar discussing Turkish films that thematize adolescence, and to read that because they were made in Turkey it follows that they are about a Turkish version of adolescence, and that they exclusively relate to the "Turkish" experience. But there can be no purely Turkish version of adolescence, any more than there can be a purely American version of adolescence. I think this is so at least since high school, as a system based on a narrative of puberty and development, was institutionalized internationally and was increasingly attached to public discourses on the guidance and protection of adolescents.

I also think that scholars working in the field of the cinema of adolescence really want to anchor teen film to a specific historical and cultural formation. Whether it's the 1950s, as Thomas Doherty did in his book *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*, or 1990s' post-feminism, there appears to be a drive to find a perfected form of the genre that is specific to a time as well as a place. I think this approach is unhelpful. The third issue I have is that teen film is not just about teens in the audience; rather, it's about popular narratives of adolescence which are not exclusively oriented to a youth audience. They also retain a durable and extensive range of possible attachments for adults and for people who are not yet teenagers. It is a dazzling field for children who

are not yet teenagers as much as it is a place of pleasures for adults, not all of which are nostalgic. Finally, I take issue with the position that teen film is low quality and repetitiously generic. Granted, it is repetitious and generic a lot of the time, because that's part of its pleasure, but there are many kinds of aesthetic experimentation. I don't think we have to take the either/or option on this (focusing on "great" examples and forgetting about the generic, or focusing on the generic but forgetting about exceptional films).

Your recent work challenged the received wisdom that American teenpics emerged as a fully formed product line in the 1950s. What opportunities and challenges do you think might characterize subsequent research on this earlier period?

Doherty's *Teenagers and Teenpics*, which is a great book in its own way, has a really interesting discussion about the marketing arms of film production companies inventing this new idea about the teen film and its audience. I completely agree with his specific argument on that period, but that marketing speak — let's give it this label and sell it in this particular way — was so successful at that moment that it cast a long shadow across everything that had gone before it, making it seem as though this was entirely about the present and the now, and that nothing similar had ever existed beforehand. So even though this was happening within a few years of an array of diverse and successful films about juvenile delinquency and bobbysoxers and so on in the 1940s, those earlier efforts were rendered invisible by the massive success of the marketing of the "new teen film". So when we encounter Doherty's argument that the teen film was invented in 1955 and died in 1959, we need to understand that he is really describing a specific narrative about the teen film as a blindingly new 1950s postwar phenomenon. It is interesting to think about how we historicize films using that story, because it seems so absurd to be told in 2014 that there have been no teen films made since 1959. I think such arguments are useful in terms of what they refuse to do as much as for what they do. Doherty's insistence that all the famous teen films of the 1980s and 1990s were merely repetitions of 1950s movies — that there was nothing new except for the fact that adults could now watch teen films — is a really interesting argument because it is clearly so wrong. It is useful to make those claims because anyone encountering them for the first time will invariably ask you about later films. However, I think stepping outside of tight periodization debates where there must be a point of origin for teen film proper allows us to think about how media and its relationships to youth culture are always changing. This in turn allows us to ask more interesting questions about the relationships between say film, television, and the internet, and what they have to say, collectively and to each other, about youth culture.

Studies of the address, the representation, and the consumption practices of young females have thankfully received increased scholarly attention in recent years. How do you think such studies reorient or broaden our understandings of this important media-audience relationship?

I think talking about girls is now no longer extraordinary in Anglophone studies of media and popular culture, but it's still far more uncommon in, for example, Francophone studies of the same field, or in disciplines where popular culture still seems a marginal concern. It is still surprising to me how many places and disciplines there are where work on girls involves having conversations that Anglophone cultural studies writers like

Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber were already doing in the late 1970s and 1980s. There are different histories for French, for example, or for Nordic girls studies. I think we need to recognize that thinking about girls, and asking how different the situation looks if we focus on them individually rather than on a generic youth or on girls rather than boys, has been going on for a long time. The situation has been different in the last ten years because Girls Studies has become a more visible and coherent field, and now boasts its own intellectual spaces and dialogues. I still think when Media Studies scholars talk about youth in general, and when ideas about youth and media are put forward, there is a default assumption that it's either about boys or, if it is about gender, it is about boys and girls as distinct categories. I think both of those situations remain rather problematic. Youth-oriented popular culture is certainly one of the sites in which gender differentiation, whether from a production or a consumption standpoint, is very striking, but we still have to think about the idea of youth that frames those things. We need those distinct perspectives and that broader frame as well.

Your work is notable for the fact that it veers away from a primarily or exclusively US-centric perspective on youth-oriented cinema towards a more international one. Given the central position that transnational approaches now occupy in the study of cinema, how do you think such a change of perspective might enrich or alter our understandings of American cinema and youth?

It is a change of perspective, which does not put the site of production as the beginning and the end of what you are going to say about a media form like cinema; taking an international perspective foregrounds a mobile, changing, international idea about adolescence that compels that genre and gives it certain shapes. This not to say that, for example, Indian and Turkish filmmakers are copying American films, but that these films share certain structures relating to how adolescence works and how it should be understood. These ideas are Turkish or Indian ideas even if they are also American. I think that starting from this conceptual frame allows us to think differently about the nation state's relationship to media. It also gets us away from some stories of globalization that were always problematic and often taken in unhelpful directions — in the direction, for example, of homogenization or American imperialism, because no form of media has ever been that simple. This international frame doesn't forget about the national. It lets you talk about the nation state as a place where industries are nourished, and harnessed to national economies, but also where they're monitored and where apparatuses of training and protection are built up around ideas of adolescence as much as media industries. It therefore lets you think about the nation state in what seems to me a better way, paying attention to certain cultural specificities without assuming that the form derives its cultural specificity from where it was produced. There are some very Australian things about teen film in Australia, for example, but the most interesting one is not that the films themselves were made in Australia.

I think the problem I have with many of the reception studies around is that, considering, say the consumption of American teen films in Germany, they simplify how American such films could be and how distinctly German those consumers could be. I want to stress the important ideas that are shared, by whatever means of translation, as

a rubric for understanding youth and adolescence. These ideas build a bridge between cultural contexts before any movie is even seen. I think some American scholars who work on teen film take my statement that the genre should not be seen as American as undermining the value of their talking about the American-ness of these films or of talking about American films per se. In fact, I think recognizing that teen film is not wholesale or automatically American is helpful for American scholars too, because it lets them focus on the peculiar American-ness of some manifestations of teen film, and to consider what allows some films to have some distinctive meanings for American audiences. It also allows them to think about how American-made teen films have always been engaged with the rest of the world. They have borrowed not only from films made in other places but also from the broader field of youth-oriented media. I think it's to the advantage of American scholars of American film to acknowledge that there is not just a default association between America and teen film.

What do you think are some of the more exciting and potentially illuminating avenues of research currently being explored by scholars in this field?

In terms of girls and popular media, there is a lot of work being done on sexualization in girls' media and on girls' responses to that. This includes girls' responses to teen film; how girls respond to the dominance of narratives about sexual identity, sexual awakening, and sexual experience. I find this work to be very useful when it considers films or discourse on films in relation to discourses on sexualization in say public policy, schools, and so on; when it doesn't isolate the films and see them as exclusively filmic events but rather as parts of a much broader cultural field. I recently read a wonderful PhD thesis by Heta Mulari, from Finland, on Swedish girl films in the 90s that was doing that kind of work. I don't, however, appreciate work that fails to disassociate itself from moral certainties, preordained cultural hierarchies, or panic formulas. It is great when film scholarship gives a new resonance to young people's continued consumption — year after year, generation after generation — of stories about adolescence. I also appreciate it when it manages to place film in relation to peoples' reflections on their own place in the world and their own experiences.

The other thing I think is really interesting in current work on youth and film are studies which put film into a broader media framework and think about how slippery the borders are between media forms: between film and digital or online media, film and television, mobile phones and movies, video games and movies, and so on. I also appreciate work that notices how slippery our notions of age and gender are, the minute we start talking about audiences that are only virtually identifiable, and only virtually anchored to a specific nation. Even though I have expressed some concern about the ways in which discussions of transmedia texts become discussions of "convergence culture", in general I do think it is crucial that we recognize media change. To talk about film now is to talk about a different thing than it was fifteen-to-twenty years ago. These issues come to bear on the question of what to do with American cinema now. I think we all, as scholars, should be more flexible about what we mean by cinema.

What are some of the (still marginalized or under-examined) aspects of the topic you think deserve greater scholarly attention? And how might such studies enrich current understandings of this topic?

I would love to see many more people working in teen film with an eye on the broad historical framework of where our ideas about adolescence come from and how we maintain them, and at the same time with an eye on the international terrain that this history covers, and that therefore any teen film addresses. I suppose that is the overwhelming interest of all my answers to your questions, but I feel like there's a lot more to be done along these lines.

Finally, what are some of the research questions shaping your current and upcoming work on youth and cinema?

I recently won a large research grant to study international media classification systems, and the histories of how they emerged in seven separate countries including Australia, Britain, Brazil, India, China, Japan, and the U.S.A., and how those histories relate to each other. The British Board of Film Classification is our British partner, and in Australia our partner is the National Classification Authority, whereas in Brazil our partner is a research center focused on censorship and classification. With the other case studies we have partner investigators who specialize on film censorship and/or classification in those countries, and sometimes particularly in youth and youth culture as well. One of the focal points of that project is the question of how these systems frame film in terms of the young movie audience or in terms of young people on the screen. This represents one of my own attempts to try and stop myself from thinking only about film in terms of the film text; to recognize that film has always been part of a cultural field in which many media forms are important, but also to think of film today as something more slippery than it used to be.