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Tesis Doctoral

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"When he was 27, my grandad fought in Vietnam.
When I was 27, I built a birdhouse with my mum."
—Bo Burnham

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Introduction

Not very long ago, it was relatively easy to tell whether somebody was an adult or not. If they wore shorts and were not doing sports, they were children; if they wore rompers or playsuits, they were probably *very young* children. Clothing items featuring characters from children's films, once reserved for kids and theme parks, are now a high street staple. Adults used to look and act the part, but that is not the case anymore. While toys were once exclusively for children, toy manufacturers now often target adults[1]. For instance, Play Doh released a line of "grown up" scents like freshly cut grass, coffee and cured meats, while Danish brand Lego regularly release building sets inspired by films and television shows that children do not watch, like *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-1998) and *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004). Today's adults may watch cartoons and willingly engage with children's media products. Most Disney World visitors live in a childless household

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[1] The "kidult" market—ages 12 and up—accounts for over a quarter of the UK's toy sales (Wood 2021).

(Kennedy Wynne 2019) and many adults dream of a Disney wedding, which has been a real possibility since 1991 (McDonough 2017).

But the rise of casual clothing and the greater acceptance of childlike leisure activities and tastes only tell part of the story. Today's adults are not necessarily married or have children: almost half of U.S. adults are single, and voluntary childlessness is on the rise (Wang 2020, Brown 2021, Fry and Parker 2021). What is more, those who do get married and become parents are doing so at an ever later age, especially if they have higher education degrees (Bui and Miller 2018). This postponement of lifelong commitment is related to several other factors that have lengthened the transition to adulthood. Young adults today pursue higher education in greater numbers than before (Bialik and Fry 2019) and graduate to a precarious labour market and the consequent difficulty to become financially independent. Unlike previous generations, today's young adults have not been able to reap the rewards of a college education: in the first 15 years since entering the workforce, millennials[2] experienced less economic growth than any generation before them (Van Dam 2020). Keeping this in mind, it is not surprising that millennials seem to be slow to grow up: in many cases, they simply cannot afford to.

Even though millennials have become the poster children for delayed transitions to adulthood, they are not alone in their tendency to postpone the attainment of adult markers. The socio-economic changes that have led to a longer transition to adulthood began to be felt in the late 1960s, leading social psychologist Kenneth Keniston to argue for the existence of a new life stage between adolescence and adulthood, which he simply termed "youth" (1970). However, such deferrals of adulthood were still more the exception than

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[2] The PEW Research Center defines millennials as those individuals born between 1981 and 1996. In 2021, the oldest millennials were 40 and the youngest 25.

the norm. The percentage of baby boomers[3] who pursued higher education is lower than that of both Generation X and millennials (Bialik and Fry 2019), and in 1970 people were still marrying and having children at younger age[4]. Thirty years later, psychologist Jeffrey Arnett reformulated this idea for a new generation and called this life stage between adolescence and adulthood "emerging adulthood." He argued that it was not until Generation X[5] left adolescence behind that this life stage began to be experienced by a large enough number of people, and that the characteristics that were once believed to be generational were actually features of emerging adulthood. Arnett defines this life stage as a bridge between adolescence and adulthood during which some markers of adulthood may have been attained but others are yet to be completed. He describes emerging adulthood as a self-focused age during which individuals are prone to identity exploration and feel a great sense of possibility despite the instability and in-betweenness that prevails in their lives (Arnett 2000, 2004). Although Arnett's theory has been criticised for its class bias, for painting a positive picture of these transitional years and failing to acknowledge the fact that some young people are forced into emerging adulthood (Blatterer 2007, Silva 2013), his categorisation is useful when it comes to defining a large body of films about twentysomething lives whose rise coincides with the rise of emerging adulthood and that I call "emerging adult films."

The rise of emerging adult films follows the same trajectory as the rise of the life stage they depict: representations of emerging adulthood began to become common in the

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[3] Baby boomers were born roughly in the decade following the end of World War II. Between 1946 and 1964 according to the PEW Research Center.

[4] In 1970, the mean age at first marriage was 22.5 for men and 20.6 for women, who were, on average, 21.4 years old when they had their first child (Matthews and Hamilton 2002, US. Census Bureau 2021).

[5] According to the PEW Research Center, Generation X comprises those individuals born between 1965 and 1980.

late 1960s with films that portrayed their twentysomething protagonists as different from the adults around them. *The Graduate* (Ben Nichols, 1967) shows all the main features that will become the conventions of the emerging adult film twenty odd years later, but, like emerging adulthood itself at the time, it is an exception. It is not until the core members of Generation X graduated from high school in the late 1980s that emerging adulthood became more commonplace. The early 1990s brought along representations of emerging adult life in all sorts of cultural products: Novels like Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales from an Accelerated Culture* (1991), television series like *Get a Life* (Fox, 1990–1992), comic books like *Ghost World* (Daniel Clowes, 1993–1997), songs like Millencolin's "Bullion" (1995) and the reality show *The Real World* (MTV, 1992–2008) deal with the challenges of emerging adulthood. It is then that the number of films putting twentysomething life at the centre of their narrative became significant enough to talk about the emerging adult film.

In the thirty years that have passed since the birth of the emerging adult film, the genre has gone through different trends and grown significantly in number, which suggests that the interest in twentysomething—and sometimes thirtysomething—life is more alive than ever and the genre is here to stay. Despite the popularity of emerging adult narratives, these films have been given little academic consideration. They have been analysed as generational texts belonging to either Generation X or the millennial generation (Gamarra 1997, Lee 2010, Elliot 2011, Kaklaminidou and Tally 2014), as performances of immaturity (Pearlman 2013) and together with teenage films (Martin [1998] 2012, Doherty 2002, Stephens 2002, Hentges 2006, Tropiano 2006, Driscoll 2011, Colling 2019). However, these analyses pull the focus away from the process of becoming an adult in the

late twentieth and early 21st century. Analysing the texts only in generational terms fails to consider the wider context within which these films are made and the fact that the changes that the transition to adulthood has undergone in the past decades transcend generations. Although it is true that emerging adult characters are often reckless and immature, focusing on performances of immaturity brings emerging adult films together with films about adults behaving badly, like *Grown Ups* (Dennis Dugan, 2010) and *Bad Mom*s (John Lucas and Scott Moore, 2016), which leaves aside the struggles—and refusals—to achieve adult stability that lie at the core of the emerging adult film. The protagonists of these films differ from emerging adults in that their adoption of reckless behaviours does not necessarily imply a real surrender of adulthood and stability, while in emerging adult films recklessness prevents the protagonists from reaching adult stability. Finally, even though emerging adult films may borrow some teenage film conventions—especially if the protagonists are still in their early twenties or going back to the place where they grew up —they possess enough character types, settings, narrative structures and conflicts of their own to warrant their consideration as a separate genre. Although both genres are, after all, about growing up, the challenges of emerging adulthood differ from those of adolescence, which becomes more evident in those films that deal with late emerging adulthood or even with thirtysomethings going through an unusually long transition to adulthood, which make up over half of the films in the corpus of this thesis.

This thesis, then, argues for the consideration of emerging adult films as their own kind of youth film, separate both from the teenage film and from films about childish adults. I understand emerging adult films as films with emerging adult protagonists whose narrative places special emphasis on the challenges of twentysomething—and, sometimes,

thirtysomething—life and on the stumbling blocks that hinder their transition to adulthood. Emerging adult films are coming-of-age films that deal with the later stages of that process, with the adoption of an adult persona that will take them over to the next stage of life. The films generally set an opposition between a standardised adulthood, which is to be avoided, and an alternative sort of adulthood that allows the protagonists to evolve while maintaining their individuality. Emerging adult characters often need to find out what parts of themselves are helping them grow and which ones are holding them back. That is, they need to learn how to change their often immature ways without losing sight of themselves in the process. This struggle between individuality and socially sanctioned forms of adulthood lies at the core of most emerging adult films, which emphasises the fact that contemporary adulthood is not monolithic. That is, that there is not a single correct way to become an adult and that each person must negotiate their transition on their own terms.

The corpus of films used in this thesis spans three decades of emerging adult films and two generations of emerging adulthood. The emerging adult film begins in earnest in the early 1990s, the decade when the core of Generation X[6] went through emerging adulthood. During this decade, films paid especial attention to the importance of the friend group, often featuring several protagonists[7]. For instance, in *Reality Bites* (Ben Stiller, 1994) the protagonists share an apartment, in *Singles* (Cameron Crowe, 1992) they live in the same apartment building, in *Empire Records* (Allan Moyle, 1995) they work together, in *The Last Days of Disco* (Whit Stillman, 1998) they frequent the same night club and in

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[6] The oldest Xers were 20 in 1990 and the youngest turned 20 in the year 2000.

[7] The same tendency to focus on group of friends living together or close by can be seen in emerging adult television shows from the 1990s, like *Friends* and the first seasons of *Melrose Place* (Fox, 1992–1999) before it veered into soap opera territory. This trend has continued on to the present day, when a focus on a group of friends rather than a single protagonist is much more common in emerging adult television than in emerging adult films.

Kicking and Screaming (Noah Baumbach, 1995) a group of college friends face life after graduation. The prominence of multi-protagonist films (Azcona 2010) changes in the next two decades: In the 2000s a few mumblecore[8] films like *Mutual Appreciation* (Andrew Bujalski, 2005), *Kissing on the Mouth* (Joe Swanberg, 2005) and *LOL* (Joe Swanberg, 2006) feature ensemble casts, but their experimental nature sets them apart from their predecessors. In the 2010s these films no longer depict communal living, but reunions and celebrations in which the protagonists celebrate a major rite of passage into adulthood, mostly wedding and pre-wedding celebrations. This reflects a change in the subject of emerging adult films: while 1990s films feature protagonists in their early and late twenties in equal measure, the focus of the emerging adult film gradually shifts to late emerging adulthood and, in the 2010s, emerging adult films are more likely to be about thirtysomethings who cannot—or refuse to—leave emerging adulthood behind than about people in their early twenties. This tendency to focus on the latter stages of emerging adulthood can be argued to reflect the difficulties that millennials have faced attempting to find stability in a postrecessionary landscape.

Even though psychologists consider emerging adulthood to take place between the ages of 18-29 (Arnett 2004), I have decided to take on a wider approach to this life stage in view of the fact that onscreen representations of emerging adulthood are often concerned with an inability to fully complete the transition into adulthood. Some of the protagonists in the films I have analysed may not be considered emerging adults by a psychologist, but

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[8] Mumblecore is an independent cinema movement that emerged in the 2000s and is characterised by a D.I.Y. approach to filmmaking, extremely low budgets and a minimalist aesthetic, among other features. The films are often loosely based on the lives of their directors, who were mostly in their twenties when they made their first films, and tend to deal with "a generation's disillusionment" (San Filippo 2011). In the 2010s, some of the writers and directors associated with the movement went on to produce emerging adult films and television shows on larger budgets, such as the Duplass brothers' *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* (2011), Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012-2017) and Lynn Shelton's *Laggies* (2014).

the films treat them in the same way they depict younger characters. Since this thesis is not concerned with the reality of emerging adulthood, but with its onscreen representations, I have allowed the films themselves to guide my selection. Films are a window to the society that creates them, and the large number of emerging adult films with thirtysomething characters suggests that the end-point of emerging adulthood is often an unmet one and that the failure to meet society's expectations regarding orderly transitions to adulthood is an issue that plagues contemporary society. For instance, the concern over declining birth rates is not only related to the growing rates of voluntary childlessness, but also to the fact that, for some people, not being able to find financial stability in their thirties may deter them from ever having kids.

This thesis begins by taking a moment to consider the changing nature of life stages over time before moving on to the socio-historical factors that have resulted in longer transitions to adulthood in post-industrialised countries and summarising the main characteristics of emerging adulthood. In Chapter Two, I focus on the definition and description of the emerging adult film genre. Then, I locate it historically by providing a brief overview of the precursors to the emerging adult film genre. That is, those films made before 1990 that depict emerging adult life before longer transitions to adulthood became widespread. Chapter Three focuses on the elements that make emerging adult films simultaneously different from and similar to the teenage film. For this purpose, I begin with an overview of the generic conventions of the teenage film before moving on to a close reading of *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985), a teenage film, *Clerks* (Kevin Smith, 1995), an emerging adult film, and *Empire Records*, a film that features both emerging adult and teenage characters. Even though the emerging adult film often draws

from the teen pic very much in the same way that emerging adulthood shares adolescent features, a comparative analysis draws attention to the different challenges and attitudes that set both genres apart.

In Chapter Four, I turn my attention to homecoming narratives in emerging adult films. Films in which emerging adult characters travel back to their hometown and are forced to confront their past selves have been common since the birth of the genre, and homecoming narratives have become more prevalent as the decades have gone by, mirroring millennials' tendency to boomerang back home (Fry et al. 2020). A third of the films analysed made between 2010 and 2019 have characters who travel back home at some point. The prevalence of narratives whose entire structure centres around the protagonist's return home makes them worthy of attention. In this chapter, I begin by categorising the different types of homecoming narratives. Then, I discuss the role of nostalgia and of small town settings that contrast with the urban settings found throughout the genre before concluding with a close reading of the film *Young Adult* (Jason Reitman, 2011).

The fifth and final chapter tackles the uncertainty under which the past two generations of emerging adults have had to negotiate their transition to adulthood. I contend that the generational differences between Generation X and the millennial generation are overshadowed by the fact that both generations came of age at a time characterised by change, uncertainty and precariousness, which has prevented them from making swift transitions to adulthood. This insecurity has been acutely felt on those domains where emerging adults carry out the greatest degree of identity exploration according to Arnett: work and love (2004). I explore the difficulty to settle down in a world

that is in constant change by focusing on the changing workplace where Xers and millennials have kickstarted their careers, on the prevalence of the "do what you love" ethos and on the influence that this fluidity has had in the intimate sphere. These changes are later explored in the close reading of two films—*High Fidelity* (Stephen Frears, 2000) and *Frances Ha* (Noah Baumbach, 2012)—focusing on the depiction of love in the former and the role of movement and managing expectations regarding adulthood in the latter. This chapter concludes with a brief section exploring the differences between Generation X and millennial films in order to illustrate how the main features of the emerging adult film transcend generations.

CHAPTER ONE

Do You Know Who You Are? The Path to Contemporary Adulthood

The last decades of the twentieth century saw the rise of a certain type of person: young adults, usually college-educated, who, instead of taking the traditional route into adulthood of stable long-term employment, marriage and kids, lead their lives as they did during their college years, living with friends and hopping from job to job and from relationship to relationship while they enjoy the social life and freedom unavailable to those who have taken on adult responsibilities. The media were quick to attach to them a myriad of mostly pejorative labels, defining Generation X and millennials as a lazy, selfish and entitled bunch who refused to grow up, and thus failing to acknowledge that it is, in fact, the changing socio-economic conditions in post-industrial societies that have led to the lengthening of the transition to adulthood and to the redefinition of adulthood itself.

Life stages are not fixed and permanent, but flexible and culturally determined. That is, what it means to be an adult, a child, a teenager or a middle-aged woman changes

through cultures and, since cultures are not static, also through time. In order to analyse the changing nature of the transition to adulthood, it will be useful to briefly discuss the emergence of the current conceptions of the two previous life stages: childhood and adolescence. By contextualising the development of these two categories, whose existence and current form are now often taken for granted, we will gain meaningful insight into the way in which the structure of the life cycle is susceptible to change as the social, economic and historical contexts do. After a brief discussion of the emergence of the child as an innocent being and of adolescence as an independent life stage markedly separate from adulthood, this chapter will focus on emerging adulthood. To begin, we will explore the socio-historical context that gave rise to the lengthening of the transition to adulthood, exploring those elements that took part in the creation of emerging adulthood as a life stage. Once the context has been defined, the focus will be placed on emerging adulthood itself, offering a brief description of the most relevant features of the life stage, such as liminality, identity exploration and instability, among others. The goal of this chapter is therefore to explore the changing nature of life stages in order to locate emerging adulthood in its socio-historical context and define its main characteristics before we delve into the analysis of onscreen depictions of this life stage.

1.1 Changing conceptions of childhood

The view of childhood as a time of innocence and play during which the child is free from the demands of adult life is now deeply ingrained in our society, but it has not always been so. Not only does what it means to be a child differ between cultures, but the concept of childhood has also undergone substantial change through history (Sibley 1995, 34). The

French historian Philippe Ariès, whose seminal work *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) studies the shifting attitudes regarding children, went as far as to argue that "in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist" (128). The study of representations of children in medieval painting revealed that children were rarely deemed important enough to have their portrait painted, and that, when they were represented, they were usually shown as small adults, wearing the same clothes as their elders and portrayed in the same attitude. According to Ariès, this indicates that medieval society did not conceive childhood as a life stage separate from adulthood (10). Although his methodology and analysis have been the subject of much criticism (Heywood, 2001), his questioning of the nature of childhood remains relevant almost sixty years after its publication, and it constitutes a good starting point from which to reflect on the changing nature of life stages.

The concept of the innocence of childhood did not arise until the end of the eighteenth century. Until then, children were considered to be born with the original sin, which made them essentially weak, sexual and sinful (Heywood 2001, 22; Bernstein 2011, 36). As Heywood (2001) explains, the change of attitude regarding children was brought upon by Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1697) and taken one step further by Rousseau's *Emile* (1762). Locke rejected the idea of humans as inherently sinful beings, considering children to be born as a tabula rasa, an empty mind which is shaped by experience. Rousseau fully reversed the doctrine of the original sin, seeing children as intrinsically innocent beings who would never purposefully do any harm and calling for the preservation of their innocence, which he calls sacred. Rousseau argues that young people who remained innocent throughout adolescence were at that point "the most generous, the most loving, and the most loveable of men" ([1762] 1979, 221). This statement, although made in the eighteenth century, foreshadows the progressive

lengthening of the transition to adulthood that started in the twentieth century and continues nowadays. Rousseau's idea of the child as an innocent being took hold. Romantic writers drew inspiration from childhood and idealised children as wiser, more sensitive creatures who had a "profound awareness of enduring moral truths" (Grylls 1978, 35). Nevertheless, as Heywood points out, at this time in history it was mostly the upper and middle classes who enjoyed the idea of childhood innocence, whereas the majority of young people remained unaffected by it and continued to be expected to lead an adult-like life at an early age (2001, Kindle loc. 807).

Until the second half of the nineteenth century, the boundaries between childhood and adulthood were not well-defined. As Chudacoff (1989) explains in his book about age consciousness in American culture, the United States progressively turned into the age-graded society that we know today. Because of this indifference regarding age, the terms "youth" and "child" were almost interchangeable: the term "youth" could designate anybody between the ages of 7 and 30, while "child" was applied to infants and adolescents alike (9-11). His analysis of advice books for young men and women written at the time reveals that there was no consensus regarding the age at which adulthood should be attained, and often it was not mentioned at all. However, a particular case argued that boys as young as ten should be able to take on some adult responsibilities (22). This lack of age-consciousness may be due to the fact that it was common for children to work with their parents in fields and factories, a family model which, according to Keniston (1970), started to disappear after the American Civil War (1861-1865). Following the progressive change in the conception of children from demonised to innocent beings, came a series of measures to ensure the protection of childhood. Slowly, children came to be seen as vulnerable creatures whose innocence left them defenceless against the adult world and

therefore needed adult guidance and protection. This view gave rise to the progressive creation of separate spheres for children, which eventually led to their separation from the adult world and the institutionalisation of childhood (Buchmann 1989, 79). As was previously mentioned, initially only the upper classes could enjoy childhood as a period of isolation from the adult world, while working-class parents lacked the time and money to devote to their offspring. Nevertheless, the new conception of childhood gradually took hold.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of compulsory education, child welfare and restrictions regarding child labour. By the 1840s, countries such as the United Kingdom, Prussia and France, as well as some U.S. states, had started to take tentative steps in the regulation of child labour. Although the final objective was not the abolishment of child labour but, rather, its regulation, and the legislation is thought to have been poorly enforced, these measures taken by industrialised countries reflect the new view of childhood. What really made the difference in keeping children away from factories and fields, as well as in reinforcing children's separation from the adult world, was, however, compulsory education. Prussia led the way in terms of free and compulsory education, with 80 per cent of children between the ages of 6 and 14 attending elementary school before 1840. Other countries like Britain (1880) and France (1882) were quick to follow, while in the US Massachusetts was the first state to embrace compulsory education, a process which finished with Texas in the early twentieth century (Heywood 2001, Kindle loc. 4737). Thus childhood effectively became a cherished time of play and learning, isolated from the demands and obligations of adult life, and children came to be, "economically 'useless' but emotionally 'priceless'" (Zelizer [1985] 1994, 21, 57).

1.2. Adolescents and teenagers

Although the beginning of adolescence is marked by the onset of puberty, which is a physiological event, adolescence is also considered to be a cultural construction which emerged as an attempt to control young people and explain their behaviour (Hall 1904, Keniston 1970, Buchmann 1989, Hine 1999, Savage 2007). The universally accepted idea of adolescence as an essential stage of human development is in fact a little over a century old (Keniston 1970). Like our conception of childhood, the life stage that we now know as adolescence was born as a consequence of socio-economic conditions that created a moratorium between childhood and adulthood during which, despite the fact that individuals were sexually mature, they were not considered fully fledged adult citizens. The turn of the twentieth century is considered to mark the beginning of the age of adolescence. The year 1904 saw the publication of G. Stanley Hall's seminal work *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, which contributed to the popularisation of the term "adolescence" to refer to the stage of life following puberty. However, Hall cannot be credited with the "invention" of adolescence. Although in the nineteenth century there was no widespread conception of puberty as a life stage (Savage 2007, 66), there had been previous studies considering its existence and the problem of what to do with young people who were past puberty but had not yet entered adulthood had been present throughout the nineteenth century (Heywood 2001; Keniston 1970, 631). Nevertheless, Hall's exhaustive study provides a definition of adolescence that still resonates today.

Rousseau had defined puberty as a "second birth," that marked the beginning of real life ([1762] 1979, 212). Likewise, Hall writes about a "new birth" during which children

became complete human beings ([1904] 1931, Kindle loc. 170). However, as Savage (2007) explains, for Hall adolescence is a social construction which encompasses more than puberty and lasts about ten years, from the age of 12 to 21 for girls and from 14 to 25 for boys. He advocated a prolonged adolescence as a longer transition to adulthood during which young people would be kept out of work for longer, remaining dependent on their parents and thus delaying their entry into the domain of adulthood. From his point of view, industrial society needed young people with higher qualifications, which in turn required longer compulsory schooling and a socially accepted period of idleness for university students. He maintained that the advance of civilisation should bring along an advance in education, and compared attempts to limit the time spent in education with a return to savagery.

Education was indeed a decisive factor in the creation and consolidation of adolescence as a life stage. As we have previously seen, regulations on child labour and, more importantly, the advent of compulsory education in age-graded schools, created separate spheres for adults and children. As a consequence, rites of passage were replaced by institutionalised transitions with fixed boundaries, which gave way to a greater degree of age-consciousness in American society. Up until this point, size played a more important role than age when it came to establishing the roles of young people. That is, if a young boy looked manly enough and was strong enough to do an adult's job in a factory, farm or mine, he would be considered a man, whereas one who took longer to develop would still be viewed as a child, even if he was older than the first one. Age-graded compulsory education meant that all children were going through life at the same pace. That is, the age at which they were expected to enter the adult world of work and marriage was

institutionally established and gradually pushed back as these protective measures included adolescents as well as children (Chudacoff 1989, 28; Hine 1999, 16).

Two factors played a key role in the construction of adolescence: the demands of industrial society for a highly qualified individuals and the need to maintain social order. As factories became more automatised, machines replaced some of the jobs that young people had previously held, which implied that great numbers of teenagers were now unemployed. At the same time, and perhaps owing to this increase in the numbers of idle youth, gangs had become a problem in cities with a big number of children and teenagers whose life was not regulated by institutions imposed and controlled by adults. By the end of the nineteenth century, U.S. authorities had acknowledged the need to control working-class youth, to keep them off the streets and to prevent their involvement in revolutionary movements which could threaten the status quo. As a consequence, young people were now being encouraged to stay in school, where they could learn bourgeois values under the supervision of adults (Keniston 1970, Valentine et al. 1998, Savage 2007). Since the emergence of a new life stage constitutes a lengthy process, it is impossible to pinpoint the exact moment when adolescence came to be. Despite the efforts made to protect young people while isolating them from the adult world, until the 1930s most of them still worked and thus were not considered adolescents, as the term was only used to describe high school students (Palladino 1996, 5). Although the numbers of high school students had been on the rise since the turn of the century and secondary education had been promoted as a goal for ambitious teenagers with the help of popular fiction (Savage 2007, 97), something bigger was needed in order to keep the American youth in school well past their puberty, and that something was the Great Depression.

According to Thomas Hine (1999, 179), although in the 1920s only a minority of adolescents pursued secondary education, it was widely believed that all teenagers should be in school and that compulsory education for adolescents would come sooner than later, which happened when the hardships of the Great Depression sent the majority of American teenagers to high school. With soaring unemployment levels, family men were the ones with the most urgent need for jobs, and national child labour restrictions were placed in 1934 in order to ensure that family men would be at the top of the list. Teenage unproductivity became a goal that was supported, encouraged and regulated by the government (Hine 1999, 206). In 1936 the proportion of teenagers in high school reached an all-time high of 65% and, accordingly, in 1940 over half of American 17-year-olds graduated from high school and nearly 80% were high school students (Palladino 1996, 5). One of the main principles behind free, compulsory secondary education was to instil middle-class values on teenagers. As the United States established itself as a world power, a larger managerial class was needed, and younger generations had to be educated accordingly in order to "play their full part within the business ideal" (Savage 2007, 92; Hine 1999). Ironically, this separation of teenagers from the world of adults meant that they spent most of their time surrounded by their peers, which increased group consciousness and effectively separated the teenage generation from the previous one, giving way to youth as a subculture (Hine 1999, 7; Palladino 1996, 5). Despite the fact that high schools are institutions created and ruled by adults, they gave teenagers the chance to take control over some aspects of their lives that were previously supervised by their parents, especially their social life. This group consciousness resulted in a greater awareness of what separated teenagers from adults, differences which were emphasised through the consumption of products aimed specifically at their age-group. Peer influence

constitutes the driving force behind the teenage market. What teenagers do for fun, the music they listen to, the films they watch, what they wear and even what they want to be when they grow up are decisions which are directly influenced by other teenagers, a phenomenon which would probably not occur if they were not segregated from adults. Taking this into account, it seems fair to argue that "without high school, there are no teenagers" (Hine 1999, 139).

The word "teenager" itself began to be used to designate adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18 during the Second World War. Although some authors quote 1944 as the year when it appeared while others claim it was first used in a 1941 article published in *Popular Science Magazine*, they all agree that the term became common during World War II and that it was originally used in marketing and advertising. The popularity of the teenager spread fast enough to feature in a book title in 1945, and in 1947 an article in *Newsweek Magazine* stated that, during the previous decade, teenagers had become a separate group in American society, one with distinctive characteristics that set them in opposition to both children and adults. This shows that, by the end of the 1940s, it was not only teenagers themselves who thought they were different from adults, but adults also saw teenagers as a separate group and, more importantly, advertisers did too (Palladino 1996, Hine 1999, Savage 2007). The fact that the term "teenager" originated in the world of marketing indicates that, by the mid-1940s, teenagers were already seen as a profitable group. Young people were marked as a group with consumer influence and spending power, which came as a consequence of the abundance of jobs for teenagers during the Second World War, when older men moved up to more skilled jobs and later went away to fight at the front (Savage 2007, 393-95). This decade also marks a change of attitude regarding adolescence. Historian Grace Palladino explains how, before the Second World

War, high school students were seen as adults in training, who should focus their energy on edifying activities which would prepare them for the adult world. In the 1940s, however, advertisers saw high school students as young people who just wanted to have fun (1996, 53).

This change of attitude brought along a shift in the representations of teenagers in the media and popular fiction. Until the 1950s, when rock'n'roll became the official anthem of teenagers, adolescent culture was closer to adult culture. Magazines like *Scholastic* and *Seventeen* promoted what Palladino calls "a culture of careful transition into adulthood" (1996, 157), with wholesome teenagers who readily accepted social conventions and good judgement. Although this clean and righteous representation of teenagers did not always correspond with the reality of adolescent life, it was prevalent in the cultural products of the time, like the Andy Hardy series or *A Date with Judy* (Richard Thorpe, 1948). The 1950s mark a turning point in filmic representations of teenagers, with the focus moving away from wholesome depictions of adolescence and into representations of juvenile delinquency. In fact, some critics consider the 1950s as the birth decade of the teen film genre (Doherty 2002). This decade sees an abundance of onscreen representations of teenagers and, more importantly, of films aimed specifically at teenagers, which reflects both the growth of the teenage market and the increasing distance between youth and adulthood that becomes one of the most important characteristics of teenage culture from the 1950s on (Hine 1999, 226).

As we have seen, the separation between different life stages and the way in which society perceives them has changed over time. Elements of life that we now take for granted, such as the innocence of childhood or the rebelliousness of adolescence are

characteristic of Modernity and were brought about by specific societal changes, particularly the move from agrarian societies to industrial ones. Although most of the examples given refer to the United States, the elements discussed can, in general terms, be applied to other societies that went through parallel processes at the same time, such as the United Kingdom or Germany. Similarly, post-industrialisation, together with globalisation and other processes that coalesced in the late twentieth century, influenced the course of individuals' lives, further elongating the transition to adulthood and giving rise to previously non-existent conceptions of youth.

1.3 The rise of the twentysomething

Now that adolescence has been a fully established life stage for over a century and the surviving original teenagers of the 1940s are in their nineties, it is generally acknowledged that all of us who grew up in the developed world have gone through adolescence before finally becoming adults. Nevertheless, as we have previously seen, life stages are cultural constructions which are subject to change as society does, and the changes in the life cycle structure did not stop as soon as teenagers consolidated themselves as a separate age group, but rather continued evolving at a rapid pace, creating what many consider to be a new stage between adolescence and adulthood. This new stage, which has been named and defined several times since the 1960s, has received names such as "youth" (Keniston 1970), "novice phase" (Levinson 1978), "threshold stage" (Apter 2001) and "emerging adulthood" (Arnett and Taber, 1994; Arnett, 2000, 2004), not taking into account the labels attached to this new age group by the media, which have been numerous and for the most part not particularly positive. The publication of Douglas

Coupland's novel *Generation X* in 1991 gave a name to a cohort which sparked great interest in the media, making the twentysomething slacker a widely recognised—and despised—figure. According to Arnett, whose studies on emerging adulthood have been the most influential in the field so far, the features attached to Generation X are not only generational. Most of the characteristics of Xers actually stem from the changes that have given way to emerging adulthood, and they will remain relevant, so that an in-between phase between childhood and adulthood largely marked by instability will not only be characteristic of Generation X, but also of the following ones (Arnett 2004, 4). This premonition, written at a time when only the oldest members of the following generation had graduated from high school,[1] turned out to be true. Ten years later, Douglas Coupland himself stated that "everything they've been saying about X they're now saying about Millennials" (2014). The fact that media representations of both generations have been similar suggests that Arnett's prediction was right.

However, the changes which contributed to the creation of this new stage did not take place overnight in the early 1990s. As we have previously seen, education is closely related to the lengthening of the transition to adulthood, and it played a vital role in the establishment of the teenager as an age group. Similarly, the rise in the numbers of high school graduates who went on to pursue higher education implied that there was a growing number of young people who were deferring entrance into the world of gainful employment and, at the same time, into adulthood. In the United States, the percentage of

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[1] Generational theorists Strauss and Howe (1991) consider the millennial generation to begin with the cohort that graduated from high school in the year 2000. Following this delimitation, in 2004 the oldest Millennials were only 22 years old.

18-24 year-olds enrolled in higher education institutions rose sharply from 6.8% in 1944[2] to 15.2% in 1949, 23.6% in 1961, 35.8% in 1970, and 51.1% in 1990 (Snyder 1993).

Writing in 1970, Keniston considers higher education, along with prosperity, to be the defining factor that created this new life stage between adolescence and adulthood, which he names "youth." He marks the late 1960s as the moment when this life stage began to be the norm for a large number of young people. As he explains, this in-between stage between adolescence and adulthood existed before this decade. However, the only people who enjoyed a prolonged transition to adulthood were either exceptionally creative or disturbed, whereas by the end of the 1960s he argues that it had become a mass-scale phenomenon in the developed world (635). Arnett and Taber criticised Keniston's definition claiming that it is too influenced by the social upheaval of the 1960s (1994, 534) and it could be argued that, given the proportion of young people attending higher education at the time, Keniston's youth was not exactly a "mass-scale" stage. Yet both the media and cultural representations of youth suggest that in the 1960s the seed of emerging adulthood had been sown and was beginning to germinate. In 1966 the entire generation of Americans under 25 was chosen *Time Magazine*'s "Man of the Year"[3] (Time Magazine, 1967). When baby boomers came of age in the 1960s, a generational shift took place: over half of America's population was under 30 years of age in 1966 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1966). The article in which this generation was chosen "Man of the Year" paints a positive picture of youth. Baby boomers are referred to as "the Now Generation" and

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[2] As it was previously noted, 1944 is the year when the word "teenager" began to be used. 1944 and 1949 have been chosen as points of reference in order to illustrate that many of those "original" teenagers chose to pursue higher education, thus initiating a trend which would later be named as a decisive factor in the redefinition of the transition to adulthood.

[3] The distinction has since been renamed "Person of the Year." However, I will refer to it using its original name, which reflects the dominant values of the time.

described as more committed, more articulate, more assertive and better educated than their elders. Under-25s are not only praised for their achievements, but also for their predicted future achievements, some of which are arguably unrealistic or yet to be accomplished at the time of writing, like putting an end to poverty and war or finding a cure for cancer.

Fig. 1.1. From America's hope to America's hopeless youth.

It is worth remembering that this article was published at the beginning of 1967; that is, before the summer of love, the largest demonstrations against the Vietnam War, the feminist protests against the Miss America Pageant, the assassination of Martin Luther King and the riotous long hot summer of 1967, to name some of the events that took place after 1966 and shaped the baby boom generation. Despite references to the use of drugs, the growing sexual freedom and the pill, young adults are seen as America's hope for the future, a view which contrasts heavily with later representations of young adults in the media. Only six months after under-25s were declared "Man of the Year," the same publication ran a cover story on the hippie movement in which the generation that had

begun the year as the "Now Generation" is described as "perplexing and infuriating" (Time Magazine, 1967). The tide had turned for young adults in America, the wholesome looking men and woman (only one woman's face made it to the cover of Time Magazine) of 1966 had been replaced by something else that the older generations could not get a grasp of, thus emphasising the generational breach between the young and their elders (fig. 1.1).

The changes which gave rise to the emergence of this new stage of life between adolescence and adulthood can be divided into two blocks: those which took place during the late 1960s and 1970s and affected the baby boom generation, and, on the other hand, those that occurred from the 1990s on and affected the two following generations: Generation X and millennials. John Modell (1989), who studied the transition to adulthood in the United States from the 1920s to 1975, points out that, during the years following the Second World War, the government facilitated the transition to adulthood. Thanks to the G.I. Bill, a large number of war veterans were able to pursue higher education, find affordable housing or start a business. Besides, a greater part of elderly care was covered by social security, which implied that young people were not in charge of supporting their ageing parents. According to Modell, the reduction of these subsidies, which directly affected baby boomers, contributed to the lengthening of the transition to adulthood.

As we have previously seen, the growing percentage of young people pursuing higher education constituted a key factor in Keniston's definition of youth and it is a factor which appears throughout the definitions of this life stage. Keniston himself attributes this increase in the number of college students to the fact that post-industrial society required higher qualifications in order to access more technologically advanced jobs (1970, 633). Twenty years later, in a study which followed the life paths of British twentysomethings in

the 1990s, Bynner et al. stated that the fast-paced technological changes characteristic of postindustrial societies give young adults a wide array of options to navigate through, which in turn gives way to a temporary postponement of the entrance into full-time work that may last until an individual is in their late twenties (1997, 2). Similarly, Arnett (2007) writes that the economic changes that industrialised societies have gone through in the past decades, from economies based mainly on manufacturing to the age of knowledge and information, have made it necessary for young people to obtain a higher education degree in order to get a job that will provide them with the financial stability needed to establish themselves in adult life. He adds that those emerging adults without a degree have few possibilities of finding a job that will allow them to have the sort of security that one expects in adulthood, partly because most well-paying manufacturing jobs are a thing of the past. In many cases, production has moved to developing countries and, in others, automatisation has rendered some jobs obsolete. In a similar vein, Hendry and Kloep argue that the lengthening of education answers to the increasing demand for highly qualified workers, and that emerging adulthood is therefore closely connected to economic change in Western societies (2011, 82-86).

For some theorists the increasing tendency to stay at school for longer is directly linked to another factor which has led to the rise of emerging adulthood: the delay in marriage (Modell 1989, Mogelonski 1996, Arnett 2004). Although later marriage ages were common in the past, the median age at first marriage began declining in the 1940s and continued to do so through the 1950s until the end of the Vietnam War, when it started rising. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2021 the median age at first marriage in the United States was 30.5 for men and 28.1 for women, while in 1960 it was 22.8 for men and 20.3 for women. Today's young adults are getting married later than their parents, who

in turn also got married at a later age than their parents. If baby boomers got married on average later than their parents, Xers did so even later and most millennials are following the same path. In general terms, the institution of marriage is undergoing a dramatic transformation. The percentage of adults who remain unmarried has been rising since the 1970s. In addition to this, in 2018, the share of adults over 25 who had never married reached a record high of 35%, almost four times the rate of 1970 (Wang 2020). Although these data suggest that the institution of marriage has lost its relevance in the past four decades, marriage statistics still constitute a powerful tool to analyse the changing trends in the transition to adulthood. As Arnett explains, those who want to marry usually do not consider marriage as a plausible option until they have graduated, and the fact that many college graduates also pursue postgraduate studies delays this even further[4] (2004, 6). Analysing data from 1976 Modell observed that those who were sure about attending college were less likely to be engaged, which suggests that the correlation between higher education and the delay in marriage has existed since young adults began attending college in great numbers (1989, 37).

Although the relationship between pregnancy and marriage has changed and one does not necessarily follow the other, later marriages have brought along a marked increase in the average age at first birth (Modell 1989, 36). Whereas in 1972 the birth of the first child took place, on average, when the mother was 21 years old (one year after the average age at first marriage) and the father was 27, in 2018 the average age at first birth had risen to 26 for women and 31 for men (Bui and Miller 2018). It is interesting to note that the average age at which individuals become first-time parents is in fact lower than the median

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[4] Arnett's book was published in 2004. Data from the Council of Graduate Schools shows that first-time graduate enrolment has continued to rise and that it grew more than usual during the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhou and Gao 2021).

age at first marriage, which shows the increase in the number of children born outside marriage (U.S. Census Bureau 2021). Additionally, the age at which individuals become parents varies depending on their educational attainment: women without a college degree become first-time mothers on average at the age of 23.8, whereas college-educated women do so at 30.3 (Bui and Miller 2018).

Similar trends can be observed in other post-industrial countries across the world, many of which boast even higher median ages at first birth, which have even reached 30 in countries like Greece (2010), Italy (2011), Switzerland (2010), South Korea (2011) and Japan (2012). What all of these countries have in common is that their development is ranked as "very high" in the Human Development Index (HDI). However, if we move down the Human Development Index, we will see that the average age at first birth declines in countries with a ranking of "high" or lower. For example, in Mexico the average age at first birth was 21 in 2013, exactly the same as in the U.S. in 1972. The median age goes further down in countries with a medium HDI, such as India (19.9) and Nicaragua (19.7). Similar differences appear regarding the expected years of schooling; children from countries with a very high Human Development Index are expected to remain in education for 16.3 years, which suggests that most of them will pursue some kind of tertiary education. The length of expected schooling goes down to 13.4 years for countries with high HDI, 11.7 for medium HDI countries, and only 9 years for those with a low HDI (Human Development Report 2014). In other words, there seems to be a correlation between the level of development of society with the length its members stay in education, and the age at which they get married and have children, with members of post-industrial societies (those ranked as "very high" in the HDI) studying for longer,

postponing marriage and parenthood and thus taking a longer time to settle down into adult life.

The United Nations Development Programme also shows that countries with a very high Human Development Index tend to rank lower in the Gender Inequality Index. Modell (1989) and Arnett (2004) argue that the changes which took place in women's lives as a consequence of the feminist movement and the sexual revolution are defining factors in the redefinition of the transition to adulthood. Modell explains how, in the mid-1970s, women's lives followed more or less the same patterns as men's (36). It was becoming more common for them to go to college and to work in professions that had previously been an exclusively male area. Legalised abortion and the pill meant that women could take control of their reproductive rights, premarital sex became more widely accepted, and those women who chose to remain unmarried no longer had to carry the stigma of the "old maid." Focusing on college students, Richard Freeman illustrates the change in attitudes regarding the role of women that took place at the time. He analyses data from the American Council on Education that reveals that the attitudes regarding gender equality, the role of women as carers and homemakers and the importance given to a large family drastically changed from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, which reflects a shift in focus from family to self-advancement (1976, 165-169).

Engagement in higher education leads to yet another delay in the life course, this one concerning the age at which one starts a career (Mogelonski 1996). This delay may be even longer than expected if one happens to graduate in the middle of a recession, as many Xers and millennials have done. The first signs that college might not be the ticket to the middle class appeared in the mid-1970s, when Freeman published *The Over-Educated American*, a

volume in which he analyses the changes that the labour market underwent in the 1970s and the consequences the depressed college job market had for college-educated young adults. At this time, university graduates found themselves struggling to find a job that matched their educational attainment, and often had to resort to jobs which were unrelated to their area of expertise and offered lower salaries than those of the previous graduating classes (1976, 4), a situation which was also developing to a lesser degree in Japan and Western Europe (1976, 29). Freeman predicted that, in terms of income, college graduates would not return to the favourable situation of the 1960s (73-75). For Mogelonski (1996), the stagnant economic situation of the late 1980s and early 1990s meant that young people who were not engaged in higher education also found themselves going through an in-between phase between adolescence and adulthood, previously reserved for those who had the means to go to college. Writing in 1986, Susan Littwin argues that young adults coming of age in the mid-1980s suffer from downwards mobility: the inability to reach the social status and purchasing power of their parents. She explains that the generations born in the 1930s and 40s came of age in a favourable economic climate and, besides, their cohorts were not very big and only a smaller percentage of them pursued higher education. As a consequence, opportunities were plentiful and college graduates were able to make a smooth transition into adulthood. By contrast, those who were born in the 1960s and 1970s (the older members of Generation X), were graduating to find a completely different situation: the combination of a sluggish economy and very high rates of college attendance made it difficult for them to find full-time employment after graduation (37). What Littwin did not know, however, is that after the publication of her book the situation would get much worse.

In 1972, Freeman argued that higher education, originally an inherent element of the American Dream, had ceased to be a guarantee of success (1-5). Littwin writes about the "Job Gap," a term coined by Thomas J. Moore, a *Chicago Sun-Times* reporter, to designate the discrepancy between the rising number of college graduates and the dwindling number of jobs (1986, 28). Moore analysed data from a study of 1972 high school seniors and concluded that the number of college graduates almost doubled the number of college-level jobs available, which implied that over 40% of graduates would have to settle for jobs for which they were overqualified. The consequences of this overqualification meant that college graduates were fighting for jobs against high school graduates, which in turn raised the amount of qualifications needed to obtain a job. This explains why jobs that previously required a high school diploma now require a higher education degree—sometimes even postgraduate education—even if the jobs themselves have not undergone any substantial changes. Côté and Allahar call this "Education Inflation" (1994, 36) and argue that underemployment is ubiquitous and "unique to advanced industrial societies" (37). But the difficulty to find a suitable job was not the only problem that those who graduated from college in the 1970s or after had to face. Since the mid-1970s, the costs of entering adulthood have increased more than inflation, while salaries and benefits have declined (Strauss and Howe 1991, 320), which created what economist Robert Kuttner (1990) calls "a depression of the young" that did not allow young people to go through a traditional transition to adulthood. Writing about Generation X, generational theorists Strauss and Howe state that "no previous American generation has arrived in the workforce paying such high tax rates on their first dollar of earnings, bearing such large high-interest student loans, facing so many anti-youth 'two-tier' wage and benefit scales, or encountering such high housing costs relative to income" (1991, 409).

The problem did not stop with Generation X. Their younger siblings, the millennial generation, came of age during and after the Great Recession, graduating to grim employment prospects and large amounts of student debt. In 2015, student loan debt in the U.S. was higher than both credit card debt and car debt (Ruby 2015), and in 2016 the proportion of young adult households who had not finished paying off their student loans was twice as large as in 1998 (Bialik and Fry, 2019). This can be blamed on the rising cost of higher education: attending a four-year college in 2017 was almost five times more expensive than in 1985 (Sherman 2020). Instead of a ticket to the middle classes, a college education seems to have become a ticket to financial insecurity. As a result, the past years have seen a rise in skepticism towards the benefits of higher education. As Daniel B. Smith puts it in a 2011 article published in *New York Magazine*, "college, the perennial hope for the next generation, may not be worth the price of the sheepskin on which it prints its degrees." In the same article, Peter Thiel, known for co-founding PayPal, argues that he believes in the existence of a college bubble which is similar in nature to previous bubbles which eventually crashed, namely the dot-com bubble and the housing bubble. Thiel anticipated both of these and saved his capital from the burst, which makes his statement sound like a prophecy. Altucher, another capitalist famous for his opposition to college, also compared higher education with home ownership and argued that the burst of the college bubble will bring along similar consequences and turn into "a national apocalypse." In short, in the past decades higher education has become a large investment whose returns are far from guaranteed.

The anti-youth wages and benefits mentioned by Strauss and Howe have also continued on to the 21st century. In a 2012 article, journalist Joel Kotkin calls millennials "the Screwed Generation," a label that results from "their parents' fiscal profligacy and

economic mismanagement." One year later, Stephen Marche penned an article titled "The War Against Youth," in which he argues that for the past thirty years economic and social policy has been serving the purposes of older generations and purposely damaging younger ones. Marche quotes David Frum, who worked as a speechwriter for George W. Bush, as saying that what we are witnessing is "a going-out-of-business sale for the baby boom generation." Marche also points out that the funds destined to Social Security are predicted to run out in 2036, which coincides with the time when the oldest boomers will celebrate their 90th birthdays. What Marche suggests, is that current boomer leaders are aware of this fact but have decided to ignore it for their own benefit. According to Strauss and Howe, the baby boom generation has been at the centre of American society at every point in their lives regardless of their age: "Through their childhood, America was child-obsessed; in their youth, youth-obsessed; in their 'yuppie' phase; yuppie-obsessed" (1991, 301).

David Willets has observed similar trends in the UK, claiming that the concentration of wealth in the hands of Baby Boomers is partly to blame for the delay in the transition to adulthood, and that the breaking of the generational contract has led to many of our social and economic problems (2010, Kindle loc. 111-144). Although the problem of student debt is not as relevant in countries with state-funded higher education such as Spain or Germany, the generational divide, lower wages, high cost of living, and difficulties for the young to step on the property ladder are a common feature to most post-industrial countries. From Spain's "Ni-nis" ("neither-nors", young people who neither study nor work), to Japan's "Freeters"[5] (freelancers who work only when they need to and reject the

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[5] The word "Freeter" comes from a combination of the English word "free" and the German word "Arbeiter", which means "worker."

importance their parents gave to work), to Australia's KIPPERS (Kids in Parents Pockets Eroding Retirement Savings), what these young people have in common is that they have come of age at a time when the markers that once defined adulthood have changed and have become increasingly difficult to attain.

The final aspect that contributed to the rise of emerging adulthood as a life stage—and according to Arnett (2004, 6) the most important one—is the change of attitudes regarding adulthood. Like Arnett, Littwin (1986) explains how people coming of age in the 1950s adopted adult behaviours and tastes as soon as their teenage years were over because they looked forward to growing up, while later generations "live knee-deep in adolescent culture because they have no desire to be anything else" (52). Littwin attributes this rejection of adulthood to the cultural impact that youth obtained in the 1960s. As we have seen, baby boomers have been the cultural and social focal point of the U.S at every age since their birth. When most of them came of age in the 1960s, youth took the centre stage, which, according to cultural critic Thomas Frank, "gave rise to a general corporate style phrased in terms of whatever the youth culture of the day happens to be" (1997, 32). Advertising took to youth culture and employed its symbols to sell all kinds of products, making them "the almost hegemonically dominant motif in the advertising of the period" (110). Frank argues that the iconography of youth was not only applied to products aimed at youth itself, but also to those which had an older consumer in mind, which makes youth "an attractive consuming attitude, not an age" (118). From the 1960s on, those who are no longer young have been urged to "think young."

This emphasis on youth has devalued adulthood and resulted in the phenomenon that Keniston calls "pseudo-youth" (1970, 650), those whose age is not within the boundaries

of "youth" (roughly between 18 and 30) but adopt styles and attitudes characteristic of this age group. Keith Hayward (2013) calls this tendency for individuals to behave and be culturally treated as if they were older or younger than they actually are "life stage dissolution," a blurring of generational differences that can appear as "adultification" or "infantilization." Noxon (2006) uses the term "Rejuvenile" to describe those individuals whose tastes and attitudes are characteristic of a life stage that they have left behind. That is, those whom Hayward would label "infantilised." When considering the study of emerging adulthood, it is important not to confuse one with the other. A rejuvenile, pseudo-youth or infantilised person can be anybody who behaves in a way which is more typical of a younger cohort—in this case of twentysomethings. For instance, a middle-aged man who has a settled adult life but likes to keep up with the latest trends in alternative music is a rejuvenile, but not an emerging adult. The rejection of adult tastes, behaviours and values, has resulted in a mentality change that has affected individuals of all ages, not only those who are transitioning into adulthood, and markers of adulthood that were previously highly valued have come to be seen by many as "a closing of doors—the end of independence, the end of spontaneity, the end of a sense of wide-open possibilities" (2004, 6).

Nevertheless, despite this conscious will to delay signifiers of adulthood, one must not forget that, those twentysomethings who do want to enter adulthood proper sometimes are not allowed to. Although some theorists assert that twentysomethings are simply arrested adolescents who refuse to grow up (Littwin 1986), an analysis of the different factors that have led to the lengthening of the transition to adulthood shows that many of them are beyond the control of young people, who find themselves in a situation that denies them entry into adulthood—or at least into the kind of adulthood that their parents had and they expected to have—even if they want to. In times of prosperity, one might be

able to make a smooth transition into adulthood, thus making emerging adulthood an optional stage. On the other hand, those who come of age in times of recession may find themselves stuck in emerging adulthood for longer than they would like to or leading precariously unsettled lives indefinitely. For some, growing up might not be a possibility.

1.4 Growing up or meandering through life?: The profile of the emerging adult

Now that the context and factors which gave way to the lengthening of the transition to adulthood have been established, in this section I will discuss the characteristics of that transition. My aim here is not to create a comprehensive analysis of emerging adulthood, but rather, to provide an overview of its main characteristics, which will prove useful in the film analyses that will be carried out in the following chapters. The protagonists of these films are emerging adults. Therefore, an understanding of some of the characteristics of this phenomenon will make the genre easier to describe and explore.

1.4.1 Neither here nor there: The in-betweenness of emerging adulthood

Arnett describes emerging adulthood as "the age of feeling in-between" (2004, 14). In a study in which he asked people of different ages whether they felt that they had reached adulthood, the possible answers being "yes," "no" and "yes and no," 60% of the participants aged 18-25 and 30% of those aged 26-35 answered "yes and no," which implies that a large proportion of twentysomethings and thirtysomethings feel like they are

in "an age in-between, neither adolescent nor adult, on the way to adulthood but not there yet" (2004, 14). Arnett attributes this feeling of in-betweenness to the fact that the top criteria for adulthood (accepting responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, becoming financially independent) cannot happen overnight or be marked by a ceremony. Instead, they take place gradually and slowly. As a consequence, "although emerging adults begin to feel adult by the time they reach age 18 or 19, they do not feel completely adult until years later" (15), and while these qualities are being developed, they feel between adolescence and adulthood proper.

Erikson's psychosocial moratorium is, by definition, the "prolongation of the interval between youth and adulthood" ([1959] 1994, 111-119). He argues that adolescence is not over until childhood identifications have been left behind and replaced by new ones informed by decisions that will gradually lead to life-long commitment. As has already been mentioned, the permanent quality of these commitments has changed since Erikson postulated his theory in the 1950s. However, the idea that the path to adulthood is gradual and varies from person to person remains relevant. Côté and Allahar (1994) go further, arguing that the decline of traditional markers of adulthood and the lack of clear replacements for them have created a "generation on hold" in which "many people are left in a limbo, as not quite adults and less than full citizens" (31). Similarly, Mortimer and Larson (2002, 11) call emerging adulthood a "period of liminality" during which individuals may find that they are considered adults and adolescents at the same time. These descriptions differ from Arnett's in their perspective. Whereas Arnett focuses on internal aspects of emerging adulthood—how emerging adults feel about their own level of maturity—, Côté and Mortimer and Larson place the emphasis on external factors, on how others—including social institutions—see emerging adults. Apter (2001) also

acknowledges the negative aspects of this in-betweenness, stating that emerging adults—whom she calls thresholders—can be seen "as a hybrid, neither teenager nor grown-up, yet both" (258). She also points out the fact that there is a disparity between the time at which young people become familiar with "the problems and secrets of the adult world" (258), the time at which they reach physical maturation, the development of their own culture and tastes and the moment when they are able become independent adults, which according to her comes a lot later.

Regardless of the point of view we adopt when considering the inbetweenness of emerging adulthood, it is clear that a large portion of individuals who have already left adolescence find themselves in a liminal period during which they may consider themselves adults in some respects but not in others. At the same time, this sense of being neither here nor there is shared by other adults—who fail to consider emerging adults to be at the same level of adulthood as they are—and institutions—which may grant them adult status for some things but not for others.

1.4.2 Trial and error: explorations in work and love

In 2007 *New York Times* journalist David Brooks used the term "The Odyssey Years" to refer to the years between adolescence and adulthood. This term emphasises the constant movement and change that characterise the period. Twentysomethings are known for frequently changing jobs, houses, cities and partners. These changes reflect two of the defining features of emerging adulthood as named by Arnett (2004): identity exploration, and instability. Writing in 1959, Erikson coined the term "psychosocial moratorium" to refer to "more or less sanctioned intermediary periods between childhood and adulthood

(…) during which a lasting pattern of 'inner identity' is scheduled for relative completion" ([1959] 1994, 119) and commitment is postponed ([1982] 1998, 75). The purpose of this period is for the young adult to find his or her place in society, which will be done through "free role experimentation." Although Erikson initially associated the psychosocial moratorium with adolescence, he later extended it to cover the years spent in higher education ([1982] 1998, 75), which would make the psychosocial moratorium take place during emerging adulthood. Similar to this "free role experimentation" is Keniston's "wary probe" (1971, 8), which he mentions as one of the major themes in youth. Acknowledging that experimentation also takes place during adolescence, he argues that what differentiates adolescent experimentation from youthful experimentation is the fact that the former is often linked to the concept of self-definition, whereas the latter tends to have more lasting consequences. In the latter, through self-probing and self-scrutiny, individuals identify their strengths and weaknesses and test whether they are prepared to live up to the challenges of adulthood. Arnett points out that emerging adulthood is the most suitable time for self-exploration. The fact that emerging adults are more independent than adolescents, but lack the commitment of adults, makes emerging adulthood an appropriate life period to try out different roles in order to find out what one really wants. According to Arnett, the areas in which this identity exploration is felt more deeply are love and work (2004, 8-9). That is, in areas which are related to two of the main markers of traditional adulthood: marriage and full-time employment.

When he described his psychosocial moratorium over half a century ago, Erikson considered that not knowing what one would like to do for a living constituted one of the main disturbances for young people ([1959] 1994, 97). If we consider the social and economic changes that have taken place since the 1960s, it will not come as a surprise that

employment continues to be a troublesome matter for emerging adults today. Exploration during emerging adulthood allows young people to try out different kinds of jobs, which helps them to identify their strengths and weaknesses, as well as to figure out what type of job they would like to hold in the future and what type of work is not for them. One of the problems is that many emerging adults have high expectations regarding work (Apter 2001, Arnett 2004). Many emerging adults hope to find a job that will do much more than just pay the rent. They reject the idea of nine-to-five jobs in hopes of finding employment that will be fulfilling and meaningful, that will express who they are and make them a better person (Littwin 1986, Arnett 2004). Emerging adults often try to find an identity-based job while they work menial jobs for which they are overqualified, a situation which can be found even in times of economic bonanza. Apter (2001, 178) gave the name of "boom time drifters" to those emerging adults who choose to hold McJobs[6] instead of trying to start a career, a phase which, as she explains, may become long term for some of them. She adds that, when faced with their first grown up job, many emerging adults feel like they are not mature enough for it and panic.

The same fear of commitment applies to the romantic realm. As we previously saw, changing attitudes regarding marriage, premarital sex and cohabitation have made it the norm for young adults to have several romantic partners before settling down. According to Arnett, love is one of the most important areas in which emerging adults pursue self-exploration. Although some of these experiences have no purpose other than having fun, one of the goals of identity exploration is to find out what one really wants. In the case of love, to figure out what they want from a relationship and what kind of person they would

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[6] "McJob" is a term used to designate a menial job with no prospects. Although the *Oxford English Dictionary* first records its use in a 1986 *Washington Post* article, the term was popularised by Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation X*.

like to share their life with (2004, 9). The fact that marriage seems to be losing power as an institution and it is no longer a compulsory step on the way to adulthood has given rise to new forms of intimacy and living arrangements (Bynner et al. 1997, 3). In other words, emerging adults are presented with options that their parents did not have and must make up the rules as they go along, which has been considered to lead to confusion (Littwin 1986, 216; Arnett 2004, 85). Whether young adults refuse to settle down due to a fear of commitment—which has been claimed of both Generation X and millennials (Littwin 1986, Dorsey 2013)—or simply because the changing patterns of the transition to adulthood have delayed this process, most emerging adults engage in serial monogamy, a sequence of monogamous relationships that usually involve sex (Arnett 2004, 75).

Despite the fact that teenagers are also involved in love relationships, what adolescents and emerging adults look for in a partner differs. Various studies have shown that, throughout adolescence, the aspects most valued in a relationship are recreation, intimacy and status. College students, on the other hand, ranked intimacy at the top of their list, followed by companionship, recreation and status (Montgomery 2005). Arnett also points out the importance of intimacy in emerging adulthood, stating that emerging adults "come to appreciate the rewards of staying with one person for a longer period of time and developing a deeper emotional closeness," as well as "to desire more security and commitment in their relationships" (2004, 98). As Montgomery's (2005) research shows, status is less important for emerging adults than for teenagers, which can be taken as an indicator that the influence of their peers diminishes with age. Teenagers organise their world in terms of cliques and crowds, which results in friends greatly influencing their personal lives. a romantic partner must be approved by the crowd unless one wants to be the source of jokes and gossip (Brown 2004). As a consequence, teenagers tend to choose

romantic partners who belong to the same clique or crowd as them (Arnett and Hughes, 2012). Although this peer influence appears to diminish after high school, Arnett cites several studies that show that emerging adults—like adolescents and older adults—usually get involved with people with whom they share features such as "personality, intelligence, social class, ethnic background, religious beliefs, and physical attractiveness" (Arnett 2004, 79; Arnett and Hughes 2012, 329). However, in these studies, emerging adults themselves refused to admit that similarity was an important factor in relationships, believing in the concept of a "soul mate" that transcends all boundaries. Nevertheless, despite this romantic ideal, they are likely to choose somebody who is similar to them, which "reaffirms, or validates, their own way of looking at the world" (Arnett 2004, 234).

We have seen how, despite the possibilities offered by identity exploration, the instability that it generates can also become a source of anxiety regarding work, one of the main areas of self-exploration, (Arnett, 2004). The experience is similar in the terrain of love. Serial monogamy inevitably leads to serial break-ups, with the consequent distress. Tanner and Arnett (2012) relate the pain teenagers feel after a break-up with adolescent egocentrism. Egocentrism peaks during adolescence and diminishes with age, although never completely. One of the two main aspects of adolescent egocentrism according to Elkind (1985), is the personal fable, which is connected to the idea of an imaginary audience that is constantly watching—and judging—you. This belief in other people's concern about them leads adolescents to think that their personal experiences are unique. Thus, during a break-up, teenagers have a tendency to feel like nobody has ever suffered as much as they have and like their suffering will never end (Bell 1998 in Arnett and Hughes 2012). As egocentrism gradually diminishes, the pain of breaking-up may become more bearable, but late emerging adulthood comes with a new source of anxiety: not finding the

right partner to settle down with. According to Arnett, many emerging adults set themselves the boundary of their thirtieth birthday as a date by which they would like to settle down. Failing to meet this deadline may also lead to anguish, a feeling that may increase if emerging adults feel external pressure from their parents, from friends who have already married or from their own biological clock (Arnett 2004, 102-105).

1.4.3 Instability, the quarter-life crisis and commitment

An exploration is, by definition, an examination of an unfamiliar area. When venturing into unknown territory, one does not expect a straightforward path to the end, but rather a certain degree of meandering, wrong turns and retraced steps, which leads to instability. Therefore, if identity exploration is one of the main characteristics of emerging adulthood, instability will also feature prominently. In fact, Arnett calls emerging adulthood "the age of instability" (2004, 10). Erikson also acknowledged the instability of this age, noting that the psychosocial moratorium was a stage during which an individual "is apt to suffer more deeply than he ever did before (or ever will again) from a diffusion of roles" ([1959] 1994, 126)[7]. Leaving the security of—age-graded, institutionally regulated—childhood and adolescence behind, the individual may feel like they do not really know who they are or who they want to be. He went as far as to assert that "in no other stage of the life cycle (…) are the promise of finding oneself and the threat of losing oneself so closely allied" ([1982] 1998, 10). Keniston links youth with "feelings of isolation, unreality, absurdity and disconnectedness from the interpersonal, social and

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[7] As we saw earlier, Erikson's psychosocial moratorium was conceived as a part of adolescence and later expanded to include individuals of college age (Erikson [1982] 1998, 75)

phenomenological world" (1971, 9). Like Erikson, he points out that the intensity of these negative feelings may be higher than during other life stages.

Most emerging adults have usually led lives that were predictable to a certain degree. A ten-year-old can be pretty certain that, in four years' time, they will be a high school student. A twenty-year-old, on the other hand, usually has absolutely no idea where they will be at twenty-four. As Arnett explains, emerging adults usually have to rethink their initial plan and modify it as they go along, which makes this period an unusually unstable (2004, 10). Although some emerging adults do not experience problems with instability, and even thrive in it, others find it overwhelming (2007, 24-25) and it may make them feel nostalgic about their own adolescence, despite the fact that they are not too old to have forgotten about adolescent anguish and anxiety (2004, 11). Although Arnett has worked to debunk the prevalent myth that emerging adults are an entitled bunch (2007), this view is prevalent among writers like Apter (2001) and Littwin (1986). The latter argues that some emerging adults do not only feel nostalgia for their high school years, but they also "get angry at the world for not being like school" and "build their lives around holding on to that sense of specialness they had when they were still in school" (59). Although Littwin supports her claim on observation rather than research, her work also portrays school as a safer time that contrasts with the uncertainty of emerging adulthood.

For some emerging adults, the instability characteristic of their age becomes too hard to negotiate, giving way to a quarter-life crisis. Robinson and Smith found that, apart from the crisis described by Erikson, which takes place during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, another major developmental crisis typically takes place during young adulthood, usually between the ages of 25 and 35, that is, during the later stage of

emerging adulthood (Robinson and Smith, 2010). According to Robinson, these crises stem from a change of priorities that takes place from the ages of 18 to 24. Emerging adults value independence and having freedom to explore. However, as they move on into adulthood, they will reassess the value placed on independence, gradually granting greater value to commitment despite the stasis that it entails (2016, 26). This change from independence to commitment as a preferred option can give way to "instability and uncertainty," depending on which one of the two options predominate, which in turn leads to the quarter-life crisis, which can be described as "a struggle between independence and commitment" (2016, 27).

Robinson has identified two different types of quarter-life crises, which he terms "locked-out crisis" and "locked-in crisis" (2016, 24). Locked-out quarter-life crises typically occur between the ages of 23-25, usually after completing higher education. At this point, emerging adults feel trapped in an in-between stage that will not allow them to adopt adult roles, feeling like they are facing "an insurmountable barrier between them and adult life" (2016, 25). The failure to commit to a career or a relationship results in a "loss of self-esteem, feelings of unwanted dependence on others and feelings of isolation" (2016, 26). In order to abandon this phase, emerging adults must make substantial commitments (2016, 28). Conversely, the locked-in variety of the quarter-life crisis usually takes place between the ages of 25 and 35. In this case, emerging adults have already made a major adult commitment that they expect to be long-term. However, after some time, they reevaluate their choice and come to the conclusion that they made the wrong kind of commitment, which leads to feelings of entrapment and frustration. In order for a locked-in crisis to be resolved, the individual must break out of the commitment that has made them feel stuck. Separation is followed by an exploratory time out phase during which they

regress to emerging adult behaviours. This allows the individual to reevaluate their priorities and eventually rebuild their adult commitments (Robinson 2016, 24-26).

In his theory of the lifespan, Erikson (1968) proposed a pair of opposites that characterises each life stage. One of the elements in these pairs is syntonic and the other one is dystonic. The syntonic element is the one that should predominate in order for individuals to resolve the potential crisis of one stage and develop positively into the next one. However, that does not mean that the dystonic pole should be nonexistent. It should also be present, but to a lesser extent, letting the syntonic pole dominate. For early adulthood Erikson proposes the dialectic "intimacy vs isolation", with intimacy being the dominant or syntonic pole and isolation being the dystonic one (1968, 135-136). As we have just seen, Robinson has updated Erikson's lifespan theory for the twenty-first century to explain the existence of different types of quarter-life crises. As part of his study, Robinson renames the opposing pairs that Erikson attributed to young adulthood—intimacy and isolation—to "commitment vs independence". From Robinson's point of view, this change of name frees the dialectic from the pejorative connotations of the word "isolation," thus making it easy to see that the dystonic pole—now independence—is in fact one that young adults particularly value and that may be harder to discard (2016, 28). The struggle between commitment and independence, then, is central to emerging adult development.

The fact that emerging adults tend to wait until their late twenties or early thirties to settle down, provides them with an entire decade during which the only person they have to look after is usually themselves. Arnett (2004) calls emerging adulthood "the self-focused age" (12). He argues that, although teenagers have more freedom than children,

they operate in institutions run by adults—family and school—by whose rules they must abide, thus limiting their degree of freedom. However, during emerging adulthood family ties are weakened and individuals have a greater chance of choosing to what extent to get involved in the institutions around them. Their daily life is thus mainly centred around what *they* want. Arnett explains that even emerging adults who live with their parents are granted more freedom than they had as adolescents, which makes emerging adulthood a period that focuses on independence not only in countries where young people leave home straight after high school, but also in those where it is common for young people to stay at the parental home well into their twenties or even until marriage, as may be the case in Southern Europe (2004, 53-54). According to Arnett, the goal of this self-focused period is to reach self-sufficiency (2014, 14). A study in which emerging adults were asked to choose the criteria that they considered most important in the transition to adulthood revealed that the top three are related to self-sufficiency; "accepting responsibility for the consequences of your actions," "decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences" and "become financially independent from parents" (Arnett 1997, 10-11). On the other hand, more traditional markers of the transition to adulthood like marriage, full time employment and parenthood were considered less relevant by the majority of the participants.

Contemporary society's focus on individuality and emerging adults' efforts to become self-reliant give way to what Apter (2001) calls "the myth of maturity." That is, the idea/notion that "being mature means being independent in the sense of being separate or autonomous (…) The myth that young people can only prove themselves by showing that they do not need or want their parents" (29). Although Apter writes about parental relationships, her concept could be extended to other areas. For instance, romantic

relationships, work and community are domains in which young people sometimes claim not to need or want anybody else, which in turn may lead to isolation rather than independence. Instead, a successful transition to adulthood requires what Tanner (2006) calls "recentering." During this process, which Tanner divides into three stages, individuals go from a state of "supported dependence" to one of "adult interdependence" (22). During the third stage of the process, which marks the end of emerging adulthood, identity exploration gradually diminishes, while identity consolidation begins. The focus on oneself that is required by identity exploration is then replaced by "enduring commitments to relationships and careers" (24), which at the same time requires the self to reorganise around these new commitments and responsibilities. Moving through emerging adulthood and on to adulthood requires finding a fine balance between making long-lasting commitments and maintaining one's independence. A challenge that can sometimes lead to distress if individuals feel like making commitments is robbing them of their freedom.

1.4.4 The world is your oyster: Emerging adulthood as a time of possibilities and adulthood as surrender

The following quote from Douglas Coupland's novel *Player One: What Is to Become of Us* encapsulates the way in which, as one progresses through emerging adulthood, the range of possibilities and different selves that an individual may choose for themselves shrinks until it gets to the point in which a person can be pretty certain that what they do at that point is what they will be doing forever.

> "By the age of twenty, you know you're not going to be a rock star. By twenty-five, you know you're not going to be a dentist or any kind of professional. And by thirty, darkness starts

moving in—you wonder if you're ever going to be fulfilled, let alone wealthy and successful. By thirty-five, you know, basically, what you're going to be doing for the rest of your life, and you become resigned to your fate…" (Coupland 2010, 98).

Arnett (2004, 16-17) calls emerging adulthood "the age of possibilities" and describes it as "an age of high hopes and great expectations" during which most individuals have more options to choose from than they ever had before or will ever have in the future. This sense of being able to do anything and reinvent oneself stems from the fact that most emerging adults have left home but have not made any other major commitments, freeing themselves from limits and restrictions. Even those who still live at home are typically granted more freedom and independence than they had as adolescents, which also widens their options (54). This move away from the shadow of one's family— and parental expectations—gives emerging adults the chance to figure out their identity on their own terms and to make independent choices. However, this apparently never-ending array of possibilities comes with certain drawbacks. Erikson points out that individuals going through "extreme instances of delayed and prolonged adolescence" may come to fear change ([1959] 1994, 136). On the other hand, Keniston (1970, 10) explains that emerging adults also have a tendency to panic when they feel like they are stuck or going nowhere, panic which stems from emerging adults' identification of adulthood with stasis and the importance they give to "change, transformation and movement" (19).

Arnett and Hughes (2012, 198) report that an Australian study found that early emerging adults tend to dream big. Younger emerging adults—those between the ages of 17 and 22—dreamt of becoming famous and having glamorous jobs, whereas older emerging adults and those who had just moved out of emerging adulthood (ages 28-33) had much more realistic visions of themselves, although these still tended to be optimistic.

Writing in 1986, Littwin found that the hardest lesson young people have to learn is that "choice is limited. You cannot do everything and be everything in one life" (247). Great expectations may bring along even greater disappointments when they remain unfulfilled, and the fear of entrapment and stasis drives emerging adults to keep their options open for as long as possible. Keniston (1970, 9) argued that the feeling of having unlimited possibilities gives emerging adults a feeling of omnipotence that usually alternates with estrangement. The individual may feel isolated and disconnected from the rest of the world to a greater degree than during other life periods. He blames these conflicting feelings of power and estrangement on a "disengagement of youth from society" and "the psychological sense of incongruence between self and world" (9). This is similar to the phenomenon that Apter calls "potentialitis" and defines as the paralysing fear that young people experience when they feel like they have to "keep their options open at all costs lest they lose the glow of endless possibilities ahead of them" (2001, 94). She blames this on a "cultural obsession with (…) total fulfilment" (96). In fact, the difference between the actual self (who we are) and the ideal self (who we would like to be) is linked to depression in adolescents and emerging adults (Arnett and Hughes 2012, 198). Although the actual self and the ideal self are at their most dissimilar during mid-adolescence, the discrepancy remains to a lesser extent during emerging adulthood.

As we have seen, emerging adulthood constitutes a time of possibility that contrasts with a view of Adulthood as a closing of doors and a loss of opportunities. One of the factors that contributed to the rise of emerging adulthood was the changing views on adulthood. Arnett (2004) explains that young people today see markers of adulthood "not as achievements to be pursued but as perils to be avoided" (6). He attributes this attitude to the fact that making an enduring commitment represents a closing of doors and thus the

end of the age of possibility. Keniston (1970) argued that young people consciously identify adulthood with stasis, with the end of change and movement. On a subconscious level, adulthood is identified with death. As a consequence, he argues, young people's rejection of adulthood does not stem from actual disadvantages of adulthood, but from the feeling that growing up constitutes a kind of death. This identification of adulthood with death is made explicit in John Hughes' seminal teenage film *The Breakfast Club* (1985), in which one of the characters stuck in detention affirms that "when you grow up your heart dies." Similarly, punk rock band The Descendents sing the following lines about becoming adults in their 1996 song "When I Get Old:" "will I still want to be someone and not just sit around? I don't want to be like other adults 'cause they've already died. Cool and condescending, fossilised." This conception of adulthood as something to be avoided can be related to the idealisation of youth that was explained earlier on in this chapter. Furthermore, as we will see on Chapter Five, it can also be read as a survival strategy in a world characterised by uncertainty where change is constant.

1.5 Conclusion

Emerging adulthood is a product of a specific time—the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st—and type of society society—a post-industrial one—just like a highly predictable, relatively smooth and quick transition to adulthood was a product of post-war economic expansion. It is true that, in a sense, a longer transition to adulthood may be interpreted as a return to normal rather than an odd development. After all, in the 18th and 19th centuries the relationship between those in their early twenties and their parents was one of semi-dependence, just like today. When the United States was a pre-

industrial society, young white men[8] did not often become independent, marry and buy or inherit land until they were in their mid-20s. In 1890, men married on average at the age of 26 and women did so slightly earlier, at 22 (Ciabattari 2016, 58-61). A hundred years later, in 1990, the median age at first marriage was exactly the same for men and only one year older for women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Keeping this data in mind forces us to confront the fact that what is unusual is not the length of contemporary transitions to adulthood but, rather, the remarkably short transitions that were common for most of the twentieth century.

But it would be reductive to consider today's transitions to adulthood as nothing more than a return to a previous pattern. The shift from a smooth to a prolonged transition, from a motorway to a bumpy, sinuous dirt path, answers to the specific socio-historical changes that were mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, like the incorporation of women to the workplace, the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial society, rising rates of higher education enrolment and the difficulty to become financially independent in times of uncertainty. In addition, young adults' plans and expectations are shaped by the society in which they have grown up. Xers and millennials grew up being told that a college degree would guarantee adult success, well aware of the fact that not all marriages last forever and expecting to work doing something that they love and through which they can feel fulfilled (McGee 2005, Tokumitsu 2015). High expectations were accentuated by the so-called "self-esteem craze" that took place when millennials were children and whose influence was deeply felt in educational settings[9] (Singal, 2017).

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[8] Needless to say, the situation was completely different for racial minorities and for young women.

[9] Millennials have been endlessly criticised for having an inflated sense of self-importance. This perceived entitlement is often blamed on classroom interventions to foster self-esteem, like participation trophies, that are supposed to have given rise to a generation who believes success should come without hard work (Singal 2017).

Emerging adulthood is described as a time of high expectations, when possibilities appear to be almost limitless and individuals have the freedom, independence and time to take on a variety of roles—particularly in the domains of love and work—in order to figure out what they want their adult lives to be like[10]. This contrasts both with adolescence, when restrictions are higher and paths are largely predictably, and with adulthood, when taking on long-term commitments narrows one's options and individuals must keep other people's wishes into account. It is a time when instability is expected and may give way to the so-called quarter-life crisis, which may be brought on by a feeling that adult life is out of one's reach and one is stuck in limbo or, conversely, by the disappointment felt upon the realisation that the commitments that have been made are the wrong ones and the feeling that there is no way out of them (Arnett 2004, Robinson 2016).

As we will see throughout this thesis, the challenges of emerging adulthood provide the themes, character types, plot lines and narrative structures of the emerging adult film, which often focuses on the struggle between independence and commitment that is at the heart of the quarter-life crisis. As we will see in the next chapter, emerging adult characters often take on a series of menial jobs while they pursue their "true calling" and reject long-term romantic commitment because they want to "focus on themselves;" they wander around the cities where they usually live in an unflagging quest to find themselves and they reject traditional markers of adulthood in favour of an alternative version that will allow them to grow up while maintaining their essence intact.

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[10] Arnett's approach has been criticised for providing an overtly positive view of this period that fails to consider the precarity and uncertainty that plague young people nowadays and the often involuntary nature of prolonged transitions to adulthood (Blatterer 2007, Silva 2013, Côté 2014). For more information on these aspects of emerging adulthood see Chapter Five.

CHAPTER TWO

The Emerging Adult Film: Definition, Conventions and Precursors

Individuals who have come of age in post-industrial countries during the past three decades are likely to have experienced a longer youth than their parents or their grandparents did. Their transitions to adulthood may have been more tortuous and precarious, with many choosing to delay assuming long-term responsibilities and others finding themselves in a position that did not allow them to move forward. Whether their "late blooming" stemmed from a privileged position that allowed them to continue receiving familial support or from a socio-economic climate that has made it increasingly difficult to achieve stability, they probably took longer than the previous generations to settle down. But youth has not only become a longer period at one end of the spectrum, it has also been elongated at the younger end. Starting in the last decades of the twentieth century, advertisers began pursuing the pre-adolescent market as a collective separate from both teenagers and children. The term "tween," like its older sibling "teen," finds its origin

in the world of advertising, where pre-adolescent girls—and, increasingly, pre-adolescent boys—are considered a demographic with purchasing power that would consume products aimed directly at them as well as influence their parents' consumption habits (Coulter 2005; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2005). As a consequence, those born after the mid-1970s have spent twenty years positioned in a liminal stage between childhood and adulthood, which by the time they reached thirty constituted two thirds of their lives. As Mitchell and Reid-Walsh say, "potentially a youth culture encompasses much of childhood, all of adolescence, and all of young adulthood" (2005, 15). Furthermore, youth can be said to have transcended age barriers to become an aspirational stage. Since the 1960s, youth has been utilised in advertising to reach adult consumers, encouraging them to "think young" and look young. Thus youth has become a coveted status symbol that can be reached only by those who can afford the products that it is associated with, whether these products are cosmetics to develop a more youthful appearance or objects that are associated with youthful hipness (Frank 1997, Campbell 2004).

The analysis of youth culture is complicated not only by youth's expanding boundaries, but also by a socio-cultural context in which youth has become ever-present. When it comes to cinema, analysing all films that possess a youthful attitude or are related to youth would be an arduous task, as it could be argued that cinema itself is intrinsically intertwined with adolescence. Driscoll quotes two early film producers who, writing in the 1920s, directly relate the development of cinema with youth itself. Terry Ramsaye states that "the motion picture has grown by appeal to the interests of childhood and youth," while film producer B.P. Schulberg calls film the "adolescent industry" and writes about qualities like "promise and vitality, vulnerability and development" that he sees as common to cinema and adolescence (quoted in Driscoll 2011, 5). Similarly, analysing films

made with a young audience in mind would pose several challenges. For instance, some films might not have youth as a primary target audience but may include elements that will appeal to young spectators in the form of sub-plots, special effects or the appearance of younger film stars, whereas other films are made with a young spectator in mind but receive ratings that are at odds with their intended audience, which complicates this approach. Some of the most popular teen films like *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985), *Heathers* (Michael Lehmann, 1988), *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) and *American Pie* (Chris and Paul Weitz, 1999) are rated R, which means that under-17s can only watch them with an accompanying parent or guardian, thus positioning youth culture as a sphere that does not grant teenagers independence from adults. This trend has continued in recent years, with *Eighth Grade* (Bo Burnham, 2018), a film about an ordinary 14-year-old girl, also receiving an R rating.

Some theorists (Shary 2002, Lee 2010) use the term "youth film" to refer to films featuring coming-of-age narratives and young characters, although their analyses are mostly restricted to films with teenage protagonists. If we were to analyse all films with characters who can be defined as young, the broadness of youth itself would leave us with characters who range from eleven to thirty years of age and who are going through extremely different maturation experiences. Those at the older end of youth are old enough to be the parents of those at the younger end. Consequently, their coming-of-age stories do not deal with the same themes; they do not inhabit the same spaces; they have very different degrees of independence from adults and other authority figures and they have different relationships with youth culture and technology, as well as different attitudes towards adulthood. The term "youth film" serves as an umbrella genre to describe all films that deal with the young, but in its breadth it erases the differences between different

categories of films that constitute genres in themselves, amongst which we can find tween films, teen films, college films, emerging adult films and, arguably, films that focus on delinquent youth and illicit activities like drug-taking. The borders between these different youth film genres are porous, with different genres sharing certain elements. For instance, both tween films and teen films may feature teenagers as protagonists, be set in high school, have a romantic storyline and feature a makeover plot. However, tween films will avoid topics that a younger audience may not feel comfortable with, such as sex, drug use and other specifically adult issues (Tally 2005, 316). Similarly, both college films and emerging adult films have protagonists who are between adolescence and adulthood, but the institutional setting of college films may be considered to position them closer to teen films in terms of narrative.

The age of a film's protagonists is therefore not enough to place a youth film in a specific youth film genre; teenagers may appear in tween, teen and college films (college freshmen are, after all, still 18), while twentysomethings can be found in both college films and emerging adult films. What differentiates these genres from one another is not age, but rather, a different set of thematic concerns that are usually linked to different stages of the coming-of-age process. They can also be placed according to the degree of independence of their protagonists. Tween protagonists[1] are too young to drive and to have a part-time job, which makes them completely dependent on their parents, while teenage characters may have their own disposable income and a car, or at least a friend with a car, which grants them a certain degree of independence. While college film protagonists have left the

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[1] Not all tween films have tween protagonists. For example *The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants* (Ken Kwapis, 2005) and *The Princess Diaries* (Garry Marshall, 2001) have protagonists of high school age but appeal mostly to tween girls, while *Monte Carlo* (Thomas Bezucha, 2011) features a protagonist who just graduated from high school and two of college age but falls within tween films conventions as described by Tally (2005).

parental home, which makes them partially independent, they are still placed within an institution controlled by adults and must therefore adhere to its rules. On top of that, college students tend not to be financially independent, relying on parental support or student loans instead. Whereas money is usually not a topic that comes up in college films unless the protagonists come from a working-class background and the film highlights class issues, monetary concerns play a central role in emerging adult films, which tend to deal with the protagonist's struggle towards achieving complete independence.

This chapter seeks to define and describe the emerging adult film, the in-depth exploration of which constitutes the goal of this thesis. First, I will establish what exactly constitutes an emerging adult film in this study. This will be followed by a brief overview of the generic conventions of the genre. Finally, I will provide brief analyses of some of the precursors to the genre: those films in which the characteristics of emerging adulthood can be seen before emerging adulthood—and, along with it, the emerging adult film—became fully established in the 1990s.

2.1 Towards a definition of the emerging adult film

As we have previously seen, the term emerging adulthood refers to a life stage between adolescence and young adulthood during which individuals are no longer teenagers but have not fully taken on adult commitments. That is, emerging adults are in the process of becoming adults. Emerging adulthood is generally thought to encompass the period from the ages of 18 to 29, beginning when adolescents graduate from high school and enter the work force or higher education, and ending when emerging adults adopt long-lasting commitments and become self-sufficient (Arnett 2000, 2004). The problems that

arise when attempting to define the emerging adult film are similar to those that problematise the definition of the life stage it depicts. To begin with, emerging adulthood is not universal, which implies that not everybody goes through emerging adulthood and thus not every film about a person in their twenties can be considered an emerging adult film. Besides, the beginning and end points of emerging adulthood can sometimes be blurry. The end of emerging adulthood is not marked by a socially sanctioned coming-of-age ritual. Instead, crossing the border from emerging adulthood into young adulthood is a gradual and individualised subjective process that takes place during a number of years (Arnett 2000, 477). As a consequence of this lack of obvious signposts, it may be difficult to identify whether older characters who have crossed a substantial amount of borders into adulthood are actually emerging adults or immature young adults.

The emerging adult film genre cannot be defined solely by the age of the films' protagonists. Although all emerging adult films feature characters who are young, focusing exclusively on a certain age span would make us include in the category films with twentysomething protagonists who are no longer emerging adults or who have not even gone through emerging adulthood. At the same time, focusing on the 18-29 demographic would leave out films whose protagonists are in their thirties but have not managed to cross over to young adulthood, such as *High Fidelity* (Stephen Frears, 2000) or *Young Adult* (Jason Reitman, 2011), whose protagonists are in their mid-thirties. What defines an emerging adult film is, rather than the age of its characters, the state of their transition to adulthood. The appearance of rites of passage associated with the transition to adulthood, such as marriage or parenthood, cannot be considered a definite marker of an emerging adult film either. Although some emerging adult films include narratives driven by the wedding or pregnancy of one of the characters, like *Bachelorette* (Leslye Headland, 2012)

or *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, 2007), other films that focus on weddings or parenthood feature characters who had already crossed the border to young adulthood before getting engaged or becoming a parent and whose process of becoming an adult plays no part in the narrative. Additionally, not every film that includes a character who is going through emerging adulthood is an emerging adult film. Culture mirrors the society in which it is created, and as more people go through emerging adulthood, more films and TV series have begun to include emerging adult characters as secondary characters. For instance, *Parks and Recreation* (NBC, 2009-2015) cannot be considered an emerging adult TV series because its protagonist is not an emerging adult and the process of becoming an adult is not central the narrative. However, the show has two emerging adult secondary characters, Andy (Chris Pratt) and April (Aubrey Plaza), whose transition to adulthood is key to their evolution (April begins the series as an intern and becomes a mother in the final episode).

The appearance of an emerging adult character or storyline is not enough to make the text an emerging adult one. I consider emerging adult films to be those in which the process of becoming an adult is placed at the centre of the narrative. There are also films with emerging adults as protagonists whose narrative fails to make a reflection on the coming-of-age process. Sometimes the narrative focuses on an aspect of subcultural life or on the process of "making it" in the music scene and relegates the transition to adulthood to the background or ignores it altogether. For example, *Staying Alive* (Sylvester Stallone, 1983)—sequel to *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977)—features a protagonist who, despite being in his mid-twenties, has not reached adulthood, but the film is concerned with his attempt to make it as a dancer, rather than his road to adulthood and thus cannot be considered an emerging adult film. I have also decided to leave out of this study those

films that focus on subcultural life but do not reflect on their characters' status as emerging adults, as well as those films based on the lives of famous musicians like *Sid & Nancy* (Alex Cox, 1986) and *Backbeat* (Iain Softley, 1994).

Another type of film that usually portrays emerging adulthood but falls outside the scope of this study is the college film. Most university students are emerging adults; they are 18 or older, they have not started their careers yet, they are mostly child-free and unmarried and, although they have a greater degree of freedom than teen film characters, they are partially dependent on their family or other adult-controlled institutions. When it comes to emerging adult characters who are attending college, we can differentiate between two types of film: those in which the characters live on campus and focus on college life, and those whose protagonists are students but live off-campus. The former constitute a genre of its own whose origin dates back to the silent era, predating emerging adulthood itself[2]. Those films that do not focus on academics or campus experiences might be considered emerging adult films *if* their narratives foreground themes related to emerging adulthood. For instance, *Six Years* (Hannah Fidell, 2015) features two college students who live off-campus. In this case, although the protagonists are enrolled in college, the film is not a college film but an emerging adult romantic melodrama. The plot focuses on the romantic relationship of the protagonists, and how moving into more adult roles is going to affect them, both as individuals and as a couple. In fact, the film does not show the students engaging in campus life at all; they do not belong to any fraternities or sororities, they are not involved in college sports and they are not even seen taking classes or studying, which positions *Six Years* outside the college film tradition.

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2 Despite its long history, the college film has not been the subject of great academic attention. For a detailed review of the college film from its origins until the 1970s see *The Movies Go to College: Hollywood and the World of the College-Life Film* (Umphlett, 1984). For an analysis that also covers contemporary films see *Campus Life in the Movies: A Critical Survey from the Silent Era to the Present* (Conklin, 2009).

The analysis of college films as emerging adult films is further problematised by the fact that the characters are often at the gates of emerging adulthood, having just stepped in. College freshmen are both teenagers and emerging adults, which can sometimes make college films closer to teen films than to emerging adult films. Films set on campus have a greater tendency to reproduce teen film conventions, especially when the protagonists are freshmen. With high school still recent in their memories, college freshmen often replicate the same hierarchical structures of high school when they enter college, which gives way to struggles to transcend the college hierarchy and assert one's individuality that resemble those found in teen films. For instance, in *Revenge of the Nerds* (Jeff Kanew, 1984), a group of misfits create their own fraternity because they are not perceived as cool enough to be accepted as members in any others, while in *Pitch Perfect* (Jason Moore, 2012) campus a cappella groups represent different cliques: loser stoners, popular girls and popular boys. Both films transfer the struggles of high school—peer acceptance, popularity, relationships that challenge the social order—to a college setting and link them with longstanding college traditions; fraternities and sororities in *Revenge of the Nerds* and collegiate a cappella in *Pitch Perfect*. The college hierarchy, which is reversed at the end of both films when the underdogs end up victorious, appears to be identical to the high school caste system.

College films with urban settings share more with emerging adult films than those set in leafy campuses that resemble the characters' (generally) middle-class suburban adolescence. Sometimes, like in *Naomi and Ely's No Kiss List* (Kristin Hanggi, 2015) the protagonists still live with their parents, which makes the change from high school seniors to college freshmen a lot less radical than for students who move away from the parental home. As a result, their transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood is softer and

more gradual. At this point in their transition to adulthood, not a lot has changed in their lives; college has only just started, their living situation is the same, they frequent the same places and they keep the same best friend. It is not until the end of the film that the two seem ready to enter a new phase in life, in this case emerging adulthood. This film can be read as a teen film in which the characters have to confront their changing reality as they enter emerging adulthood. Similarly, *Loser* (Amy Heckerling, 2000) follows Paul (Jason Biggs), a small-town boy who has just started college in New York City. Paul is on a scholarship and has to be careful with his money, which makes him look like a loser to his spoilt rich flatmates, while his love interest, Dora (Mena Suvari) is an alternative girl from the boroughs who lives at home and is self-financing her college education, an outsider in terms of both position within the college hierarchy and physical location. As in many teen films, social class becomes a popularity marker, with popular kids coming from upper class backgrounds and working-class characters inhabiting the margins. In this case, Paul and Dora's social background forces them to attain responsibilities that their richer classmates will not have to face until after they graduate: Paul needs to keep his average up in order to continue receiving his scholarship and lives on very little money that he has to manage himself, while Dora has to find a job that will pay enough for her to afford to continue her education, for which she is ready to compromise her health by selling her eggs. The responsibilities that Paul and Dora have to deal with are typical of emerging adulthood, while the clash between losers and the popular crowd positions the film closer to teen films than to emerging adult films. Another aspect that brings the film closer to teenpic territory is the fact that although it deals with deep, adult issues like date rape, relationships in which one member is in a position of power or resorting to desperate measures to make ends meet, they are treated lightly. In a piece on Amy Heckerling published on *The Ringer*,

Ken Stovitz, Heckerling's agent, stated that the film was ruined when the studio forced them to modify it so that it would receive a PG-13 rating instead of an R rating. This would explain why the film's deeper themes were given such a light treatment in favour of the romantic plot and also suggests that film studios regard college films and teen films similarly as far as their intended demographic is concerned (Zoladz 2017).

Films about characters who have just graduated from high school pose a similar problem. Although these characters are still teenagers, their high school graduation has marked the beginning of their emerging adulthood. Many films are set immediately after high school graduation, a moment that some films like *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1972) see as the last summer of (teenage) freedom before real life begins, whereas others like *Ghost World* (Terry Zwigoff, 2001) show characters who are eager to step into emerging adulthood straight away and spend the summer after high school job and apartment hunting in order to attain the kind of independence that will eventually allow them to become adults. Like teen films, college films and emerging adult films tend to portray characters who come from middle-class backgrounds and who are expected to go to college, thus postponing their entry into the real world. It is rare to find characters who are ready to make the transition from high school students to independent adults as abruptly as Rebecca (Scarlett Johansson) does in *Ghost World*. *Saturday Night Fever* constitutes another example of a film in which the protagonist is still in his late teens but ready to take steps towards greater self-sufficiency. However, these films, which can be read both as teen films and as emerging adult films, constitute an exception. As we have seen, films depicting late adolescent characters tend to focus on the college experience and, despite the change of setting, they usually reproduce the same thematic concerns as

teenpics. It is usually in films portraying life after college graduation that the emerging adult genre comes into its own.

When we turn our attention to films that focus on emerging adults in their mid-to-late twenties, we find that emerging adult films may sometimes overlap with other categories, such as chick flicks or "girly films"[3] (Radner, 2011) if the protagonist is a woman and "lad flicks" (Gill and Hansen-Miller, 2011) if the protagonist is a man. Emerging adult films, chick flicks and lad flicks gained prominence at around the same time—in the 1990s—and reflect some of the changes that helped to establish emerging adulthood as a life stage, like a growing presence of women in the workplace, a delay in the age of marriage and parenthood and the move away from traditional gender roles. Chick flick protagonists are usually "overwhelmingly young, heterosexual, white, and middle class" (Ferriss and Young 2011, 8). Similarly, the lads in lad flicks tend to be white and heterosexual, and they usually inhabit the lower ranks of the middle class (Gill and Hansen-Miller, 2011). With very few exceptions, emerging adult films also have a tendency to focus on white, heterosexual, middle-class protagonists. In addition to that, lad flicks feature protagonists who need to grow up and let go of their attachment to boyish hobbies, and the narrative focuses on their path away from boyishness and into manhood. Lad films' concern with the coming-of-age process and emphasis on youthfulness positions them close to the emerging adult film. In fact, a lot of them fall within the emerging adult spectrum. Among those lad flicks that can also be considered emerging adult films are *High Fidelity*, *School of Rock* (Cameron Crowe, 2003), *Knocked Up* and *Zack and Miri Make A Porno* (Kevin Smith, 2008).

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[3] Radner (2011) defines "girly films" as a group of films made with a female audience in mind that focus on consumer culture and highlight "girlishness" as a desirable quality that is not linked to chronological age. She places these films within the chick flick genre, so from this point on I will refer to the more general term chick flick unless I am referring to a feature exclusive to girly films.

Nevertheless, not all lad flicks are emerging adult films. Some lad flick protagonists have made the transition into young adulthood but choose to temporarily leave their responsibilities behind. As immature as the characters in these films might seem, grown-ups behaving badly are not emerging adults, and the films cannot be considered emerging adult films. Gill and Hansen-Miller (2011) term this group of films, which they consider a budding subgenre, the "boys gone wild" variation of the lad flick, and they include films like *Old School* (Todd Phillips, 2003), which despite its protagonists' regression to college life, is not an emerging adult film. Other lad flicks, which Hansen-Miller and Gill, term "the Player" variation, depict the life of bachelors who, despite having chosen not to get married and start a family, are not emerging adults. Another type of film that Hansen-Miller and Gill do not include among their formulaic variations of the lad flick but which may be considered one is what I call the "man-child" film. These films feature characters who, despite being in their twenties, thirties or over, behave like spoilt children. That is, they do not find themselves in a stage between adolescence and adulthood—they are frozen in childhood. Although the coming-of-age process of the protagonists is often at the centre of the plot, this process is not related to emerging adulthood, and films like *Step Brothers* (Adam McKay, 2008) or *Billy Madison* (Tamra Davis, 1995) are therefore not emerging adult films. Similarly, films whose protagonists are adults but have childish hobbies cannot be considered emerging adult films. Those characters would be what Noxon (2006) terms rejuveniles, adults whose hobbies are more typical of an earlier life stage.

An interesting example of a film with a rejuvenile protagonist is *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005). Andy (Steve Carrell) decorates his house with toys and posters and spends his time playing video games, which brands him as a rejuvenile. At the

same time, as the film title implies, he is still a virgin. The quest to lose one's virginity is a recurrent trope in teen sex comedies like *American Pie* or *Porky's* (Bob Clark, 1981), although it all but disappears in emerging adult films, where characters are assumed to have some sexual experience[4]. In teen films, characters see losing their virginity as a rite of passage that will mark their entrance into (emerging) adulthood, and its significance is inflated to the point that having sex often appears to be more important than graduating. Andy's virginity therefore places him in a position of immaturity, of someone who has not fully achieved manhood. As Deleyto (2010, 259) explains, despite the emphasis on the character's sexual inexperience and his connection to adolescence, Andy also possesses redeeming qualities that stand in contrast with the immaturity of his friends, who despite being sexually experienced remain in a state of arrested adolescence that Andy has already left behind. Although the film makes use of teen film and gross-out conventions, the protagonist is past emerging adulthood in the sense that he is self-sufficient and independent. His lack of sexual experience and juvenile hobbies are not enough to place the *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* within the emerging adult genre.

Regarding chick flicks the situation is similar; there are chick flicks whose protagonists are portrayed as immature in some way but are not actually emerging adults. For instance, *Bride Wars* (Gary Winick, 2009) features two best friends whose relationship goes awry when they mistakenly book their weddings on the same date. Despite a friendship that stretches all the way back to childhood, Liv (Kate Hudson) and Emma (Anne Hathaway) start behaving like mean teenage girls and try to boycott each other's wedding. However, this instance of immature behaviour is not enough to make them

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[4] *Girls* (HBO, 2012-2017) constitutes a rare example in which an emerging adult character, Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet), is still a virgin, and her quest to lose her virginity features throughout the first season, culminating with her virginity loss in the season finale.

emerging adults. Although, as we have seen, people in their mid-20s may still be on their way to adulthood, that is not the case here. Both protagonists, who are 26 years old, have begun their careers, are involved in long-term committed relationships, have left shared flats and roommates behind and are generally presented as adults in the way they dress and behave. A similar regression to behaviour that is typical of high school appears in *You Again* (Andy Fickman, 2010), where two different generations of women come face to face with their high school nemeses and revert to immature behaviours they should have left behind in adulthood. The infantile jealousy and aggressive behaviour that characterises women in many mainstream films is reminiscent of popular girls in teen films, who often turn into mean girls or bitches and showcase aggressive behaviour against those they see as their inferiors. However, this adolescent behaviour alone does not imply that the character is yet to reach adulthood and does not automatically make those films emerging adult films.

Similarly, and as in lad flicks, the fact that a character is not married does not make them an emerging adult. Although marriage and motherhood were once considered to mark the end of girlhood and the beginning of womanhood (Driscoll 2002, 57; Traister 2016, 4), the feminist advances of the second half of the twentieth century brought along an increase of women in the workplace, the ability for women to choose when and whether to have children and a change of mentality that made remaining single for longer or not marrying at all an option that did not have the negative connotations of spinsterhood (Traister 2016, 19), thus allowing a greater number of women to grow into adulthood without getting married. Along with this new attitude towards womanhood, came a series of post-feminist cultural artefacts that represented and, to some extent, celebrated this new independent woman, like *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004) and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Sharon

Maguire, 2001). Both texts portray women who have reaped the rewards of feminism, which has allowed them to lead independent adult lives. Although both the women from *Sex and the City* and Bridget Jones (Renée Zellweger) are self-sufficient adults, they feature what Radner refers to as girlishness. Radner argues that *Sex and the City* highlights "a girlishness that extends from 15 to 55 as a mode of being and an identity" (2001, 58). This girlishness is associated with consumer products and with the ability to unapologetically "enjoy all sorts of traditional feminine pleasures" (McRobbie 2009, 21), which can be seen both in the emphasis on designer goods that pervades *Sex and the City* and in Bridget's fantasy of having a big wedding. While these texts appeal to a certain girlish fantasy of playing dress-up and being a princess for a day, their characters have left emerging adulthood behind, and their singledom and girlishness are not enough to position them as emerging adults.

Emerging adulthood is not marked by the presence of behaviours coded as immature, girlish or adolescent. Neither is it signalled by singledom or childlessness, both of which constitute a choice in contemporary society. Similarly, the fact that a character is married does not necessarily imply that they have made the transition towards young adulthood. As Driscoll explains, there is no equivalence "between maturity and becoming a bride" (2001, 184). Although she writes about the relationship between maturity and marriage in terms of age of majority, her argument can be extended to the psychological and individual factors that mark the transition to adulthood. Marriage does not signify the end of emerging adulthood just as it does not signify maturity to those who marry before becoming legal adults. In other words, one can be married and not be able to vote just as one can be married and still be an emerging adult. This can be seen in *Girls*, which features a character who marries someone she barely knows. After the wedding, Jessa (Jemima

Kirke) continues behaving as recklessly as she did before, culminating in a slew of inappropriate comments in front of her husband's parents that make him realise how immature she is and prompt him to offer her money if she leaves. Jessa's marriage does not mark the end of her transition to adulthood. Instead, it highlights the distance between her emotional immaturity and adult behaviours.

To conclude, we can define an emerging adult film as a film in which the main characters are in between adolescence and adulthood and whose coming-of-age process plays a central narrative role. Since emerging adulthood is not a universal stage and has no definite boundaries, the emerging adult film cannot be defined solely by the ages of their protagonists. However, most emerging adult film characters are in their twenties or early thirties. Occasionally, characters in their late teens or mid-to-late thirties will be the subject of emerging adult films, although these are few and far between. These films are characterised by a certain degree of youthfulness that must not be confused with childish or adolescent hobbies or behaviours. The youthfulness in emerging adult films is represented as an opposition between emerging adulthood and proper adulthood which mirrors the opposition between youth and adulthood that permeates other youth film genres, such as teen films, tween films or college films. However, emerging adult films may also portray an opposition between emerging adulthood and adolescence, particularly in those films whose characters are closer to completing the transition to young adulthood. The emerging adult film overlaps with broader definitions of the teen film and adolescence that do not consider adolescence to be limited by age boundaries but, rather, by immaturity, such as Driscoll's (2011) and Pearlman's (2013). Nevertheless, as will be further explored in the next section, the coming-of-age moments or, in Pearlman's words, "threshold moments" (2013, 2), that structure teen films and emerging adult films represent two different life

stages and therefore give way to different themes, characters and narrative structures, even if the process of coming-of-age remains central to all youth cinema.

2.2 Generic conventions of the emerging adult film

As we have seen, an emerging adult film is one whose protagonists are going through emerging adulthood. That is, a film whose protagonists find themselves in a transitional stage between adolescence and adulthood, having crossed some of the borders into adulthood but not all of them. However, the presence of emerging adult characters is not enough for a film to be considered an emerging adult film. In addition to emerging adult characters, there must be discussion of the process of becoming an adult, with most films placing the coming-of-age process at the centre of the narrative. Although the genre is not strictly defined by the age of the films' protagonists, emerging adult films mostly feature characters who are in their twenties. Less frequently, films portray the lives of younger emerging adults who have just left high school and older ones who are already in their thirties. Emerging adult narratives focus on the tribulations of the life stage they depict. Consequently, films with older protagonists tend to place their focus on the process of settling down, usually in the form of long-term commitment to a career or a partner, whereas films about younger emerging adults depict the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Emerging adult films borrow the conventions of those larger narrative genres that work best to convey the challenges of the transition to adulthood, the most common being romantic comedies and comedy-dramas. Unlike teenage films, emerging adult films have not developed to include a wide variety of subgenres. While we can find science fiction, horror and musical teen films, among others, emerging adult films are

typically limited to different comedic or dramatic subgenres. However, the late 2010s have seen instances of emerging adult films dabbling in other subgenres: fantasy in *Unicorn Store* (Brie Larson, 2017), science fiction in *Colossal* (Nacho Vigalondo, 2016) and the musical in *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016). Whether these films constitute isolated forays or develop into new trends within the emerging adult film remains to be seen.

Like teen films, emerging adult films lack diversity; their protagonists are usually white, heterosexual, middle class and college educated. As in teen films, ethnic minorities tend to be relegated to the background. However, a few recent films feature non-white protagonists, which suggests that ethnic minorities are beginning to find their place in emerging adult films. For instance, *Someone Great* (Jennifer Kaytin Robinson, 2019) follows a hispanic girl in her transition to adulthood, the protagonist in *Appropriate Behavior* (Desiree Akhavan, 2014) is the daughter of Persian immigrants and *The Big Sick* (Michael Showalter, 2017) features a Pakistani protagonist and places the emphasis on multiracial coupling. Although in *Someone Great* ethnicity does not pose additional problems in the protagonist's transition to adulthood, both *Appropriate Behavior* and *The Big Sick* deal with the difficulty of pleasing parents whose cultures furnish them with a different set of expectations as far as their children's lives are concerned. Similarly, there are very few films which portray the lives of LGTBI emerging adults, who sometimes find their way into the narrative as secondary characters but rarely constitute the focus of the story, with recent films like *Appropriate Behaviour*, *Life Partners* (Susanna Fogel, 2014), *Other People* (Chris Kelly, 2016), *Duck Butter* (Miguel Arteta, 2018) and *Happiest Season* (Clea DuVall, 2020) as notable exceptions.

Similarly, class issues are mostly ignored, with only a few instances of emerging adult films with blue-collar protagonists, like *Saturday Night Fever, S.F.W.* (Jefery Levy, 1994), *Good Will Hunting* (Gus Van Sant, 1997) and *Buffaloed* (Tanya Wexler, 2019). This last film that deals with an emerging adult hustler whose obsession with "financial freedom" and her belief that going to an ivy league college is the only way to reach it leads her to spend her childhood and adolescence conjuring money-making schemes that begin innocently but become illicit as she ages and eventually send her to prison when she is barely out of high school. The clash between the promise of the good life and the protagonist's reality is brought to the fore from the film's opening scene, which features the protagonist running away from the police as the song that plays non-diegetically says that all you need is "heart" and "hope." The following montage sequence, a flashback in which a voice-over narration of the protagonist details her hopes and dreams and how they came crashing down confirms that what one really needs to succeed is not heart, hope, inventiveness or drive, but money. The focus that *Buffaloed* places on the systemic roadblocks to the protagonist's dreams makes it rare among its kind and begs the question of whether future emerging adult films will concern themselves with the role that privilege —and the lack thereof—plays in the transition to adulthood.

Romance plots tend to be narratively prominent and almost always heterosexual. As emerging adults move from relationship to relationship—or from hookup to hookup— figuring out the kind of person they want to be with constitutes one of the greatest challenges of the transition to adulthood (Arnett 2000, 2004). Sometimes the importance of finding the right partner is inflated to the point that commitment to a romantic partner is equated with the attainment of adulthood. While teen films are concerned with firsts—the first love, first kiss, first time—emerging adult films, particularly those whose protagonists

are in their late 20s and beyond, are often concerned with lasts, with finding the right person to settle down and perhaps start a family with[5]. The distinction between sex and love narratives and the gendered approach to sex present in teen films tend to disappear in emerging adult films, where romantic plots often include sex and characters are generally assumed to have had some previous sexual experience, thus making the loss of virginity storylines so prevalent in teen films all but disappear. The pervasiveness of hookup culture among today's emerging adults further blurs the line between love narratives and sex narratives. Hooking up, which can mean anything from kissing a stranger to repeatedly having sex and hanging out with the same person throughout an extended period of time, has become ubiquitous and is even claimed to have replaced dating, especially among college-age emerging adults. Besides, some hookups may lead to committed relationships, while other casual sexual relationships, like those that involve being "friends with benefits" or "fuck buddies" can involve a high degree of intimacy and resemble romantic relationships (Kimmel 2008, 190; Claxton and Van Dulmen 2013; García et al. 2013). In some cases, emerging adult characters cast a nostalgic look on their past relationships, particularly those they had when they were teenagers and the dating scene was a lot less difficult to navigate.

The obstacles to emerging adult love reflect the complex nature of post-adolescent relationships. Whereas in teen films obstacles to the couple are always external (Shary 2002, 214), in emerging adult films they tend to be internal. That is to say, they come from the characters' own doubts regarding the suitability of their partner, their desire to be in a committed relationship or whether they are capable of love. The obstacle standing between

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[5] As will be discussed in Chapter Five, even though the search for the right partner is ubiquitous in the genre, emerging adult films rarely show the protagonists making a permanent commitment. Films may end with the promise of a long-lasting bond, but engagements, weddings and parenthood are rare.

two lovers is often the degree of maturity that they have achieved thus far. When an individual who is still going through emerging adulthood is in a relationship with one who is ready to settle down and make lifelong commitments, this difference regarding their transition to adulthood becomes the source of conflict. In these cases, those characters who are closer to young adulthood also tend to have higher social status. Commitment to a career usually leads to higher-paying, more stable jobs. Nevertheless, although the barrier between them may appear to be class-based and therefore external, in many cases the attainment of young adulthood, which involves choosing a long-term career, depends on internal individual aspects, such as the ability to decide what one wants to dedicate their life to.

The exploration of one's sexuality is often seen as a step towards adulthood, and it is usually represented in a non-judgemental manner, regardless of whether the characters are men or women. Some films, like *Happythankyoumoreplease* (Josh Radnor, 2010), *Bachelorette* or *Izzy Gets the F*ck across Town* (Christian Papierniak, 2017) begin the day after a one-night-stand in order to mark the characters as individuals who are yet to settle down, while others like *Duck Butter* make explorations of sexual intimacy with a stranger the focus of the narrative. Onscreen representations of sexual experiences tend to portray sex as flawed and awkward, but not necessarily from a comic perspective. Emerging adult films present a fairly realistic view of sex, sometimes as an intimate moment of emotional connection and sometimes as nothing but a game in which one just wants to score. It is not usually portrayed in an overly sentimental or idealised way or as a moment with inflated significance, as sometimes happens in teenpics. Furthermore, emerging adult films deal with the negative consequences of sex more often than teen films. In the 1990s, the AIDS epidemic found its way into emerging adult films. One of the characters in *Reality Bites*

(Ben Stiller, 1994) has an AIDS scare and has to get tested, while the grittier *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996) shows the consequences of sharing syringes as one of its characters dies of an AIDS-related disease. Several films deal with pregnancy and abortion, with some films like *Blue Jay* (Alexandre Lehmann, 2016), *Bachelorette* and *Young Adult* reflecting on the consequences that past abortions and miscarriages had both on the characters' relationships and their development towards adulthood.

Starting a career is, along with finding a suitable partner, one of the most important steps towards adulthood, and it consequently plays a prominent role in emerging adult films. The majority of emerging adult films include characters who are dissatisfied with their current employment situation, which a lot of the time involves jobs in retail, in the hospitality industry or in soulless offices. In films about older emerging adults, characters may even own their own business, which may be struggling or may have become a source of entrapment. Most emerging adult characters see their jobs as a temporary solution while they either find out what they really want to do with their lives or get the big break that will allow them to flourish in an artistic field. A great deal of emerging adult protagonists aspire to make a living out of their creative endeavour as novelists, journalists, musicians, actors, artists, etc. Emerging adults often want a job that reflects their personality, lifestyle and passions, and they place more importance on doing something they enjoy than on earning a lot of money (Arnett 2000, 474; 2004, 143). There is often an overt rejection of the corporate world and of those who work in it. Characters who opt for a career in fields like business or law often appear as antagonists, and they tend to be portrayed as materialistic, superficial and sometimes as sellouts.

Emerging adult films are typically concerned with the issue of remaining true to oneself. In the 1990s, the prominence of alternative culture led films like *Empire Records* (Allan Moyle, 1995) and *Reality Bites* to focus on the issue of selling out, which involves allowing a corporation—in these cases a record store chain and an MTV-like channel—to take over something that emerging adult characters have created or that they feel personally attached to and modifying it to make it more profitable; a record shop in *Empire Records* and a documentary about their group of friends in *Reality Bites*. In other instances, selling out is not framed as an explicit rejection of corporate values, but as giving up on one's dreams in order to take up a job that is not as exciting but will pay the bills and offer emerging adults the chance to grow up. The main challenge emerging adult characters face is often how to grow up and become a proper adult without completely losing their identity in the process. This process may involve using the skills involved in one's passion to develop a career. That way, characters are allowed to grow up without fully letting go of what they love. This change often involves teaching those skills to younger generations, as in *School of Rock* and *Frances Ha* (Noah Baumbach, 2012). The changes emerging adults have to make in order to complete their transition to adulthood not only involve making a compromise in their professional life, but also in their love life. They usually have to let go of the concept of the perfect job as well as that of the perfect partner, accepting the fact that nothing is perfect and that they need to change in order to grow up. Emerging adult characters need to see their sometimes unreasonable ambitions as the fantasies that they really are and settle for a more realistic option without letting go of their authenticity or their values.

An opposition between youth and adulthood permeates all youth films, whether the protagonists are tweens, teenagers or emerging adults. Nevertheless, emerging adult films

present a different kind of clash. In tween, teen and college films, the conflict is a generational one: all adults are older than the protagonists. However, in emerging adult films the conflict is partly generational and partly intra-generational. In other words, some adults may be older than the protagonists, while others may be the same age as them or even younger. Unlike adolescence, emerging adulthood does not have a clear end. Instead, emerging adults work their way towards adulthood at different paces, and the duration of the process is different for each individual (Arnett 2004, 209). As a consequence, emerging adults often find that someone younger than themselves has completed the transition to adulthood while they have not. In emerging adult films, as in teen films, there may be conflict between the protagonists and members of older generations, typically in the form of bosses and other authority figures, but it is in the conflict between emerging adults and their more grown up peers that the conflict between youth and adulthood really takes place. In emerging adult films, the teen film's scale of popularity is replaced by the scale of adulthood, with those who have made a successful transition to adulthood situated at the top and emerging adults at the bottom. Proper adults take the place of popular kids, while emerging adults replace nerds and losers at the lower end of the hierarchy. As in the high school caste system, being at the top is linked to higher social and economic status. In teen films, popular characters tend to come from more privileged backgrounds than outcasts, who are more likely to belong to the working classes. Similarly, in emerging adult films proper adults typically have better paying jobs, while emerging adults usually struggle to make ends meet and sometimes have to rely on their parents or even their friends for economic support.

In teen films, members of different cliques are easily identified by their appearance, their hobbies, the spaces they occupy and even what they eat. In emerging adult films,

desirability and physical attractiveness does not play a role when it comes to locating a character in one group or the other as it does in teen film, but all the other aforementioned clique identifiers remain. Emerging adults usually work in environments where one can dress casually and they are almost never seen in business wear, whereas proper adults tend to work in fields where dressing elegantly is expected. What's more, emerging adults often wear clothes that mark them as young, like flannel shirts, band t-shirts, bright dresses, bold patterns, childish accessories, etc. Emerging adults live in shared apartments and spend time in their local bars and cafés, while proper adults can afford luxury condos, expensive restaurants and wine bars. The makeover plot that appears so frequently in teen films, in which a change of clothes makes an outcast look like a popular kid, also finds a place in emerging adult films. Emerging adult characters sometimes go through a makeover that will make them look more like an adult, adopting business wear and habits that are perceived as more adult-like, such as sipping coffee or eating healthy food. However, in emerging adult films the makeover is always reversed. The more professional look tends to resemble a parody of adulthood and emerging adults discard it in favour of a look that fits their personality, realising that the change has to come from within and thus rejecting preconceived ideas of adulthood.

An aspect that sets emerging adult film apart from teenage films is that, whereas teenage films are written and directed by adults, thus offering an adult's perspective on youth, many emerging adult films have been written and directed by individuals who were going through emerging adulthood at the time and they are informed by their own experiences. For instance, *Clerks* (Kevin Smith, 1994) was filmed in the store where Kevin Smith himself worked; *Slacker* (Richard Linklater, 1990) represents the Austin alternative scene that Linklater himself was a part of and *Tiny Furniture* (Lena Dunham, 2010) is not

only inspired by Lena Dunham's life, but it also stars the director, her mother and her sister playing fictionalised versions of themselves. Emerging adult films always offer the point of view of emerging adults, and the spectator is encouraged to identify with the—sometimes severely flawed and unlikeable—protagonists even when the narrative casts a critical look on their lifestyle. Teen films offer a wider variety of identification points, and although the spectator is not always encouraged to root for the outcast, popular kids are often portrayed as shallow and mean, just like proper adults are in emerging adult films. Those who have crossed the border into adulthood often bully emerging adults in a manner which is reminiscent of the treatment nerds and misfits receive in high school. Emerging adults are therefore coded as high school losers, while proper adults are coded as jocks and prom queens. In teen films, characters ultimately transcend the high school caste system and assert their individuality, which is usually done by dating outside their clique or showing unexpected qualities like a hidden sensitive side. Similarly, emerging adult films often involve the protagonists abandoning or modifying their lifestyle in favour of a more mature one, which often involves committing to a person who is further along the transition to adulthood than they are, which can be seen as the emerging adult equivalent of dating outside one's clique.

As we have seen, emerging adult films not only feature conflict with the older generations, but they also present intra-generational conflict between emerging adults and their more mature peers. In addition to this, emerging adult films—particularly those with older protagonists—also tend to include conflict with the younger generations. Despite the fact that they are in their late 20s or in their 30s, emerging adults feel young and often behave in a way which does not differ much from the way they behaved in their early 20s. In some films, these characters need to face the younger generation to realise that they are

older than they think, that their coolness is being phased out and that not everybody perceives them as young. For instance, in *Ass Backwards* (Chris Nelson, 2013) a group of college students mock the 29-year-old protagonists by comparing them with the older women from *Sex and the City,* while in *Fort Tilden* (Sarah-Violet Bliss and Charles Rogers, 2014) the protagonists go to great lengths to meet two boys who turn out to be underage. Sometimes, as in *Saint Frances* (Alex Thompson, 2019) an encounter with a younger character helps the protagonist to move further towards adulthood. In some cases, emerging adults adopt a mentoring or teaching role that enables them to be responsible for others, while in other instances, as in *Trainspotting*, younger characters highlight the fact that the world is changing and the protagonists are not moving along with it, which makes the protagonists realise that they cannot remain frozen in time and motivates them to change their lifestyle.

Emerging adults are old enough to have left the parental home, but a lot of them have not managed to establish themselves independently or with a partner yet. They usually live with their friends, who take on the role of a surrogate family on which emerging adults rely for company and entertainment, emotional support and sometimes even financial support. In emerging adult films, we often see protagonists who struggle to become independent from their friends. The process of leaving a life shared with friends to pursue independent living or cohabitation involves a kind of commitment that is more permanent than what emerging adults have experienced so far. While during college any wrong decision can be easily reverted by changing majors, partners or apartments, post-college commitment often involves the closing of some doors. Sometimes, conflict between emerging adults and friends who are trying to mature plays a central narrative role. Due to the importance of friendship in emerging adults' lives, a friend pulling away often feels like a betrayal which

leads to a situation resembling a romantic breakup. These friendship breakups are more common in films with female protagonists who tend to have a co-dependent bond with their best friend, as is the case in *Girlfriends, Walking and Talking* (Nicole Holofcener, 1996), *Frances Ha* and *Life Partners*, among others. In other cases—most commonly in films with male protagonists—the main characters are part of a group of friends whose dynamics are behind their arrested development. In lad flicks, homosocial bonding plays a prominent role in the protagonists' lives, and in order to grow up they must let go of their attachment to the group (Gill and Hansen-Miller 2011). The group, which functions as a boys' club from which women—who are perceived as more mature—are excluded, is often centred on a shared hobby or activity, which is usually related to the consumption of pop culture or drugs and alcohol. The exclusiveness of these groups makes them resemble high school cliques, and their members seem to be overgrown adolescents, which establishes a parallel between lad flicks and teen films.

The spaces in which most emerging adult films are set differ greatly from those of teenage films. Whereas teenage films place an emphasis on suburban life, emerging adult films are almost always urban. Large homes with garages and picket fences are replaced by shared apartments and makeshift homes. The city is seen as the site where the protagonists' dreams can be fulfilled, the place where everything happens. It stands as a symbol of freedom and possibility that contrasts with the peaceful and sometimes stifling nature of suburban life. Emerging adults constantly navigate the city—they walk, ride bikes, take public transport and make public spaces their own. They are individuals in transition, and seeing everything the city has to offer constitutes a part of their coming-of-age process. Emerging adult films tend to place emphasis on movement, with many of them beginning and ending with the protagonists on the go. When emerging adult films take place in small

town or suburban settings, it is usually because the characters are going back home. In homecoming films, the narrative centres around a trip back to the place where the protagonist grew up, which forces them to face their past and reflect on how they have evolved since they left. As we will see in Chapter Four, this trip may be motivated by a personal crisis or by a major event that highlights the passing of time, like a friend's wedding, a high school reunion or somebody's death. Going back to their origins gives characters the chance to see how their high school classmates have negotiated their transitions to adulthood and speculate about what their lives would be like if they had never left. Facing their high school friends and nemeses usually establishes a close link between the protagonist and their high school persona, to the point that sometimes they experience a regression into their teenage selves. Homecoming films, which are so prominent within the genre that they can be considered a budding subgenre, will be analysed in detail in Chapter Four.

Like teenage films, emerging adult films are structured around coming-of-age plots that foreground the protagonist's quest towards adulthood. Some of the most common plots that find their way into emerging adult films are driven by traditional markers of adulthood, like college graduation, marriage, pregnancy and parenthood. However, these plots do not usually constitute the centre of the narrative. College graduation often marks the beginning of the narrative, representing a new life stage. With some exceptions, emerging adult films do not culminate in marriage or parenthood. These may appear as part of the plot, but they do not constitute a narrative climax. Sometimes, as in *Walking and Talking*, these rites of passage are part of the narrative but they are only talked about, not shown. Emerging adult films do not tend to have a close ending in which the character has fulfilled all the typical steps into adulthood. Instead, endings tend to be open. The

challenges that the protagonists face throughout the narrative usually suggest greater maturity, but there is no guarantee that these changes will actually take hold. These open endings reflect both the lack of signposts to mark the end of the transition to adulthood and the multitude of paths—most of them with many twists and turns—that lead to it.

2.3 Precursors to the emerging adult film genre

The rise of emerging adulthood as a life stage brought along cultural representations of this reformulation of the transition to adulthood. As we saw in the previous chapter, emerging adulthood did not spring out of nowhere in the 1990s. Rather, it appeared as the result of a series of progressive changes that took place during the preceding decades. Before emerging adulthood became an expected life stage for the majority of young people in post-industrialised countries, instances of emerging adulthood had already appeared onscreen. When Keniston wrote about "youth" as a new life stage between adolescence and adulthood in 1970, this stage had already been represented onscreen in the form of countercultural films aimed at the baby boomer generation. Arnett (2004, 20-21) criticised Keniston's attempt at describing a life stage analogous to his emerging adulthood on the grounds that Keniston's "youth" is too closely associated with and influenced by 1960s counterculture. The same problem appears when we look at films representing twentysomething life in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Films like *Riot on Sunset Street* (Arthur Dreifuss, 1967), *Wild in the Streets* (Barry Shear, 1968), *Alice's Restaurant* (Arthur Penn, 1969) and the animation film *Fritz the Cat* (Ralph Bakshi, 1972) place countercultural movements of the 1960s at their core, relegating narratives of growing up

to the background. Nevertheless, these countercultural films present features that will later be seen in emerging adult films.

2.3.1 Countercultural films of the 1960s

Both *Riot on Sunset Street* and *Wild in the Streets* unite teenagers and twentysomethings as a distinct group different from adults, which emphasises the generational quality of these films. In these time-capsule films, if you are old enough to remember World War 2, you are too old. Both films are reminiscent of the juvenile delinquency films of the 1950s, and they function as cautionary tales about the dangers of the counterculture, making use of documentary-like voiceovers that make young people come across as an animal species in a remote land with customs and behaviours completely different from those of civilised beings (i.e. adults)[6]. The young people in these films are rule-breakers: they sneak out of their parents' homes to drink and take drugs, they have sex and they have no respect for their elders and authority figures. The consequences of this behaviour are tragic. In *Riot on Sunset Street* a girl is gang raped during an acid trip, sending a clear warning that countercultural participation comes with consequences. *Wild in the Streets*, shows what would happen if power were left in the hands of young people. Max Frost (Christopher Jones), a rock singer, plays the role of the voice of a generation when he takes part in a political rally which calls for the lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18. While he is onstage, Frost takes the chance to remind the audience that the majority of Americans are under 25, which positions adults as a minority, and calls for a demonstration to lower the voting age to fourteen. Once youth takes over and Max Frost

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[6] *Riot on Sunset Street* was inspired by the riots that took place in Los Angeles only a few months before filming. The fact that the film drew inspiration from real events adds to its sensationalist nature.

becomes president of the United States, he sets thirty as a new mandatory retirement age and sends over-35s to retirement camps reminiscent of nazi concentration camps where they will be forced to take LSD. The film is aimed both at young people and at the older generations, with the trailer stating "if you're under 30, you'll want to see it. If you're over 30, you'd better see it." Younger audiences are expected to take delight in seeing themselves represented onscreen, while older ones are meant to take the film as a warning of what could happen to them if they let Baby Boomers rule them.
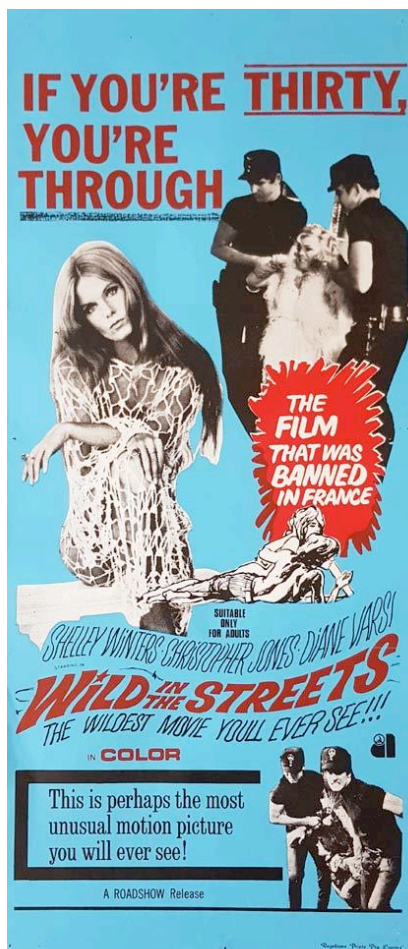
Fig. 2.1. A threatening message to over-30s.

What *Wild in the Streets* shares with emerging adult films, is the view of adulthood as the end of fun. In this film, when you reach thirty you might as well be dead, which supports Keniston's claim that the young unconsciously equate adulthood with death (1971, 11). As its poster states: "If you're 30, you're through!" (fig. 2.1). Although emerging adult films do not see adulthood as something to be entirely avoided, they reject traditional notions of adulthood. Emerging adult characters often hope to grow up in a way which is different from their parents', which leaves them without a roadmap or a clear destination. In *Riot on Sunset Street*, young people are said to have "nowhere to go, nothing to do, no goal in life." This view of youth as aimless drifters with no ambition or motivation appears across emerging adult films, particularly in slacker films of the 1990s. Emerging adults in the later genre often portray the same lack of ambition and direction, working menial jobs that they are often over-

qualified for and spending a lot of their time simply hanging out, which contrasts with the productivity, both in the workplace and at a biological level, that is expected in adulthood (Erikson [1982] 1997, 67).

In these earlier countercultural films, narratives of growing up are eclipsed by the sensationalist lens through which the counterculture is represented. Conversely, few emerging adult films are cautionary tales, nor do they attempt to explain the behaviour of young people to the older generations. Instead, they present the process of growing up and becoming an adult in a realistic and mostly non-judgemental way. Although subcultures have their place in emerging adult films, their depiction is almost never the goal of the narrative. Instead, they function as a backdrop against which the main story—the process of growing up—is set. This is what makes another 1960s film the most interesting one as far as emerging adulthood is concerned. In fact, it could be argued that *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967) is the first emerging adult film.

2.3.2 Drifting towards independence in *The Graduate*

Just like James Dean's Jim Stark became an icon for teen angst that multiple generations continue to relate to, Dustin Hoffman's Ben has become an intergenerational icon of the post-graduate haze in which many twentysomethings find themselves when it is time for them to leave education and dive into adulthood. Although Ben has received a prestigious award to continue with post-graduate education, he is in no hurry to make a decision about his future. He seems to be aware that, once he decides what to study in graduate school, some doors will be slammed shut behind him, limiting his range of options. By choosing not to go to graduate school—opposing his parents' desire—he is

prolonging his transition to adulthood, allowing himself a few more years to figure out who he wants to be. Although emerging adulthood is said to be a time of high expectations, Ben seems to have no expectations whatsoever. While talking to his father, he claims to want to have a different future, setting himself in opposition to the path his parents—and their friends—consider the best for him, but what that different future will entail remains unsaid.

The in-betweenness of emerging adulthood is powerfully conveyed through the cinematography of *The Graduate* from its very beginning. The film begins with a close-up of the protagonist's face in which his eyes look watery, as if he was about to cry or had recently shed a tear or two (fig. 2.2). His face is set against a white background, which eliminates distractions and forces the spectators to keep their eyes on the protagonist's, wondering why he looks so upset. As the camera zooms out, we see that he is in an airplane and he is alone. Through most of the shot, Ben's is the only face that is not partially covered by the seats, allowing the spectator to keep the attention on his facial expression: sad and lost in thought (fig. 2.3). He looks like he has just experienced a terrible loss and he is on his way to a funeral, and in a way he is. Once we find out that Ben is returning home after graduating from university, it becomes evident that what he is mourning is his lost youth. Upon graduation, one is meant to make decisions that will result in lifelong commitments, which at the time the film was made usually meant getting a job and a spouse for life. Ben knows that the days in which an almost limitless array of options spread before him have come to an end unless he dares to disappoint his parents, who are incredibly proud of him and expect him to follow their footsteps.

Figs. 2.2-3. *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967): Adulthood is portrayed as a sad and lonely affair.

Once the plane lands, Ben stands motionless on a conveyor belt, allowing the belt to slowly take him to his destination, to his future life as an adult, as Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence" plays, highlighting the protagonist's alienation. Ben's motionlessness can be interpreted in two different ways. Ben's decision to stand still may be seen as his attitude towards life thus far. Up until this point, Ben has behaved like the perfect son, doing everything that was expected of him and simply following the path that his parents had set up for him. So far he has not had to make any decisions for himself, but rather agree to follow through with parental expectations, which required little movement on his part. Standing on the conveyor belt, Ben is not moving, he is being moved, which functions as a metaphor of his life's direction so far, which followed a tidy predetermined

route. Alternatively, the conveyor belt can be seen as the path to adulthood, and the fact that Ben remains static as his will to lengthen that path and avoid stepping into adulthood just yet. Sooner or later, the belt will come to an end and Ben will have reached his destination, which reminds us that growing up and getting older is unavoidable and one cannot choose to remain an adolescent forever.

Fig. 2.4. *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967): The fish tank represents the protagonist's entrapment.

Ben is stuck between adolescence and adulthood, between being who he wants to be and who his parents want him to be. To emphasise this feeling of entrapment, the airport scene cuts to a shot of Ben in his childhood bedroom sitting in front of a fish tank. The shot is framed close enough to Ben to hide the edges of the fish tank, which makes it look like the protagonist is floating inside it just like one of the fish (fig. 2.4). Ben appears to be floating, drifting, slowly moving but going nowhere. The fish tank has its limits and what looks like an endless horizon is in fact a wall made out of glass that lets you see it but not float your way to it. Like the fish, Ben is moving but going nowhere, trapped in a world of limited paths that have been drawn out for him. His feeling of despair and hopelessness is underscored by Ben's sad countenance as well as by the shot's lighting: the darkness on his face suggests that his life is devoid of light and meaning.

The Graduate differs from later emerging adult films in several aspects, most notably the lack of emerging adult characters other than Benjamin (Dustin Hoffman) and Elaine (Katharine Ross). Instead of showing how other twentysomethings have managed to grow up while the protagonists are yet to enter adulthood, *The Graduate* focuses on generational conflict, setting Ben and Elaine's world of possibilities against their parents' settled adult lives. Ben complains that the rules he has been playing by are "being made up by all the wrong people," in this case by older generations. Ben's parents are standing in the way of the kind of future he wants. That is, one in which *he* is able to make the rules. This is conveyed in the film both through the narrative and through framing devices. Benjamin's parents walk into the frame, partially blocking the spectator's—and Ben's— view (fig. 2.5). They are often filmed from low angles, highlighting the power they wield over their son (fig. 2.6) and standing on the way of his movements, which can be seen when Ben is in the pool and his parents are swimming so close to him that he cannot move, mirroring their attempt to direct their son's movement into adulthood (fig. 2.7). When Ben is around his parents and their friends—particularly during the party scene—the atmosphere is oppressive: adults keep touching him, firing questions at him, speaking without letting him answer, telling him what to do and making assumptions about his future. The protagonist is framed surrounded by adults who block his—and our—view (fig. 2.8). Ben tries to get away, but all the exits are blocked by an adult who wants to talk to him. Handheld camera movements track Ben's attempt to get out of the party, increasing the scene's claustrophobic feeling. At times, the scene resembles a zombie film in which the living dead (adults) try to infect the living (the young, in this case Ben). If Ben remains at the party his parents threw for him, he runs the risk of becoming infected with their

disease (adulthood), starting a career in plastics as one of the guests suggests, and becoming one of them.

Figs. 2.5-8. *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967): Framing highlights the influence that Ben's parents try to exert over their son.

When Ben is at home, he almost always occupies a space different from his parents'. He either retreats to his room or seeks comfort in the swimming pool, where he can just drift. This isolation, both physical and metaphorical, from the world inhabited by his parents reaches its peak when Benjamin is presented with a scuba diving suit as his graduation present. The suit not only limits his movement but also emphasises the isolation that he feels from the adults around him. It is significant that, while scuba diving is meant to be done in the ocean, his parents encourage Ben to try it in the swimming pool, which suggests that they would like Ben to dive into adulthood, but only into the kind of adulthood that they have envisioned for him, rather than into the ocean's depths. As the protagonist visibly struggles to walk towards the swimming pool, his parents and their friends cheer and clap. The camera remains fixed while Ben walks closer and closer, taking up the entire frame, which conveys the feeling of entrapment and lack of options. The

camera then cuts to a point of view shot in which we can see the garden from Ben's perspective (fig. 2.9).

The spectator is now inside the scuba mask with Ben, where the sounds from the outside world are mute and only his breathing can be heard. His parents keep gesticulating and directing him while the rest of the crowd claps in the background, which reminds us that following his parents' wishes will get him praise, but those wishes cannot be heard inside the mask, inside himself. There, the only sound to be heard is the steady rhythm of his breath. From the scuba diving suit, Ben's field of vision and action is limited, he cannot see or move clearly. The suit can therefore be seen as a representation of his parents' wishes. As long as Ben is around his parents, he cannot see far enough to figure out what he really wants and he cannot move swiftly enough to get there. When he dives into the swimming pool, the analogy with the fish tank is complete; he has become a pet who may swim freely as long as it is within a confined space and whose owners—in this case his parents—look at with delight. Inside the swimming pool, Ben is completely static, resembling the scuba diver figure that adorns his fish tank. He is not an independent individual, but rather a decoration in his parents' lives.

Fig. 2.9. *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967): The restricted point of view of the scuba diving mask mirrors the narrow range of options that Ben's parents want him to choose from.

An in-depth analysis of the film would be required in order to explore other interesting elements, such as the use of music and the romantic narrative. Nevertheless, the aspects discussed here—the feeling of being in between, the opposition between emerging adults and the older generations and the process of figuring out who one wants to be—are central to later emerging adult films, and *The Graduate*'s portrayal of them warrants its recognition as a stepping stone to the genre.

2.3.3 Downtown living in *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* and *Girlfriends*

Although emerging adulthood begins at 19, which makes most university students emerging adults, it is in depictions of postgraduate life that the genre really thrives. Postgraduate life presents emerging adults with challenges that differ to a greater extent from those they had to face during adolescence. Although university students in the United States tend to live on campus and therefore have more independence and freedom than they had living at home, their lives are similar to the lives they led in high school; they go to class, study for exams, practise sports, date, go out and have fun. Once they are out of college, these characters have to begin figuring out what they really want to do with their lives, with college being a bridge between the dependence of adolescence and the independence expected in adulthood. It is after graduation that most characters begin the search for the perfect job and the perfect partner, a search which becomes the dominant narrative in emerging adult films.

The 1970s offer two good examples of onscreen representations of life after graduation that share all the characteristics of the emerging adult films that came after them; *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* (Paul Mazursky, 1976) and *Girlfriends*. These two

films introduce a type of character that has become an archetype in emerging adult films: a twentysomething college graduate with artistic inclinations working odd jobs until they can live off their art. *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* follows Larry Lipinsky's (Lenny Baker) first steps into adulthood. Larry has graduated from university, but he is not ready to settle down with a job for life. Instead of following his parents' advice and getting his teacher's license so he has "something to fall back on," Larry chooses to find work as a waiter while he waits for his big break as an actor. Although the film is set in the 1950s and it therefore portrays a kind of bohemian lifestyle that was not followed by the majority, it anticipates the kind of transition to adulthood that will later become the norm. Greenwich Village's artistic circles seem to share some of the defining features of emerging adulthood. These characters would not be out of place in a film about twentysomething life made thirty years later. The Village that is captured in the film is long gone, but the attitudes towards adulthood and the lifestyle the film portrays remain. *Girlfriends* features not one, but two aspiring artists. Susan (Melanie Mayron), the protagonist, is a photographer who aspires to move on from family shooting sessions to focus on a more artistic approach to photography, while her best friend and housemate Anne (Anita Skinner) wants to become a writer.

In both of them New York is the backdrop against which success may or may not happen. While teenage films are mostly suburban, characters in emerging adult films have usually left suburbia to move on to greater things. This move from suburbia to the city (or, in the case of *Next Stop, Greenwich Village*, from Brooklyn to the Village), sets the desires of emerging adults in opposition to those of their parents, the generation that aspired to have a nice house in the suburbs where they could live peacefully has to witness how their children long for the grittiness and fast-paced life of the city. To emerging adults, the

suburbs often represent stagnation, lack of movement and lack of opportunities. In contrast, the city grants them freedom of movement and presents them with opportunities to meet likeminded people. The grittiness of the inner city may be off-putting for some, but for Larry and his friends the village is the place where a brighter future might manifest itself, and their joy as they move around it indicates the sense of possibility that it offers them (fig. 2.10).

Fig. 2.10. In *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* (Paul Mazursky, 1976), Larry and his friends dance in the streets, a celebration of downtown life.

However, life in the city is expensive, which means that most emerging adults cannot afford to live on their own and, when they do, their apartments leave much to be desired, especially to the eyes of the older generation. *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* begins with the protagonist moving out of his parents' home in Brooklyn to a hip and bohemian neighbourhood where his artistic inclinations are more likely to flourish. Even though Larry is twenty-two years old when he moves out, his mother gets extremely upset. Upon seeing her son's new apartment, she exclaims: "you call this an apartment? An apartment's got shelving and curtains and furniture. This is no furniture," to which he replies: "What do

you mean, mum? I have a record player," exposing the generational differences between his generation's and his parent's when it comes to the definition of home. He does not find comfort in symbols of stability and success, but in the popular culture he enjoys.

The rejection of bourgeois values in favour of a more bohemian lifestyle is also seen in *Girlfriends*, although in this case the conflict is not between emerging adults and the older generation, but rather between people the same age who find themselves at different points in the path towards adulthood. When Anne decides to get married, Susan accuses her friend of abandoning her. As the wedding is taking place, the spectator can hear a voiceover narration of the wedding while Susan is shown painting the wall red. The red wall may be seen as a reflection of Susan's feelings towards her friend's wedding. Red is the colour of love, but it also represents danger, it is the colour of emergencies and warning signs. When Susan learns that Anne is getting married, she asks her if she is sure and reminds her that she barely knows her fiancé. The wall may be seen as a reminder of this warning or, alternatively, as the rage she feels at her friend for having left her. The film questions the validity of marriage as an easy way into adulthood. Anne states that she does not want to take care of herself, but wants her boyfriend Martin (Bob Balaban) to take care of her. Instead of taking on adult roles, marriage allows Anne to take a step back into a type of dependence more characteristic of childhood. After a while, Susan and Anne envy each other's lives. Anne envies Susan's freedom and the excitement of her new relationship, whereas Susan envies Anne's motherhood, the kind of love that her husband professes her, and the fact that she does not have to work. By presenting both young women's lives as flawed in their own way, the film emphasises that there is no clear roadmap into a happy and fulfilling adult life. Both conforming to what society expects (getting married, having children) and trying to lead an alternative lifestyle may bring unhappiness and self-doubt.

The changing attitudes towards sex and marriage that resulted from the sexual revolution of the 1960s and that, as we saw before, played a role in the creation of emerging adulthood, are reflected in both films. Although *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* is set in the 1950s, its characters seem to be ahead of their time, from which we can assume that, from the film's perspective, bohemian circles were ahead of the mainstream as far as alternative lifestyles are concerned. The fact that both films are loosely based on the lives of their directors positions them as a faithful representation of emerging adulthood before the stage was even defined. In these films, marriage is not seen as a compulsory step into adulthood. Instead, getting married is simply an option some may choose. In an interview for the London Institute of Contemporary Art's website, Claudia Weill (2014) stated that the story for the film was inspired by her coming to terms with the fact that all her friends were getting married and she was not. In *Girlfriends*, marriage is represented as an option that does not necessarily imply a greater degree of maturity or greater happiness. Similarly, *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* presents marriage as an option instead of an obligation. When the protagonist's parents ask him if he is getting married he answers: "you don't necessarily get married to your girlfriends these days," which implies that it is acceptable to have sex before marriage and to have multiple sexual partners, that one can opt out of marriage and that this ambivalent attitude towards marriage was new in the 1950s.

Larry's girlfriend, Sarah (Ellen Greene), seems to be a woman ahead of her time. Not only has she had multiple partners, but she also refuses to get married or have children and, when she gets pregnant, she decides to have an abortion. Abortion, a subject that is still stigmatised and controversial 40 years after these films were made, features in both in a way that feels forward-thinking even today. The women having abortions—Sarah in *Next Stop, Greenwich Village* and Anne in *Girlfriends*—are not punished for their choice, which

is presented in a non-judgemental manner. Abortion is shown as an option both to single women who want to remain childless and to married women who are already mothers. In both films, the abortion storyline serves as a reminder that these women are neither reckless adolescents nor fully grown up. In *Next Stop, Greenwich Village*, upon learning of his girlfriend's pregnancy Larry is keen to accept responsibility for his actions, get married and have the baby. Sarah, however, rejects this traditional route into adulthood and chooses to do things her way instead. When Sarah is about to have the abortion, Larry asks her how she feels, to which she replies: "Strange. Grown up. Old." They also talk about what they want to be when they grow up, which emphasises the fact that they do not feel like grown ups yet. In *Girlfriends*, After Anne explains to Susan that the reason why she missed her show was to have an abortion, the two friends are seen drinking shots and playing games, a reminder that despite having to deal with difficult adult decisions, they are still two young friends who like to drink, be playful and have fun. This scene is interrupted by Martin's arrival, which reminds the viewer that Anne's decision to marry Martin has brought an end to the two friends' life together. Now that Anne is a married woman and a mother, she has taken on responsibilities that prevent her from drinking and playing with her friend whenever they want.

The friendship between Anne and Susan is characteristic of emerging adulthood and similar friendships appear throughout the genre. In emerging adult films, friend circles function as a surrogate family; friends share a living space, spend their free time together and turn to each other for support, both emotional and financial. Emerging adult friendship, especially female friendship, can often resemble a romantic relationship. Weill describes female friendship as "fragile, delicate, supportive, complex, nourishing, painful and difficult as a love affair […] not unlike a marriage" (1978). In these films, marriage and

motherhood often pose a threat to female friendship, with the moment in which one of them announces their aim to move out and get married functioning as a break-up. Keeping this in mind, Susan's reaction towards her friend's marriage can be seen as disappointment and anger at having been abandoned, rather than as an ambivalent stance towards marriage. In emerging adulthood, leaving friends behind seems to be harder than living independently from one's parents, and in emerging adult films the process of leaving one's friends to live independently or with a partner seems to be more complicated than that of leaving one's parents to live with friends. A key issue that emerging adults have to work through, as *Girlfriends* shows, is finding the balance between independence and dependence. First emerging adults must learn to live independently from their family and later on they must learn how to live independently from their friends.

2.3.4 Dancing towards a better future in *Saturday Night Fever*

A character who does not hesitate to leave his friends behind to move on to better things is Tony Manero (John Travolta), the protagonist of *Saturday Night Fever*. Tony is a 19-year-old working class Italian-American who lives with his family in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, making him one of the rare depictions of emerging adulthood in which the main character chooses not to pursue higher education. Although Manero is, admittedly, still a teenager, some of the issues that pervade the film are characteristic of emerging adulthood. Tony has finished high school and he works at a paint store, which we later learn constitutes his family's main source of income. The responsibility on his shoulders is therefore greater than that experienced by most emerging adults. His is not a time for careless self-discovery and a postponement of adulthood, but rather one in which he has

had to take on an adult role straight out of high school. His father, however, is not appreciative of his support, and berates Tony for not earning enough after he announces that he got a raise at work. The family scenes represent an oppressive and violent home life in which Tony is reprimanded for not becoming a priest like his brother, told off for being late and smacked at the dinner table. This representation of familial conflict in which parents exert authority over their children in such a straightforward manner is reminiscent of teenage films and does not appear often in films depicting emerging adulthood. This may be attributed to the protagonist's young age—after all, he is only 19—or simply to the fact that Tony has not left home and thus must live by his parents' rules. He lacks the independence that other emerging adults with more resources are able to attain at this point in the transition to adulthood.

Like *Girlfriends*, *Saturday Night Fever* features a character who, despite not being much older than the protagonist, is closer to adulthood than he is. Stephanie (Karen Lynn Gorney), Tony's dance partner and love interest, is only a year older than him, but this difference feels like an abyss to her. Stephanie is an upwardly mobile independent woman who, despite not having been to college, is in the process of educating herself in order to climb up the corporate ladder. From her vantage point, the differences between herself and Tony as insurmountable and multifaceted. She sees herself as different from him in a multitude of ways, "not just chronologically, but emotionally, culturally, physically, every way." Stephanie wants to be with someone who shares her ambitions and is eager to leave Bay Ridge for Manhattan in search of a better—and wealthier—life. Despite the fact that she also comes from Brooklyn, she has moved on, she works in Manhattan and plans to move there soon. To her, Tony is paralysed in a world that has nothing to offer and constitutes the polar opposite of the glitzy life she aims to build for herself, with an

emphasis on consumerism that foreshadows the 1980s. Although the word "yuppie" was not used to designate Young Urban Professionals until the early 80s (Koerting 2008, 1072-73), Stephanie is already one of them. The difference between them is not one of social class, as is often the case in teenage films, but rather one of ambition and drive to lead a lifestyle different from that of her parents, to be more educated, classier, have a better job, live in a better neighbourhood and be perceived as coming from a wealthier background. Compared to Stephanie, Tony is directionless. As she contemptuously says, he's nowhere and on his way to nowhere. Tony's ambitions are small scale; he lives for the weekend, when he can shine as a dancer at the local nightclub, 2001 Odyssey, and forget about the dissatisfaction with his job and his home life. To him, the future is tonight, and his long-term plan is to buy a fancy shirt or a new pair of shoes to wear at the club.

The fact that Tony Manero is stuck is made clear in the film's opening scene. The film begins with an aerial view of Manhattan taken from across the Brooklyn bridge. The camera zooms out and cuts to another aerial view featuring another bridge; in this case the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, which connects Brooklyn with Staten Island. The geography of Bay Ridge is thus clearly defined right from the beginning; it is geographically separated both from the hustle and bustle of Manhattan and from the suburban peacefulness of Staten Island. The camera travels along the bridge and zooms in on Manero's neighbourhood, cutting to a view of a train arriving at the station (figs. 2.11-14). The travelling the spectator has done, from Manhattan to Staten Island and across the bridge to Bay Ridge, serves to highlight the distance between this neighbourhood and wealthier ones, and suggests that, should one want to leave Bay Ridge, the journey would be long. As Smith argues, it emphasises the distance between the protagonist's "aspirations, his self-perception, and the reality of his situation" ([2017] 2019, 38).

Figs. 2.11-14. *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977): Same city, different worlds.

When the camera cuts to Tony Manero, the emphasis is placed on walking. We are introduced to the protagonist through a close-up of his feet as he walks down the street to the rhythm of The Bee Gees "Staying Alive," a song that suggests that the protagonist has no clear destination, no goal other than simply getting by. For somebody who is, as the song says, going nowhere, Tony Manero moves a lot. However, his moving takes place in spaces that, as we have seen at the beginning of the scene, are limited. The protagonist walks along the elevated train tracks, hardly stopping to buy a pizza slice and eat it as he walks on, hit on a couple of girls and look at clothes. This emphasis on movement is highlighted by his dancing. Tony lives for the weekend, when he will be able to bust a move. However, dancing only allows him to move within the confines of the dance floor or the studio. In order to truly move, the protagonist needs to change, and in order to change, he needs to realise change is necessary.

The opening scene foreshadows the protagonist's need for someone to help him achieve a better future. When he walks into a clothes store to see if the owner will hold a

shirt for him until he gets paid, The Bee Gees sing "life going nowhere. Somebody help me," which suggests that the help Tony is asking for goes further from what he really is asking the shop owner to do. What he needs is not a new shirt, but rather a way out of his current situation: he needs to get on the train that has just left the station or to cross the bridge. Help comes in the figure of Stephanie, who makes him realise that someone from his background can move on to better things. But meeting Stephanie is not enough and money is not everything, change has to come from within, nobody can make him move unless he wants to. In the course of the film, Tony realises what awaits him unless he makes a radical change in his life; he will either work at the paint store for life like his colleagues, or he will become trapped in a downwards spiral of delinquency. Once this realisation hits him, Tony finally gets on the train and goes to Manhattan. Despite having just attempted to rape Stephanie, Tony apologises, tells her that he wants to find a new job and move to Manhattan like she has done, and asks for her friendship, thus moving away from his family, from his delinquent friends and from the oppressive masculinity prevalent in his environment. By moving away from his family and friends, from Bay Ridge, he is able to see a woman as a friend, and not just as "a nice girl or a cunt" as he previously did. The final shot reminds the spectator that, by leaving Bay Ridge, Tony is hoping to move up on the social scale. While Stephanie gives Tony a hug, a high angle long shot allows the spectator to peek into her hip downtown apartment (fig. 2.15). The film then begins and ends with shots that place the focus on markers of material success. And that signal the protagonist's evolution as far as his aspirations are concerned. During the opening sequence, Tony looks at shirts and shoes as he walks, which suggests that, although he has aspirations, these are superficial. However, by the end of the film, these aspirations have

morphed into more sophisticated—and grown up—ones: Tony now aspires to move up the

social scale.

Fig. 2.15. *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977): Stephanie's aspirational apartment marks her success leaving Bay Ridge.

Although apparently a film about a dancing competition, *Saturday Night Fever*'s

main theme is actually the protagonist's transition to adulthood, his process of becoming an

independent person who can make life-changing decisions independently from his family

and friends. The emphasis that the film places on movement, is not only linked to Tony's

dancing, but also to his being in a transitional stage between adolescence and adulthood.

This emphasis on movement appears throughout emerging adulthood films, with many of

them beginning and ending with the protagonist travelling as they figure out their way into

adulthood. Although in terms of the protagonist's age the film can also be considered a

teenpic, the issues that plague him can be considered as characteristic of emerging

adulthood. Besides, the character that he most closely associates with is past her teenage

years and has moved on to emerging adulthood. It is that adult world that Tony wants to

become a part of. While most emerging adult films tend to focus on a middle-class college-

educated experience of emerging adulthood, which makes their protagonists older, *Saturday Night Fever* explores a different kind of transition to adulthood, one in which the jump from being a high school teenager to a working emerging adult is more abrupt. Furthermore, the fact that the protagonist is still living at home highlights issues related to his socio-cultural background in a way that other emerging adult films do not. By focusing on life after college, social class in emerging adult films is more often than not linked to the level of maturity of the characters, with those who have grown up faster, made more practical decisions and have managed to get better jobs at the top and those who have delayed the process and have thus spent longer earning less at the bottom. Class is rarely linked to the characters' background and the spectator is not often allowed a peek into their past in a way that is not drenched in nostalgia, which makes *Saturday Night Fever* unique as far as emerging adult films go.

2.3.5 Boomers reminisce: *The Secaucus 7* and *The Big Chill*

By the early 1980s the entirety of the baby boom generation had made it into adulthood. The youngest baby boomers—born in 1964—were 16 when the 80s came along, while the oldest were in their mid-thirties. As we have seen, Generation X is thought to have been the first generation for whom emerging adulthood was prevalent. The films made in the 1980s that deal with the baby boomers' transition to adulthood reflect this generation's smoother road to adulthood. Instead of featuring individual stories of finding oneself and becoming and adult, the 1980s see several multi-protagonist films (Azcona 2010) that focus on how an entire group of friends has handled life after college. These films, which focus on the role of friends as a surrogate family, constitute what Charney

(1996, 22) calls "extended family films." According to Charney, these films tend to feature a couple, a rebel and outsiders. The main couple is usually at the centre of the action and plays a parental role. In those extended family films whose characters are in their twenties or thirties, the central couple has usually managed to make a smooth transition into adulthood, while the rebellious characters tend to be those who are still in the process of becoming adults. The emergence of the depiction of friendship groups as a surrogate family can be linked to changing trends in family structures that played a role in the creation of emerging adulthood. The rise of divorce, together with the postponement of marriage and parenthood and a greater degree of sexual freedom for women, resulted in the devaluation of the nuclear family and the emergence of new forms of living, which in turn increased the importance of friendship as a source of emotional support for those who chose to delay or reject marriage. Nevertheless, emerging adults constitute a minority in these films, which reflects the fact that, after college, Baby Boomers generally found it easy to move on to an adult role.

Upon reaching adulthood, many Baby Boomers had left the rebelliousness and idealism of their hippie youth behind and embraced the greed of the 1980s. This shift from hippie to yuppie is reflected in two remarkably similar films that depict a reunion of Boomer college friends; *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (John Sayles, 1980) and *The Big Chill* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1983). *The Big Chill* is a more mainstream film backed by a major studio (Columbia Pictures) and it features a throwback soundtrack that emphasises the nostalgic feeling for the characters' college days, while *Return of the Secaucus Seven* was filmed independently on a small budget and its characters are not as upwardly mobile as those in *The Big Chill*. Other than that, the differences between them are few and far between. They both feature a group of friends who met at college in the 1960s and spend a

few days together some years later, reminiscing about who they were and reflecting on who they have become. The reasons why they come together are also different; the Secaucus Seven are reuniting for fun, while the characters in *The Big Chill* are mourning the death of one of their friends. Neither *Return of the Secaucus Seven* nor *The Big Chill* can be considered emerging adult films. In fact, most of their characters have made big steps as far as adulthood is concerned. Nevertheless, they are worth examining briefly, as they provide a good summary of what it was like for Baby Boomers to make the transition into adulthood. As the characters in both films talk about their past and think about where they are now, the films deal with some of the themes that are usually explored in emerging adult films, such as the concept of selling out, the postponement of marriage and parenthood and friend groups as a surrogate family on which characters rely to solve their problems. Emerging adults are a minority in both films. *Return of the Secaucus Seven* only features one emerging adult, JT (Adam LeFevre), while *The Big Chill* features two, Nick (William Hurt) and Alex (Kevin Costner). The three of them are college dropouts who have gone through a series of occupations that have led them nowhere. JT still hopes to make it as a country singer; Nick dropped out of his PhD programme and became the voice of a successful radio program and, later, a drug dealer; whereas Alex turned down a fellowship and chose not to pursue a career in science despite being a successful student and took on a series of menial jobs before killing himself.

Although Alex does not actually appear in the film, his suicide provides the reason for his friends' get-together, and as the friends discuss his death, his presence pervades the film. At the time of his death, Alex was living at a friend's holiday home and dating a younger woman. By the end of the film, Nick will be living there and dating the same woman. Friends who are further along the transition to adulthood than emerging adult

characters take on the role of caretakers on whom emerging adults can rely for emotional and sometimes financial support. Similarly, in *Return of the Secaucus Seven,* the highest-earning member of the group, offers to help JT launch his music career. JT's friends are worried about him, and the narrative suggests that JT himself is not happy about the way his life is going. For instance, he says that he is turning 29 when he is actually turning 30, which his friends take as fear of growing up. The fact that JT is stuck in his twenties is further emphasised by a scene in which he sings a song about being 21, which comes across as a desperate attempt to hold on to his youth and a refusal to move on. However, his unusually long transition to adulthood is not punished like it is in *The Big Chill*. At Alex's funeral, the priest talks about him not pursuing a career in science and going through "a seemingly random series of occupations" instead. The fact that this is the most remarkable aspect about his life that is mentioned at his funeral indicates the rest of the group's attitude towards a prolonged transition to adulthood. Here, a failure to become an adult results in death (Alex) or criminality (Nick), and refusing to take an opportunity to start a lucrative career constitutes a waste of one's life.

Money seems to be more important to the characters in *The Big Chill* than to the Secaucus Seven. They also seem to have forgotten their ideals along the way to a greater degree. The topic of selling out and betraying one's youthful ideals in order to earn more money or to have a steady job appears in almost every emerging adult film. Just a decade later, so-called slackers will become notorious for their reluctance to jump on the corporate bandwagon. In *The Big Chill* almost every character seems to have compromised their beliefs. Michael (Jeff Goldblum) mentions how in the past he wanted to teach kids in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, while in *Return of the Secaucus Seven* Mike (Bruce MacDonald) and Katie (Maggie Renzi) teach in a problematic school. Whereas the

characters in *The Big Chill* worry that their revolutionary past was just a pose one second only to casually make comments about how much money they make the next, the Secaucus Seven talk about their past going to marches, getting arrested and smoking weed without worrying that they have betrayed it. Instead, they discriminate between people like them—the free-spirited youth of the 60s—and "squares." Irene (Jean Passanante), who works as a speech writer at a senator's office and has thus become, in the words of her friends, "straighter than she used to be," is dating her workmate Chip (Gordon Clapp), whose conservative attire, lack of familiarity with their pop cultural references, and more traditional values set him in opposition to the rest of the group. This clash between conservative characters who find themselves closer to adulthood and more left-leaning ones with more alternative tastes is prevalent throughout the emerging adult film genre, where being more like somebody's parents or holding on to one's youthful identity seems to substitute for the hierarchical system found in high school and college films. As an emerging adult, you are not a nerd or a popular girl, you either resemble a parent or a cool older sibling.

2.3.6 The children of the 60s grow up: *St. Elmo's Fire*

St. Elmo's Fire (Joel Schumacher, 1985) also focuses on a group of college friends that function as a surrogate family. However, two reasons warrant its separate analysis. To begin with, its characters find themselves at a different stage in their development. While the characters in *The Big Chill* and in *Return of the Secaucus Seven* are in their thirties, *St. Elmo's Fire* features a group of friends shortly after graduating from college. More importantly, the film depicts a different generation. By the mid-80s, the oldest members of

the Generation X were leaving their adolescence behind. The film's characters are between the youngest members of the baby boom generation or the oldest members of Generation X, depending on whose definition we take. Nomenclature aside, there is one major difference between them and the slightly older characters of the other two films; they did not get to experience the 1960s as teenagers. While their older brothers were marching and protesting, they were watching the marches on TV. They grew up in a rapidly changing world and have no revolutionary youth to look back on. Besides, the film's cast includes several members of the Brat Pack,[7] famous for their performances in teenage movies, which positions *St. Elmo's Fire* as a film aimed at a younger generation. Although some of the film's characters embody the consumerism and lavish materialism of the 1980s, the film also foreshadows some of the characteristics that will come to dominate Generation X discourse in the 1990s. After *St. Elmo's Fire*—and the stock market crash of 1987—emerging adult films will cease to feature yuppie protagonists to focus on the misunderstood rebel types. Yuppies and the materialistic times that gave rise to them will come to be represented as evil and will appear as outside elements representative of what the characters do *not* want to aspire to.

Reviewers positioned *St. Elmo's Fire* and its target audience somewhere between *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985) and *The Big Chill*, with its characters described as "old enough to enjoy the first flushes of prosperity, but still sufficiently youthful to keep their self-absorption intact" (Maslin, 1985) and the film billed as "the latest kiddie angst movie" (Attanasio 1985). The film deals with what Byrge calls "the freshman year of life" (1985). That is, the first year after graduating from college. What all these reviews make

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7 The Brat Pack received its name—an allusion to the Rat Pack—in a 1985 article written by David Blum and published in New York Magazine. The article followed Emilio Estevez, Judd Nelson and Rob Lowe on a night out and portrayed them as members of a group of entitled, womanising and brattish young actors. The article is claimed to have ruined their reputation and ended their friendship (Blum 1985, Gora 2010).

clear, is that reviewers—who are presumably older than the film's characters—see the film's characters as little more than children. The immaturity of the characters may have been emphasised by the fact that the film's actors had recently starred in teenage films—the film stars no less than three of the five members of *The Breakfast Club*—and by the depiction of the actors' personal lives in the article that gave the Brat Pack its name. As Charney (1996, 29) argues, the twentysomething protagonists of *St. Elmo's Fire* resemble teenage film stereotypes, with each one of them being linked to a different high school clique. This link between emerging adult characters and their high school selves is easy to make in most emerging adult films. As characters navigate the road towards adulthood, the type of person they were in high school still plays a role in their lives, and seeing beyond the judgemental attitudes that come with their youthful identities—like judging people by their music taste, the way they dress or the clique they belong to—is an essential part of the acquisition of an adult identity.

As teenagers, besides going through physical changes, people experience many things for the first time, which grants them inflated importance. This continues during emerging adulthood as we experience the real world for the first time, and Carl Kurlander, St. Elmo's Fire's screenwriter was aware of it. In an interview with Susannah Gora for her book *You Couldn't Ignore Me if You Tried* he states "when you're in your twenties, everything is life or death. Getting an apartment, trying to have that first relationship that works" (Gora 2010, 100). This urgency to achieve one's goal because the opportunity might never present itself again can be seen the way Kirby (Emilio Estevez) idealises a girl he has a crush on to the point of obsession. His view of love is not dissimilar from the idealised conception of love often found in teenage films, where characters are always sure that their love is true even when they do not know the object of their attention very well.

Kirby's fairy-tale beliefs regarding romantic love contrast with the cynical approach of his contemporaries, particularly Kevin's (Andrew McCarthy). Although the validity of his arguments is later undermined when we learn that the real reason why he has not been involved with anyone for a long time is the fact that he is in love with his friend's girlfriend, Kevin's attitude anticipates the bitterness and cynicism that will come to characterise Generation X. He is particularly skeptical about love and the institution of marriage, which he calls an illusion "to create the reality of divorce and then the illusionary need for divorce lawyers." To him, the only way to avoid divorce is to stay away from love. Divorce looms large over this generation and marriage is no longer sacred. Jules (Demi Moore) is obsessed with her father's wife, whom she calls "stepmonster." Despite her life being affected by divorce, or perhaps because of that, she dates a married man and, when one of her friends confronts her about it, she replies "this is the 80s," implying that marriage has now lost its meaning.

With marriage not being a necessary step before cohabitation and parenthood, these previously almost compulsory rites of passage that marked the beginning of adulthood have become meaningless. Billy (Rob Lowe) embodies this loss of relevance. Although he is married and has a kid, he remains the most irresponsible of all his friends, which shows that the traditional markers of adulthood no longer imply an actual entrance into the adult world. This can be seen when Alec (Judd Nelson) says to him "you're a father. When are you gonna grow up?" His wife complains that he is not married to her, but to his friends and to the bar, and Billy wishes he had had a vasectomy. Alec presents a different attitude towards marriage. To him marriage—like everything else—constitutes a lifestyle choice. Despite having cheated on his long-term girlfriend, he wants to marry her and have kids. When Kevin points out that marriage is not going to make him faithful, he disagrees.

Alec's path into adulthood has been quick, and he takes for granted that marriage and kids will soon follow. When his girlfriend Leslie wants to use contraception, he asks her not to use it because they are getting married soon, assuming that she will want to marry him without ever asking first. Now that he has a high-earning job working for a republican senator, his next steps are getting a longer sofa and getting married. By linking marriage with the acquisition of material goods, he makes clear that he sees marriage as just another status symbol.

Fig. 2.16. *St. Elmo's Fire* (Joel Schumacher, 1985) : Billy's clothes highlight his reluctance to grow up.

The film's characters find themselves at different stages regarding the transition to adulthood, with Alec positioned at the top and Billy at the bottom. As we have previously seen, the concept of selling out and finding a way of earning a living and carving an adult identity without compromising one's ideals and losing oneself is central to emerging adult films. For Alec selling out has been easy. It has only taken him a few months to betray his political ideals in order to gain material wealth and he also seems to have no problems repeatedly cheating on his partner. Despite him being a man of dubious morality, this does not seem to affect the group dynamics, which would be unthinkable in later emerging adult films. Alec's clothes, which make him look like he has just stepped out of a meeting, mark

him as an adult and contrast with Billy's look (fig. 2.16). Despite having graduated months

ago, Billy still wears his fraternity's sweater, which symbolises his inability to move on

and leave college behind. He even tries to find a job at the fraternity, but leaves when the

only position open is that of a drug pusher. He also wears his hair long, eyeliner and an

earring, subcultural markers that emphasise his youthfulness and position him as separate

from the adult world. His living space further emphasises this distance between him and

adulthood. The flat he shares with Kevin resembles a teenager's bedroom: it is full of

records, posters and other pop culture artefacts that suggest the two friends place a big

emphasis on popular culture to define who they are (fig. 2.17). As was mentioned before,

Billy is also the most immature in the group. His behaviour is reckless; he is unable to hold

a job or a steady relationship and he shows no respect for authority or the law.

Fig. 2.17. *St. Elmo's Fire* (Joel Schumacher, 1985): Kevin and Billy live in an apartment that denotes their immaturity.

This disrespect towards adult figures is reminiscent both of teenage rebellion and of

Generation X's attitude towards the older generation. Both Billy and Kevin have artistic

inclinations: Billy is an aspiring musician and Kevin an aspiring writer. In emerging adult

films, protagonists usually have an ideal job in mind that tends to be tied to their identity,

related to their cultural consumption and far away from the corporate world. Kevin explicitly rejects one of the most popular careers favoured by yuppies (Koerting 2008) when he mentions that "there are more people in law school right now than there are lawyers on the entire planet," marking an awareness of the difficulties that the overcrowding of the graduate job market will pose for emerging adults. The popularity of law degrees, as well as business administration and medicine, reflects the importance that young adults attached to the financial prospects of their chosen degree (Golburgh Johnson 2008, Koerting 2008). Alec's and Jules' ostentatious living quarters constitute, in the words of Joel Schumacher, the film's director, "a representation of Reagonomics and the yuppification of the time where people were so willing to go into debt just to have image" (quoted in Gora 2010, 100). Nevertheless, in *St. Elmo's Fire* spending power does not necessarily equal maturity. This is most clearly seen in the character of Jules (Demi Moore). Although at first sight Jules appears to have made a successful transition to adulthood, not all that glitters is gold. Jules is the epitome of 1980s consumerism. She spends money that she does not have and believes that a person's identity is defined by their possessions, which can be seen when she asks Alec why he does not buy a car that truly reflects his lifestyle. Her fashionable apartment, with flashy, expensive-looking interior design mirrors her superficiality (fig. 2.18). She claims that god invented credit for fabulous people like her, gets salary advances and dates her married boss, which suggests that not only does she lack the maturity to live within her means, but she also lacks respect for two of the institutions most closely related to adulthood: work and marriage.

Fig. 2.18. *St. Elmo's Fire* (Joel Schumacher, 1985): Jules' apartment is a yuppie's dream.

As we have seen, emerging adulthood plays a more prominent role in *St. Elmo's Fire* than in *The Big Chill* and *Return of the Secaucus Seven*. Here, emerging adults are seen as reckless and immature, but they are not driven to suicide or delinquency, and their friends appear to respect their choices. This suggests that, as the 1980s progressed, a longer transition into adulthood became more common. Although before the 1990s emerging adult films are few and far between, emerging adults gradually made their way into movies in the previous years. From the counter-cultural films of the late 1960s and early 1970s to the ensemble films of the 1980s, emerging adulthood progressively became visible in film, first closely linked to bohemian lifestyles and later among characters who did not necessarily belong to a subculture, indicating its growing prevalence in society. The 1990s will bring along Generation X's coming of age and the moment in which emerging adulthood became commonplace. This will result in a much greater number of films not only depicting emerging adulthood but making it their focal point in a way that very few films before the 1990s did.

CHAPTER THREE

From the Teen Film to the Emerging Adult Film

Emerging adult films share a substantial number of characteristics with teen films. Both genres can be considered youth films, and as such they have protagonists who find themselves in a liminal stage between childhood and adulthood. Like teenpics, emerging adult film narratives focus on the coming-of-age process and the struggle to establish a more mature identity. However, emerging adult films differ from teen films in other aspects that reflect the differences between the two life stages that they depict. Emerging adults have more agency and freedom than adolescents—they have achieved a certain degree of independence from their parents and other institutions that regulate young people's behaviour. Besides, without the established, goal-oriented, age-dependent path that high school or college offer, emerging adults follow individual paths that often have no clear objective and tend to present more twists and turns than those of adolescents. As a

consequence, their lives may sometimes appear erratic and lacking in structure. Although both film genres are ultimately concerned with identity building and growing up, the challenges of each life stage, which constitute the narrative tensions that pervade the genres, give rise to significant differences between them.

The fact that emerging adulthood has a specific starting point immediately after adolescence, does not make the beginning of this life stage a radical rupture with an individual's adolescent identity. For instance, although college students may have left the parental home, they might still be treated like children. Transitions do not take place overnight, and emerging adults' adoption of adult roles is progressive. As a consequence, early emerging adulthood and late emerging adulthood present different challenges. Whereas younger emerging adults may be happy taking their time to figure things out, drifting from job to job or living without ties, older emerging adults value stability and are usually more concerned with taking the necessary steps towards lasting commitments. Differences between early and late emerging adulthood are also reflected in emerging adult films. Films with early emerging adult protagonists borrow teen film conventions more often, leading to a generic proximity that reflects the protagonists' remaining links to adolescence and makes the films appealing to both teenage and twentysomething audiences. This is most visible in college films, where emerging adults often find that college replicates the hierarchical structures of high school and their dream of reinventing themselves, leaving cliques aside and forging a new identity is shattered. Younger emerging adults may still be sexually and romantically inexperienced and they may still see life in terms of high school cliques, which results in films that borrow teenpic conventions in order to deal with emerging adult concerns. For instance, *Adventureland* (Greg Mottola, 2009) transfers the hierarchical structure of the high school to a summer

job in an amusement park, where the cool kids are in charge of the rides while the misfits are relegated to games. Despite being in their twenties, the characters are defined in terms of popularity—just like they were in high school—and their assigned tasks and the spaces they occupy reflect their status within the park's hierarchy. On top of that, the film features a loss of virginity plot that further aligns it with the teen film genre. However, at the same time, the film deals with life after college graduation, taking responsibility for one's actions and the challenge to become financially independent, all of which are emerging adult concerns.

This chapter explores the differences and similarities between emerging adult films and teen films through a comparative analysis of a teen film—*The Breakfast Clu*b (John Hughes, 1985)—, an emerging adult film—*Clerks* (Kevin Smith, 1994)—and a film that features both teenagers and emerging adults as protagonists and can be read either as a teen pic or as an emerging adult film—*Empire Records* (Alan Moyle, 1995). In these three films the action takes place during a single day within a more or less restricted space: the high school library in *The Breakfast Club* and the workplace in *Clerks* and *Empire Records*. These similar temporal and spatial restrictions help to highlight the connections between the two genres. At the same time, the emerging adults in *Clerks* and *Empire Records* are in their early twenties and some of them have not even left the parental home, which means that they still have a long way to go in their transition to adulthood. Thus, both films deal with the concerns of early emerging adulthood, which further accentuates the interplay between the two genres. While films that deal with the challenges of late adulthood present characters who are usually more detached from their adolescent selves, for characters in their early twenties their teenage experience is their immediate past and, in some cases, continues to exert influence on their identity and worldview, especially when they are

reluctant to grow up. Despite this generic proximity, the films analysed present points of view that differ from those of the teen film. They depict different types of intergenerational and intragenerational conflict, different romantic challenges that are portrayed in visually distinct ways, and slightly different uses of space that emphasise emerging adults' greater freedom of movement.

Emerging adult films have most often been analysed together with teen films (Martin [1998] 2012, Doherty 2002, Stephens 2002, Hentges 2006, Tropiano 2006, Driscoll 2011, Colling 2019). These authors view adolescence as a flexible category that goes beyond the boundaries of the protagonists' teen years. For instance, Driscoll considers that the focus of teen film is "not teenagers per se but the process of becoming a recognizable adult subject." (2014, 304). In contrast, Shary (2014, 19) and Smith ([2017] 2019) consider that films featuring college-age characters focus on different aspects of youth, which sets them apart from teen films (2014, 19). Like them, I contend that films that deal with emerging adult characters differ from teenage films. In order to clarify the differences between the two, I will start by presenting an overview of the generic conventions of the teenage film that will partly serve as a basis from which to observe the differences and similarities between teenage films and emerging adult films. The focus will not be placed on a historical review of the teenage film, nor will I present an exhaustive discussion of teen film subgenres such as teen horror films or teen sex comedies. Instead, the analysis will concentrate on teenage films made in the 1980s and 1990s, and it will be restricted to what Shary (2002) calls romantic melodramas and school pictures or what Tropiano (2006) denominates "teen-angst" films, an umbrella category which includes romantic comedies and coming-of-age dramas among others. The reason for this decision is that the 1980s constitute a foundational moment in the genre when, partly thanks to the films written and

directed by John Hughes, the generic conventions of the teen film were rewritten. Furthermore, teenpics from the 1980s and 1990s portray the same generations that will later appear in emerging adult films of the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s. The teen film categories used are those which share the most with emerging adult films, which so far have tended to be romantic comedies or comedy-dramas that emphasise the highs and lows of the stage of life they depict. Then I will move on to the close reading of the three films, placing a special emphasis on generational conflict (both with the older generations and within the peer group), their attitudes regarding love and their use of space.

These three films have been chosen not only because they resemble each other, but also due to the fact that they represent the same generation—Generation X—thus allowing for an analysis in which it is not necessary to delve into generational differences between Xers and millennials. In *Empire Records*, emerging adult and teen identities are developed side by side, which gives way to interactions and oppositions that do not appear often in other films, where teens and emerging adults tend to inhabit separate spheres and twentysomethings rarely get the chance to interact with older teenagers despite the fact that the age difference between them is very short.

3.1 The teen film

The presentation of adolescent tastes in cinema predates both the teen film itself and the use of the term teenager to refer to the 13-19 demographic. The 1950s—and *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955) in particular—tend to be the decade associated with the birth of the teenpic. Doherty pinpoints 1955 as the birth year of teen film and names *Rock Around the Clock* (Fred F. Sears, 1956) as the first box office success "marketed to

teenagers *to the pointed exclusion of their elders*" (2002, 57 [emphasis in original]). Nevertheless, other theorists consider the teenpic an earlier genre. Driscoll argues that some of the conventions of the genre developed between the 1910s and the 1930s, including the juvenile delinquent character type (2011, 14). Similarly, Considine argues that, in the 1940s, films reflected the emergence of adolescence "as a separate stage replete with its own views, values, and tribal customs" (1985, 42). Regardless of the exact moment in which the teen film genre came into being, what is clear is that the genre developed alongside the life stage it depicts and, at the same time, it helped to shape the nature of adolescence itself. Teenagers find themselves at a key point in the development of their identity, and they are prone to utilising the symbols and myths provided by popular culture to make sense of the kind of person they want to be, which makes the relationship between adolescence and teen film a two-way one in which they feed off each other (Considine 1985, 3; Shary 2002, 7; Hentges 2006, 10).

The brief outline of the generic conventions of the teen film that follows focuses on films made during the 1980s and after. This answers to two specific reasons. First of all, the generations who came of age during the past four decades were more likely to experience emerging adulthood. Those who were teenagers in the 1980s went through emerging adulthood in the 1990s, while 1990s teenagers became emerging adults during the first decade of the 21st century. These teenage films therefore portray the same generations that are the focus of this thesis: Generation X and the millennial generation. Furthermore, the 1980s saw the teen film "in the process of changing out of all recognition" (Christie 2009, 63). During this decade, partly thanks to the work of writer and director John Hughes, whose films have become canonical, the conventions of the genre were rewritten (Shary and Smith 2021). Shary attributes the proliferation of teen

films during the 1980s to the rise of the shopping mall as youth hangout. During this decade, as movie theatres began to disappear from city centres and move to the new shopping malls, the film industry saw the need to appeal to the people who frequented those malls; teenagers. At the same time, the teen film had to keep reinventing itself in order to avoid retelling the same story over and over again, which led to a wider array of teenpic narratives (2002, 6). What is more, 1980s teenagers grew up in a media landscape which was substantially different from their elders'. They had a television when they were children and became teenagers as MTV was launched in 1981, thus growing up surrounded by a greater variety of visual narratives and advertisements aimed at them, which can be seen to have influenced their relationship both with media texts and with consumer culture, as well as their preferred visual styles.

The borders of the teen film are not well-defined. Lee describes the genre as "amorphous" and made up of films that may seem to have nothing in common other than the fact that they deal with the process of coming-of-age (2010, 7). It is considered an essentially hybrid genre that tends to appear in combination with another, well-established genre, such as the romantic comedy or the horror film (Speed 1995, 24; Deleyto 2003, 20; Nelson 2011, 6; Martin [1998] 2012). In addition, the boundaries between the different teen subgenres are also porous, as certain characters and settings tend to appear throughout the genre (Tropiano 2006, 143). Unlike other genres, the teen film is not defined by subject matter but by the age of its protagonists, which is the same as the age of its target audience and makes it "directly connected to specific notions of different youth behaviours and styles" (Shary 2002, 11, Tropiano 2021). Teen films are often structured around coming-of-age plots that represent a move towards greater autonomy and, eventually, adulthood, such as high school graduation, the loss of virginity or the first love (Stephens 2002, 124;

Driscoll 2011, 2; Colling 2019, 2). Rites of passage like the prom and the graduation ceremony are often imbued with heightened importance and gravity as teens take it as a key step in their transition to adulthood (Hentges 2006, 57). However, although these rites of passage symbolise the end of an era for senior students, they do not grant characters adult status (Driscoll 2011, 70). The prom, which Deleyto (2003, 214) argues is to the teenpic as the happy ending is to the comedy or the duel is to the western, provides an excuse to reunite all cliques under one roof, thus connecting it to another major narrative concern of the teenpic: conflict within different character types and the struggle between individuality and community (Deleyto 2003, 216). The prom also provides characters the opportunity to be celebrated for their attractiveness or popularity (Driscoll 2011, 2), both of which constitute qualities that position characters at the top of the high school hierarchy. The prom is also linked with the culmination of a romantic or sexual plot, whether it is the quest to lose one's virginity before going to college or the romantic culmination of an intimate relationship.

Writing about 1990s teenpics, Wood (2003, 312) describes sex and education as "the structuring presence and structuring absence of the cycle as a whole," and he argues that, while sex and love pervade the narrative, education is remarkably absent. Bulma (2005, 81) claims that this lack of interest in education is only characteristic of suburban teen films, while in urban teen films—which tend to feature working-class characters and ethnic minorities—academic success becomes a key narrative element, which reflects the fact that characters from lower socio-economic backgrounds may not have the means to obtain a second chance while middle-class characters have more opportunities. However, despite the genre's lack of interest in academic pursuits, educational settings—most often a suburban high school—are prevalent in teen films. The school usually serves as "a

symbolic site of social evolution, […] a site of individual growth through not only educational achievement but also the earning of social acceptance" (Shary 2002, 26). The high school can be seen as "a microcosm of society in which the central agency is transferred from adults to adolescents" (Lee 2010, 55). Until the 2000s, teachers, coaches and other authority figures were often portrayed as ineffectual, disengaged and sometimes even morally corrupt, leaving teenagers to their own devices when it came to figuring out the right way to behave (Shary 2014, 36). Within the high school young people often have some of the agency that they lack in the real world, where they are not considered full citizens. However, as Hentges (2006, 105) points out, teenage culture is informed by adult culture and it tends to reproduce its conventions. For instance, those kids at the top of the high school hierarchy tend to come from privileged backgrounds that allow them to buy into the consumer goods that mark them as fashionable and desirable, whereas marginalised students—nerds, geeks, misfits, rebels—often come from working-class or economically disadvantaged families and cannot buy their way into the popular crowd. As a result, the high school caste system reproduces—and sometimes reinforces—the divisions of adult society.

The high school serves as a site where the power dynamics between different cliques are played out, which makes it "a land of opportunity" for some and "a locus of oppression" for others (Shary 2002, 27). These cliques are populated by character types who are associated with certain personal styles, hobbies, attitudes, settings and storylines. For instance, nerds tend to be male, dress unfashionably, be sexually inexperienced, enjoy computer games and be good at school; they are often found inside computer labs or in the library and their peers may take advantage of their intellectual skills (Shary 2002, 33). Shary (2002, 31-32) establishes five character types that appear recurrently: nerds,

delinquents, rebels, popular types and jocks. Jocks and the popular crowd are placed at the top of the pyramid, with nerds—despite being the ones who actually care about school—at the bottom. Teenage characters must conform to two sets of rules: On the one hand, they must obey their parents and teachers and, on the other hand, they must abide by the rules of the high school hierarchy, which in some ways mirror those of adult society. The fact that parents in teen films are often emotionally disconnected or entirely absent makes conflict between different high school cliques a main source of tension. The different spaces of the teen film represent varying degrees of teenage independence from adult authorities and they therefore present teenagers with different opportunities to socialise. Nelson (2011, 224) names the educational institution, the family home and the "local hangout" as the most common spaces of the teen film. Writing about youth films in general, Lee (2010, 37) adds other liminal spaces to the list, like parks and street corners. She adds that, although these spaces may be privately owned and have security cameras installed, they offer teenagers sites where adult supervision is not as tight as at home or in school. Outside the parental home, teenagers are free to live without having to comply with their parents' expectations, while being outside the heavily coded spaces of the high school gives them the opportunity to interact with members of other social groups without breaking the rigid rules of the high school caste system, where members of their clique monitor and judge their every move. Neil Campbell defines the family home and the high school as "comfortable but imprisoning" spaces whose rules seem "perverse and restrictive" (2000, 20), which drives teenage characters outside of these spaces and into others where they can establish their identity in their own terms.

One of the ways in which teen film characters transcend their clique is through sex and romance. Nelson's quantitative analysis of the most common storylines across a

selection of 100 1980s teen films revealed that looking for sex or love appears in 94% of the comedies she analysed, while 77% of dramas contained a storyline about romantic love[1]. Her findings show love and sex storylines as the most common ones across the comedy teen film of the 1980s, with self-discovery and self-acceptance as the other storyline that appears in the vast majority of the films analysed. In dramas, love appears as the third most common storyline, second to self-discovery and self-acceptance and standing up for others (Nelson 2011, 353-57). It has been argued that, in teenpics, falling in love and having sex do not usually coalesce in the same narrative (Shary 2002, 212; Wood 2003, 312). In her study about onscreen representations of female adolescence, Hentges (2006, 13) suggests that there is a gendered approach to the teen film's representation of sex. She argues that the quest to have sex is placed at the centre of the narrative in films with boy protagonists, while romantic narratives prevail in films with girl protagonists[2]. At the same time, girl protagonists are more likely to deal with sexuality as a discussion topic, but when they do have sex, it tends to happen "off-screen or post-narrative and almost always romantically portrayed." However, as Speed (1995, 26) argues, in teen films both boys and girls are to a large extent romantically or sexually inexperienced, which the narrative highlights and connects to adolescence itself. Shary (2002, 214) points out that teen films tend to establish a relation between social groups and romantic and sexual skills. The high school caste system is not only related to socio-economic divisions, but also to physical beauty and the performance of normative gender roles (Smith [2017] 2019, 72),

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[1] Nelson's study also analysed other teen film subgenres, namely action/adventure, science-fiction/fantasy and horror, which have been left out of this study since they are not as relevant to the analysis of emerging adult films.

[2] Recent teen films with girl protagonists, like *To All the Boys I Loved Before* (Susan Johnson, 2018), *Sierra Burgess is a Loser* (Ian Samuels, 2018) and *Moxie* (Amy Poehler, 2021) follow this trend, but teen television series like *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019–) and *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019–) contain explicit sex scenes focused on their female characters, which may point towards a shift in the way the sexuality of teenage girls is depicted onscreen.

which makes other teen film characters believe that popular students will make better romantic or sexual partners and leads to conflict in which this belief is revealed to be untrue.

Teen film characters often date outside their clique, thus subverting the unwritten rules of the high school caste system and emphasising the unfairness of social divisions (Speed 1998, 5). Choosing a partner who belongs to a different social group represents an assertion of the character's individuality against both group and parental expectations. As Shary (2002, 215) explains, parents often expect their teenage children to choose a partner that they approve of, which is usually someone with similar socio-economic status, clean-cut, polite and ambitious. Teenagers' choice of romantic partner often constitutes a double rebellion: against their peers and against their parents. Unlike adult characters, teens do not usually have doubts regarding their love or whether they are ready to commit to a relationship. Instead, the obstacles that stand between the couple's union are always external, such as parental or clique opposition, race, age or social class (Leitch 1992, Shary 2002, 214). Even though teenage love rarely lasts a lifetime, teen films generally provide a happy ending in which the couple transcends the social order imposed by their parents and their peers by not doing what is expected of them. These romantic happy endings are related to the development of the protagonist's independence, symbolising a newly acquired maturity that allows them to make their own decisions independently of what their parents, their friends or society think.

Teenage films depict teenagers' attempts to define their identity as individuals, struggling to defy the conventions of both the adult world and the high school hierarchy. Teenpics are therefore structured around opposites, such as youth and adulthood,

carelessness and responsibility (Nelson 2011, 376), craziness and innocence (Martin 1994, 67), rebellion and reconciliation (Doherty 2002, 2008), consumerism and a refusal to conform (Driscoll 2011, 4), autonomy and conformity (Hentges 2006, 14) and innocence and knowingness (Colling 2019, 4), to name a few. Teenage identities are identities in transition, in the process of becoming. Adrian Martin (1994, 68; [1998] 2012) argues that teen films, even the most trivial ones, deal with the liminality of youth, and that it is this in-betweenness that gives adolescence its gravity. He argues that going through a liminal experience grants every moment inflated significance and makes it seem like anything can happen and everything will last forever. However, it could be argued that this liminal experience, together with changing definitions of adulthood and a lack of role models, directions and signposts, could also lead to alienation and anomie. Teen films often feature adults who cannot provide answers to teenage issues, who are ineffectual, disengaged, self-centred or simply not there. With adults who are unable to provide guidance, teenagers are left to fend for themselves and sometimes even adopt parental roles (Nelson 2011, 140). Adulthood as portrayed in the adults that inhabit the teen film is not something to aspire to, but rather something to avoid. This portrayal of adulthood can be seen to reflect a rejection of 1980s greed and the conservative values that the older generation embodies, as well as a rejection of the baby boom generation itself.

One way in which teenagers define their identity in opposition to adult values is through the consumption of youth culture—cultural products and fashions that explicitly mark them as separate from the adult world. As Lesley Speed (1998, 107) argues, consuming pop culture together unites teen film characters against adults and makes them feel like they are part of the same group, even when they belong to different high school groups. Martin (2012) argues that a certain "pop knowingness" pervades teenpics, in which

characters live "in and through references to pop culture, its images, catchphrases and emotional experiences." This celebration of pop culture can be seen in the scripts' intertextuality, the set design (particularly the teenage bedroom), the emphasis on fashion and, most evidently, in the use of music. Music plays a prominent role in the films' structure. Writing about the MTV aesthetic—a fast-paced editing technique borrowed from music video conventions—Dickinson (2001) argues that teen films seem to be structured around their soundtrack. Music is sometimes played non-diegetically in order to emphasise the characters' feelings or the nature of their actions. For instance, rock music often plays when characters rebel against adults or when they misbehave. Diegetic music tends to feature prominently across the genre. Characters are often seen engaging with music; listening to music, singing along, attending parties and concerts or performing. Besides, they often rely on music to convey feelings that they are unable to find the words for, letting music speak for them and revealing an intimate connection and self-identification with pop culture. Their consumption of popular culture is used as an identity marker and a community maker, as characters define themselves through the music they consume and come together through their mutual enjoyment of music.

Adolescence is typically considered to end at the age of 19. However, in recent years there have been calls to expand the end-point of adolescent to the age of 24 in order to account for continued growth during the third decade of life as well as for the delay in the transition to adult roles (Sawyer et al. 2018). This overlapping of adolescence and early emerging adulthood can also be observed in films. As we discussed in Chapter Two, teenage film conventions are often used in films whose protagonists are of college age, particularly in those whose action is set in an educational institution, which allows college films to make use of the same settings and character types that are found in teenage films.

In contrast, those films with characters of college age which do not foreground the college experience may use some of the conventions of the teenage films, but these cease to be the focus of the films as they are replaced by emerging adult film conventions. Emerging adult films—like the life stage they depict—retain elements in common with teenage films: they are partly defined by the age of their protagonists and are often structured around coming-of-age plots, they deal with the trials and tribulations of each life stage and they feature both intergenerational and intragenerational conflict. Despite these similarities both genres present different character types, conflicts, settings, coming-of-age moments and attitudes towards love and their future. As we will see in the next section, films that depict early emerging adulthood emphasise this overlap between the two life stages, making greater use of teen film conventions along with those characteristic of emerging adult film.

3.2 From Saturday detention to Saturday shifts: the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood in *The Breakfast Club*, *Clerks* and *Empire Records*

The Breakfast Club, *Clerks* and *Empire Records* share a similar narrative structure. The three films take place during a single day and are set mostly in a single location: a high school library in *The Breakfast Club* and the workplace—a convenience store and a record store, respectively—in *Clerks* and *Empire Records*. These relatively small places that offer no escape force the protagonists to interact with those around them, with schoolmates that they would otherwise never talk to or with customers that they need to serve. Their inability to up and leave opens the door to conflict and confrontations that would not take place elsewhere, while the long time spent together in a place with few distractions leads

characters to talk to each other to pass the time, which results in dialogue-heavy narratives and the forging of unexpected bonds. Despite their similarities, the films offer different perspectives on the prospect of spending a day stuck at school or work. The teenagers in *The Breakfast Club* are forced to spend Saturday in detention, which is a frequent occurrence only for one of them. Similarly, in what feels like the grown-up equivalent of a Saturday spent in detention, *Clerks'* protagonist Dante (Brian O'Halloran) is called into work on his day off, which also happens to be a Saturday. The protagonists in both films are therefore forced to spend their Saturday somewhere they would rather not be, which gives them a feeling of resignation and apathy regarding the prospect of their day.

On the other hand, in *Empire Records* the working day is filled with excitement. As Mark (Ethan Embry) enthusiastically announces while breaking the fourth wall to address the spectator, it is Rex Manning Day. The fact that Rex Manning (Maxwell Caulfield) is an old-fashioned singer that most of the employees dislike does not matter. Rex Manning's in-store signing event gives staff a respite from the monotony of retail life, which they welcome with pleasure despite their overall indifference towards the subject. The punished teenagers of *The Breakfast Club*, like *Clerks'* Dante, brood over the unfairness of their situation, which contrasts with Mark's positivity in *Empire Records* when he announces to no-one in particular: "We mustn't dwell. No, not today. We can't! Not on Rex Manning Day!" Nevertheless, his attitude is not shared by everyone in the store. Upon learning of an agreement to sell the independent record store that has been operating since 1959 and turn it into a chain, night manager Lucas (Rory Cochrane) takes the day's money after closing time and drives to Atlantic City in a desperate attempt to win enough money to save the store. After he gambles the money away, his failure to return the money does not take long to reach his manager Joe (Anthony LaPaglia), who now has to worry about the missing

money on top of the store's imminent sale and its accompanying changes to his lifestyle. It could be said that the attitude to work varies according to the characters' age and consequent degree of responsibility. While Mark, the youngest, is enthusiastic and energetic, Lucas—an emerging adult—does not share this excitement. He has a more cynical and ironic attitude, and is worried about the shop's future and the lost money, although that does not stop him from joking around with his workmates. Finally, Joe, the manager, carries the weight of responsibility. Although it was Lucas who gambled the money, Joe is the person in charge and thus the one who will suffer the consequences. Joe is older than his employees, and his relationship to the workplace is different. The film marks this division between Joe and the rest by making them occupy different spaces: Joe is often seen locked up in his office, visually separated from the youth and carelessness of his employees. Although unlike *Clerks'* protagonists, most of *Empire Records'* employees are happy to be at work, the day feels like a turning point that will result in the end of an era, granting the film a bittersweet feeling and a sense of preemptive nostalgia for a time that is not over yet.

Despite the different attitudes regarding a day spent at school or work, the films share many common themes. At their core, they are films about growing up, but different life stages come with different challenges. While they all emphasise youthful rebellion and paint an unappealing picture of adulthood, they present different types of conflicts. The teenage characters in *The Breakfast Club* and *Empire Records* struggle under the weight of parental expectations (or lack thereof) and peer pressure; while the emerging adults in *Clerks* and *Empire Records* have left those issues aside and face challenges characteristic of emerging adulthood, like the feeling of being left behind while others move on to

adulthood, indecision and apathy regarding their future and disillusionment with corporate values, among others.

3.2.1 Rebellion against authority figures, institutions and values

Youthful rebellion pervades the three films as the protagonists—both teenagers and emerging adults—defy adult authority, whether it is embodied by the high school principal, store owners and managers or the authorities. The protagonists of the three films leave the spaces they are supposed to be confined to and purposefully break the rules of detention and the workplace. None of the high schoolers in *The Breakfast Club* are eager to write an essay on the reasons why they are in detention, and they spend the day chatting to each other and breaking the rules instead. Similarly, the characters in *Clerks* lack enthusiasm towards their job, which seems to consist in passing time until their shift ends. Rebellion takes different forms despite the fact that disobedience runs through the three films: teenage characters are portrayed as eager to unite against a common enemy, while emerging adult characters channel their frustration into cynicism and sarcastic detachment. Additionally, whereas in *The Breakfast Club* every authority figure seems to behave in a way that is detrimental to the protagonists' wellbeing, *Clerks* and *Empire Records* show a different sort of conflict. Conflict with certain adult values and authority figures appears throughout emerging adult films, but it is not as widespread as it is in teen films. Instead of showing rebellion against adult values as an intergenerational power struggle, emerging adult films tend to showcase rebellion against a specific sort of adulthood that is seen as undesirable and may be embodied by characters who are the same age as the protagonists, making the conflict intragenerational. Emerging adult characters do not rebel against all

adults, but against the notion that adulthood implies giving up one's values, ideals and passions. Adulthood is then seen as a loss of fun and individuality for the sake of conformity and monetary gain. As a result of these different types of conflicts and modes of rebellion, the protagonists show different attitudes towards their work. Teenagers are eager to prove adults wrong, which can be seen in the letter that the protagonists write to the principal in *The Breakfast Club,* while emerging adults are more likely to express their contempt through a refusal to take their work seriously. This difference in attitudes can be seen in *Empire Records*, where it is one of the youngest employees who has the idea of having a party to save the shop, uniting cliques, subcultures and generations against a common enemy, which contrasts with Lucas' rash decision to gamble the money, a solitary endeavour that could have had fatal consequences for the shop.

Absent, immoral and materialistic

Teenage films from the 1980s and 1990s often portray authority figures who are incompetent, clueless or entirely absent (Shary 2014, 36). While in teenpics this results in an inter-generational clash between teenagers and adults, in emerging adult films authority figures are not necessarily older than the protagonists and may sometimes be younger. As the grown-up world of work takes the place of school and the family as the institution that rules over protagonists and dictates their behaviour, in emerging adult films bosses, managers and more competent workmates replace parents, teachers and principals as authority figures. In *Clerks*, the store's manager is not only entirely absent, but also dishonest. Dante's unnamed boss promised him he would be able to leave work at midday. However, as the day goes by Dante finds out that his boss is actually in Vermont and he

will be stuck at work all day, which encourages him to rebel and close the store to play a hockey game on the roof. Similarly, Vernon (Paul Gleason), the vice-principal in *The Breakfast Club*, exhibits less than model behaviour, threatening and insulting a student and looking at confidential files. Adult immorality is also shown in *Empire Records* when it is revealed that Rex Manning has no qualms about sleeping with underage girls. Thus, authority figures are exposed as morally corrupt in the three films, all of which cast a negative light on adulthood and offer no adult role models, or at least no traditional ones.

The adult world also tends to be depicted as greedy, materialistic and shallow. In *Empire Records* this is exemplified by two characters: boomer singer Rex Manning and the store's owner Mitchell Beck (Ben Bode). Although Mitch belongs to the same generation as some of the characters, his status as the store owner, together with his business attire, mark him as someone with an adult outlook. Mitch values money above all things, which is seen when he enters the store and instantly tells two of the employees that "there should be more selling." He complains that his "beatnik father" turned his grandfather's toilet and bidet store into a record shop, which he considers a stupid decision because there is more money to be made in the toilet business. From his point of view, work is not something one should enjoy or be passionate about, it is simply something you do to make money. This contrasts with the attitude of the rest of the characters, who, as is common among emerging adults, would rather have a job that they are passionate about than a well-paying one. For instance, Jane (Debi Mazar) quits her job as Rex Manning's assistant and asks Joe if he has a job as a night manager, which suggests that downgrading professionally is an option as long as she can do something she likes.

Rex Manning is represented as a product of a bygone era, which can be seen in his outdated look and music and is emphasised by the fact that the song "Video Killed the Radio Star" begins playing when Mark announces Rex Manning Day. This song, which was the first song to play on MTV when the channel started airing in 1981, positions the singer as a symbol of the radio days, which were considered a thing of the past (Tannenbaum and Marks, 2011). In a similar vein, *The Breakfast Club*'s Vernon is wearing an old-fashioned outfit that prompts Bender (Judd Nelson) to compare him to Barry Manilow, a 1970s pop singer who, like Rex Manning, is perceived as old-fashioned and out of touch by the next generation. In contrast, Dante's boss in Clerks remains absent throughout the film. His absence underscores his incompetence and places the focus on the tedium of the workplace as well as on the often condescending attitude of the store's customers. As a result, Dante and Randal's (Jeff Anderson) rebellion is not against a specific individual but, rather, against the monotony of service jobs.

Unity in rebellion

Disdain towards the older generation and towards adult values is what unites initially dissimilar characters in both *The Breakfast Club* and *Empire Records*. Each one of the five teenagers in *The Breakfast Club* belongs to a different clique. Claire (Molly Ringwald) belongs to the popular crowd, Andy (Emilio Estevez) is a jock, Allison (Ally Sheedy) is a weirdo, Brian (Anthony Michael Hall) is a nerd and Bender is a rebel. None of the protagonists except for Claire and Andy, both members of popular cliques and thus positioned at the top of the high school caste system, appear to have had any interactions prior to their day in detention. At first, the prospect of spending a day with schoolmates

that they perceive as different from themselves is daunting to say the least, which is voiced by Claire when she expresses her frustration by saying: "I know it's detention, but I don't think I belong in here." As the narrative moves forward, the characters begin to see beyond the stereotypes and to realise that they have more in common than they ever imagined. This process begins through rebellion against adult authority as personified by the vice-principal.

When Bender breaks one of Vernon's rules by shutting the library door, the others complain. However, despite their initial opposition to Bender's rule-breaking, none of them snitch on him when Vernon demands to know who broke his rule, which indicates that the bond between the five teenagers—however loose—is strong enough to unite them against a common enemy embodied by the school's vice-principal, the film's representative of adult authority. When Vernon tries to prop the door open with a chair, his attempt fails and the door slams shut on his face. The vice-principal is framed in a long shot from the inside of the library, between three different door frames, which conveys the feeling that he is also stuck in detention and unable to escape (fig. 3.1). Besides, he is dressed in a shade of brown that almost matches that of the library's doors, walls and counter, which makes him come across as part of the furniture, as an element that will remain part of the school long after the students have left. His inability to do something as simple as keeping a door open presents him as a ridiculous figure who should not be trusted with any important tasks. Vernon can be heard screaming off-screen while we are shown a succession of shots showing the students' reaction to his failure to keep the door open. Despite the fact that the other students urged Bender to keep the door open, Claire, Brian, Andy and Allison are amused at the vice-principal's lack of success, which brings them together for the first time and positions Vernon as someone so deeply uncool that even nerds make fun of him. After

this initial episode of group consciousness, Vernon shows his true colours. His attempts to keep the door open by placing an object in front of it stop when Bender sarcastically reminds him that, in doing so, he would incur in a violation of the fire code and potentially ruin his career. This incident not only exposes Vernon as incompetent at his own job, but also reveals the conscious nature of Bender's rebellion. Bender, the criminal, does not break the rules because he ignores them. His is a conscious choice to misbehave. By using the rules that he so often breaks, Bender belittles Vernon's authority and outsmarts him.

Fig. 3.1. Vernon is also stuck in detention.

The confrontation that follows is filmed in a way that reflects and subverts the school hierarchy. As Bender insists in talking back at the vice-principal, Vernon keeps adding more days in detention. The beginning of this exchange shows Bender, who is sitting down, from Vernon's point of view. From Vernon's position Bender looks smaller, which is further underscored by the vice-principal's position in the foreground taking up half of the frame (fig. 3.2). This framing choice reflects both Vernon's authority over Bender and his desire to make the rebellious student disappear. As the argument heats up, the camera pulls in until both characters are filmed in close-ups that allow the spectator to perceive their

growing frustration and anger. At the same time, the angles from which Bender and Vernon are shot gradually become more similar, suggesting that the power that Vernon initially seems to wield over Bender is disappearing, and positioning the two characters as equals (fig. 3.3). Power dynamics are shifting, and the high schoolers who were arguing with Bender minutes ago now show concern for him. While Bender and Vernon fight, Claire and Andy share concerned looks that imply sympathy towards their school mate. The fact that this confrontation draws the group closer together is further emphasised by the fact that, after this argument, Allison takes off her parka's hood for the first time, which indicates her willingness to stop shutting herself away. and marks her first step towards opening up to the rest of the group. During this scene, Vernon also behaves in a condescending manner towards Brian and expresses beliefs about Andy based on his status as a jock. This realisation that the vice-principal only sees them as mere stereotypes regarding their status within the high school caste system further draws the group together, inspiring their final essay in which they criticise Vernon's shortsightedness.

Fig. 3.2. Framing conveys Vernon's power over Bender.

Fig. 3.3. Framing power dynamics.

Empire Records has been described as "*Breakfast Club* at the record store" (Petersen 2014). Like *The Breakfast Club*, *Empire Records* features an array of teenage protagonists who belong to different cliques. In reductive terms, Corey (Liv Tyler) is a nerd, Gina (Renée Zellweger) a slut, Debra (Robin Tunney) a misfit and Mark a stoner. However, unlike *The Breakfast Club*, *Empire Records* also includes protagonists who are no longer teenagers. Scriptwriter Carol Heikkinen, who based the script on her own experience working at *Tower Records*, has expressed her interest in showing how some of the kids worked at the record store to earn some extra cash before college, whereas others had to make a living out of their meagre salary (Petersen 2014). Employees in their early twenties, like Lucas and A.J. (Johnny Whitworth), do not belong to a specific clique. Instead, what defines them and unites them is their love for alternative rock and their

rejection of corporate values, which in this film are embodied by chain stores. Despite the fact that the employees have different personalities, concerns, and reasons to work at the store, a corporate takeover would affect the lives of all of them. Although they would be working in the same location and performing the same tasks, the rules of the workplace would be different: they would no longer be able to wear their own clothes or listen to their favourite artists. The employees fear that those rules would erase those markers of individuality that differentiate them from the rest. When Lucas gambles the day's earnings in Atlantic City, he expresses his desire to strike "a blow at all that is evil" and make the world "a better place to live in." For the twentysomething night manager, corporations are the enemy. His intentions are met by puzzled looks from the older people gambling at the casino, which stresses the generational divide between young people like himself and adults who cannot conceive a corporate takeover as a negative thing.

Empire Record's older characters, store manager Joe and Rex Manning's manager Jane, share the employees' attitude towards the store's conversion into a chain. Although Joe and Jane are old enough to lament the loss of their youth, both of them join the younger employees in their rebellion against corporate values: Jane resigns as Rex Manning's manager without knowing what she is going to do next, while Joe supports his employees' idea to throw an illegal party in order to raise money to save the store, confronting the owner and eventually buying the store off him. This alignment of Joe and Jane's values with those of the younger characters emphasises that the film's rejection of adulthood is only partial: the problem is not growing up, but growing up discarding those elements of oneself that once were integral to the individual's identity. Jane's resignation is symbolic of this rejection: she has realised that she would rather lose her job than work for Rex Manning, an artist whose music she does not enjoy and whose values do not align

with hers. Integrity—both musical and moral—proves more important to Jane than financial gain. At the same time, the fact that Mitch, who embodies corporate values, looks younger than Joe and Jane highlights the fact that the real conflict in Empire Records is not intergenerational but, rather, ideological. The fundraising party brings every character together against corporate takeover. Not only that, it provides a welcoming space for all kinds of subcultures which are allowed to party together, celebrating their differences. The only character who finds himself unable to enjoy the party is Mitch, who fruitlessly tries to make people focus on work. When he tries to take matters into his own hands and sell some records, Mitch cannot get the cash register to open, showing that power and authority do not make you superior or efficient. Like Vernon in *The Breakfast Club*, Mitch is unable to perform the simplest tasks, which reinforces the idea that status and authority are essentially meaningless and do not require a great deal of intelligence or specific skills.

In the case of *Clerks*, the characters' contempt is directed at their often abusive and insulting customers, who make up a mixed-age group. It could be argued that the customers' generally rude attitude towards those who serve them stems from the belief that individuals who are happy working in dead-end jobs are in some way inferior to those who opt for a traditional career. The characters' rejection of corporate values can therefore be read as a refusal to follow a trajectory into adulthood established by societal expectations. Although jobs for life have become increasingly rare (Beck 2000), choosing a lifelong career is one of the traditional markers of adulthood, which makes Dante's decision to drop out of university to work in a convenience store a reaction against adult values. The same can be said about Randal's apathetic attitude towards his job. Randal seems to see his working hours at a video rental store as an excuse to hang out with his friend Dante and to bully his customers, rather than as a time of duty and responsibility or as an opportunity to

learn and grow. Randal's attitude towards work is introduced before he even appears onscreen. When one of his customers finds the store closed during working hours, rendering him unable to return a film, he complains to Dante, who ends up on the receiving end of Randal's customer's anger. When he finally arrives at work, Randal shows no signs of worry over his delay: instead of rushing to open the store, he joins a waiting customer and pretends that he wants to rent the same film as them. Despite the fact that Randal has already made his customer wait for over thirty minutes, instead of opening he goes straight to the *Quick Stop* where Dante works, and upon finding him working on his day off exclaims "if I had known you were here, I would've come even later."

Both Dante and Randal personify the Generation X slacker stereotype, showing a detached and cynical attitude towards work and a complete lack of aspirations. This indifferent attitude and rejection of traditional career trajectories has been linked both to young middle-class people's downward mobility (Moore 1998) and to the socio-historical and cultural context in which Generation X grew up. Hanson (2002) names the AIDS crisis, political scandals, growing economic inequality and the deaths of 1960s cultural icons, among others, as factors that led to the generation's cynicism, anger and listlessness which permeates films made by Generation X filmmakers. According to Hanson, 1990s slackers share a sense of dissatisfaction with their boomer older siblings, but they have "neither clearly defined antagonising forces nor clearly defined reactions to such forces" (15). In *Clerks*, the characters' discontent translates both as a refusal to join the rat race and as contempt towards their workplace. This is further elaborated in *Clerks II* (Kevin Smith, 2006), in which Dante and Randal, now in their thirties, still have a menial service job. The two friends find themselves out of a job after the *Quick Stop* burns down, which leads them to another dead-end job, this time at a fast-food chain.

The sequel reveals the characters' choice to opt out of the rat race as a conscious one. The film's narrative tension is built around Dante's engagement and planned move to Florida, where he will be able to start a new life as a married man working as the manager of a car wash owned by his father-in-law. This situation is, in the words of John Kenneth Muir (2012), "a jackpot he doesn't really desire." Eventually, he refuses to take these steps towards traditional conceptions of adulthood, choosing to stay in New Jersey and borrowing money from his friends to rebuild the *Quick Stop* and *RST Video*. The ending shows Dante and Randal as willing to take on responsibility, make long term commitments and accept adult roles, but only in their own terms. As Malecka (2015) argues, the film rebels against the Puritan work ethic and the United States' focus on professional success, reminding the spectator that each individual should build their own path to happiness instead of striving to commit to somebody else's ideals (202). The protagonists' priorities are not to make more money or to become conventionally successful, but to have an easy job that allows them to be around their friends, choice which some might see as settling for mediocrity. The fact that their stoner friends Jay (Jason Mewes) and Silent Bob (Kevin Smith) are the ones who lend them the capital to start their own business questions the validity of societal expectations regarding what it takes to grow up successfully.

The three films use music as an element that unites the characters together as they rebel against the adult world, regardless of whether it is represented by the vice-principal, a large corporation or an ineffectual boss and the stultifying nature of service work. Popular music has traditionally been the domain of the young. Although it can be argued that popular music is no longer exclusively a product of youth culture, since several generations have grown up with pop music and continue to enjoy it into adulthood, it remains an essential element of youth films (Hogarty 2017, 3; Nelson 2019, 84). In her study of 1980s

teenage films, Nelson argues that teen film characters actively engage with music more than characters in other genres with the exception of the musical. As she explains, teen film characters use music to define themselves, making the performance of music "a site of performance of self" (2011, 253).

The use of music in teenage films and emerging adult films is often similar. Both teenage and emerging adult characters self-identify with the music they listen to, using it to belong to a group or to mark themselves as outsiders and sometimes making it an integral part of their identity (McNelis 2017). At the same time, the use of contemporary music emphasises the characters' youth and separates them from the adult world, providing a sense of community and generational unity. Music is so intrinsically linked to youth culture that, as Nelson points out, it is often used to signal how older characters are stuck in adolescence and their giving up of music symbolically marks a step towards adulthood (2011, 252). Popular music, particularly rock music, carries rebellious connotations and is often used to emphasise moments of rebellion against adult values and authorities

In *Clerks,* rock music plays non-diegetically to emphasise the protagonists' rebelliousness, particularly when they defy adult authority by leaving work to play hockey or to attend a funeral. Music is not as integral to *Clerks* as it is to the other two films analysed, which can be related to the film's production. *Clerks* is an independent film produced with a small budget, and it initially had no soundtrack. The soundtrack was added as a marketing tool after Miramax bought the film (Pierson, 2014). As a consequence, music is not seamlessly incorporated into the film, but added as an afterthought. In contrast, *Empire Records* and *The Breakfast Club* feature prominent soundtracks that are integral to the films' narrative. Bozelka (2008, 2010) argues that they

both are in musical mode. That is, that they "appear both like and unlike a musical" (2010, 164). The characters play music and dance and non-diegetic songs often voice the characters' feelings or address them directly, which can be seen at the end of *The Breakfast Club* when Simple Minds' "Don't You Forget About Me" plays non-diegetically as Saturday detention comes to an end. The songs' lyrics reflect the students' wish to remain friends regardless of their different position within the high school hierarchy and voices their doubts regarding whether this will happen.

Moreover, music also performs a utopian role by bringing different characters together despite their differences. The two films use music in order to emphasise togetherness and individuality at the same time, cementing them both as a group and as individuals. In *Empire Records* the characters play music all day long, culminating with a fundraising concert that saves the store from turning into a chain, celebrating the individuality and authenticity associated with alternative rock and the fact that none of the characters will have to conform to *Music Town*'s rules (Bozelka 2010, 167). Similarly, in *The Breakfast Club* rock music plays in moments that unite the five characters against Vernon's rules, especially when they run around the corridors and when they dance in the library. Brian chooses to play Karla de Vito's "We Are Not Alone," whose lyrics speak for him indicating the comfort he finds in the group. The fact that the five characters dance to the same song despite their individual differences highlights the comfort they have found in each other and the rising group consciousness. However, as Bozelka (2008, 2012) notes, each character is shot individually and dances in a markedly different style that fits their personality, showing that one can be part of a group without compromising their individuality. Similarly, In *Empire Records*, music is the glue that holds the community together against the values of older generations while allowing them to maintain their

individuality (Bozelka 2010, 167). Lesley Speed (1995) contends that, in teenage films, parties and dancing are often set in opposition with adult responsibility and carry revolutionary connotations, which is true of both *The Breakfast Club* and *Empire Records*, despite the fact that, in the latter, rebellion is not strictly adolescent but multigenerational.

As we have seen, rebellion against authority is portrayed differently in emerging adult films and in teen films. Even though both genres are concerned with the rejection of adult values, in teen films like *The Breakfast Club* rebellion is intergenerational, while in emerging adult films that is not necessarily the case. Instead, adult values may be embodied by somebody from the older generations, by somebody who belongs to the same generation as the protagonists but has made greater progress into adulthood or even by somebody younger than them. Furthermore, in emerging adult films the adult world is often embodied by the workplace and by a focus on money, and rebellion against adult values often takes the form of a rejection of traditional career trajectories and corporate values, as well as a lack of interest in their—often menial—jobs.

3.2.2 Intragenerational conflict

Intergenerational conflict, along with rebellion towards adult figures, values and institutions, plays a prominent role in both teen films and emerging adult films. In most of these films, adulthood—or at least a certain type of adulthood exemplified by the characters' parents, teachers and bosses—is not a stage the protagonists are in a hurry to reach. As has been mentioned before, in emerging adult films this opposition to traditional adult values does not necessarily lead to conflict between members of different generations, but rather to conflict among members of the same generation who find

themselves at different stages regarding their transition to adulthood. This intra-generational conflict constitutes one of the most salient conventions of emerging adult films, and it can be said to be the emerging adult version of the teenpic's conflict between characters who belong to different groups within the high school caste system.

A princess, a jock, a nerd, a basketcase and a criminal

Teenage life is ruled by the social structure of the high school, which pigeonholes teen film characters into separate groups that come with their own set of expectations. Different cliques behave differently, dress differently, occupy different spaces, have different hobbies and even eat different food. For instance, nerds tend to wear glasses, dress unfashionably, spend time in the computer lab or the AV Club, excel at academic activities but perform poorly in the athletic realm, be sexually inexperienced and socially awkward. At the other end of the high school hierarchy, we find jocks and cheerleaders, who tend to be physically attractive, athletic, fashionable, sexually experienced and well-liked, as well as generally uninterested in academic activities. Popularity is often inextricably linked to both physical attractiveness and wealth, with popular students having families who are able to afford to buy them cars and fashionable clothes that will work to guarantee their status. It is also an aspirational status that less popular kids often hope to achieve, even if they have to behave immorally to do so.

The Breakfast Club makes use of the differences between the five teenagers to subvert the high school caste system. Despite hating the prospect of spending time together, by the end of the film the five characters discover that they have more in common than they initially thought. Each one of the characters in *The Breakfast Club* belongs to a

different clique, which determines their social status both within the school and within the group, and sometimes hints at the socio-economic status of their families. The place that the different characters occupy within the high school caste system plays a central role in the film and is conveyed in different ways. The film begins with empty shots of the high school while the spectator hears a voice-over narration of the letter the characters write in detention. Different spaces within the high school are associated with different characters. The computer room with the nerd, a vandalised locker with the rebel, the changing room with the jock, the counsellor's office with the basketcase and a prom poster with the princess. In this case, the association of character with space emphasises the distance among them, reminding us that even though they go to the same school, they tend not to occupy the same space. The high school clique that each one of them belongs to is also linked to the clothes the characters wear, the way they interact with one another, what they eat for lunch, the way they express themselves and even the kind of relationship they have with their parents, which can be glimpsed at the beginning of the film when the characters arrive at school.

Fig. 3.4. Claire is associated with markers of social status and popularity that set her apart from her peers.

Claire, the princess, arrives first. She is associated with a poster that says "vote for prom queen," which together with her fashionable pink clothes and immaculate manicure, suggests that she is a popular girl and positions her at the top of the school hierarchy. She arrives in a BMW and seems disappointed that her dad cannot get her out of detention, which reveals that she comes from a relatively affluent background and that both Claire and her dad usually get what they want. When Claire unpacks sushi for lunch it is made clear that she belongs to a different world than the other students, who look at her in shock (fig. 3.4). Andy, the jock, is associated with a locker room, and his varsity jacket, trainers and tank top leave no doubt that he is a sporty type. The brief conversation he has with his dad upon arrival suggests that he has been brought up in a house in which there is an emphasis on competitive masculinity. His built-up aggression is shown throughout the film until he explodes and confesses that he taped somebody's bum cheeks together to impress his dad. Despite homophobic insults and an aggressive demeanour, Andy is respectful towards his female classmates and shows a true self that is more sensitive than the role his father and society have imposed on him. The film reveals that the lives of these two popular teenagers are not as perfect as they might seem to those who look at them from the outside, highlighting the fact that along with popularity comes pressure to maintain that status.

The three remaining characters occupy the bottom end of the high school hierarchy. Brian, the nerd, is associated with a computer lab. He is wearing a calculator watch, is smaller in size and wears unfashionable clothes. The emphasis that his family place on his academic success is made obvious when his mother pushes him to disobey the principal and use the time in detention to study instead of reflecting upon what brought him there. The pressure placed on Brian's brain is so high that he planned to kill himself after failing

a test for the first time. Bender, the criminal, is associated with a vandalised locker. He is the only one who arrives on foot and brings no lunch, implying that his parents do not care about him enough to drive him to school or make sure he is fed. His outfit oozes rebelliousness. He has long hair and wears combat boots, leather gloves and a denim jacket with buttons on it. Throughout the film we learn that he has grown up in a violent and abusive environment, and that his own violence functions as a protective shield that he has been forced to build around himself. Last to arrive, Allison, the basketcase, is associated with the school counsellor's office. She is the only one who arrives sitting at the back of the car and the only one who doesn't interact with her parents on arrival. In fact, they drive off without saying goodbye to her while she stands by the car waiting to say goodbye, suggesting that she is as invisible to her parents as she is to her classmates. Her parents' indifference towards her is further emphasised by the look of disgust on her face when she opens her lunch, which suggests that her parents do not care enough to find out what she likes eating. She is dressed in black, with messy hair all over her face and a big coat with a hood that functions as a cocoon, isolating her from the outside world, isolation that is emphasised by the fact that she remains silent for the majority of the film.

The arrangement in which the characters choose to sit in detention, together with the way in which they are framed emphasises the differences between them (fig. 3.5). Claire and Andy are sat on the same row, suggesting that they have a similar status. Bender sits behind them, which provides him with a good vantage point from which to shout abuse at them. Although Bender is not a popular kid, his status as a rebel grants him power over the others, which could justify why they appear on the frame together. The two most helpless characters, Allison and Brian, place themselves at the other side of the room, which suggests that the distance between them and the popular crowd is greater. Allison sits at the

back, barely making eye contact with her schoolmates, which indicates that she is at the bottom of the school hierarchy. A high angle long shot shows the five characters together (fig. 3.5). The long distance allows the spectator to appreciate their seating arrangement, which resembles a social hierarchy pyramid in which the vice-principal is at the top, followed by the two most popular students, and Allison occupies the bottom row, sitting as far from her peers as she can. This choice of framing emphasises the distance between students who belong to different cliques. At this point in the film, what brings characters together is the disgust towards the behaviour of students belonging to a different group. For instance, when Allison loudly bites her nails, all the other characters look at her in shock and disapproval. The same happens when Brian talks about academic societies. At the same time, Vernon's position at the top of the pyramid, standing in front of Claire and Andrew, constitutes a reminder of his position of authority over the students.

Fig. 3.5. Framing emphasises the differences the protagonists' different social status.

The position of the camera makes the shot look like one filmed by a CCTV camera, which highlights the fact that the high school is a controlled environment in which the protagonists are under—adult—surveillance. In fact, characters are not framed together at

the same level until they challenge the school rules, which they do by not using their detention time productively, choosing to waste time by whistling a song together, running around the corridors, chatting and smoking weed instead. When Bender starts whistling the "Colonel Bogey March" he is quickly followed by the others. The choice of a military march as a song that unites the five students serves as a reminder that they are fighting against a common enemy—the vice-principal—and that they are ready for battle. In contrast with previous shots that emphasised the distance between the protagonists, while they whistle the march, they are shot at eye level and from a shorter distance, which accentuates their burgeoning camaraderie. At the same time, a longer focal length makes them look physically closer despite the fact that the characters have not actually changed their position, which again foregrounds their growing proximity (fig. 3.6). As Petersen (2021) argues, the connection between the five protagonists is also marked by mobile framing. At the beginning of the film, stationary shots signal the protagonists' disenfranchisement, whereas Vernon, holds power both over the students and over the frame: the camera tracks his movements, showing that he is the only character who can tell others what to do.

Fig. 3.6. As the protagonists get emotionally closer, shorter distances and longer focal length emphasise their new bond.

Lingering in-between

In emerging adult films characters have left high school and are no longer ruled by the high school caste system. Instead, what determines their status is their progress towards adulthood, with those who are closer to finishing their transition to adulthood at the top and those who have a longer way to go at the bottom. In the case of *Clerks*, this is visible in the character of Veronica (Marilyn Ghigliotti), Dante's girlfriend. Although she is still at university, which marks her as an emerging adult, she comes across as more responsible and mature than Dante and Randal. She tries to push Dante to leave his job and go back to university, brings him homemade lasagna, and saves him from customers who are harassing him. Veronica's first appearance on-screen is filmed in a way that emphasises her position as a more mature character who stands above Dante as far as growing up is concerned. In this scene, a chewing gum salesman is trying to dissuade Dante's customers from buying cigarettes by warning them of the harm that smoking can do to one's health. He begins by showing customers a model of a diseased lung, a tracheal ring and a photo of a cancerous lung. As he gathers a small crowd, he calls those who sell cigarettes "the nazis of the nineties" and refers to Dante as a "merchant of death." If that was not enough, he encourages customers to protest, which they do by cornering Dante behind the counter while they scream and throw cigarettes at him. When the situation looks out of control, Veronica stands on a chair and shoots a fire extinguisher at the crowd (fig. 3.7). She is shot from a low angle, which together with the fact that she is standing on a chair, makes her look big and menacing despite her short height, the way a child might see an adult. Veronica's status as a more mature character can also be seen in her clothes, which are slightly more formal—a shirt and a blazer—and mark her as someone who is closer to adulthood. Besides, she is the one who exposes the anti-smoking activist as what he really

is: a chewing-gum salesman who does not care about public health but about pushing his own product, an example of the sort of adulthood that is portrayed as something to be avoided in emerging adult films. Her assertiveness contrasts with Dante's difficulty to read and handle a difficult situation, which emphasises his immaturity and her progress towards adulthood. Veronica and Dante may be the same age, but they are growing up at different paces.

Fig. 3.7. Veronica saves the day.

Since the characters in *Clerks* are still in their early 20s, they are still very much in touch with their high school selves. The way they engage in conversation about *Star Wars* marks them as past nerds, although their behaviour—closing the store to play hockey, lack of interest in work—marks them as rebels. Both Dante and Randal wear items of clothing that would not be appropriate in a more serious work environment and emphasise their role as rebels: combat boots and a backwards baseball cap. While Dante is at the store, a customer dressed in athletic gear makes offensive comments about his physique in a way that resembles a jock bullying a less popular kid in high school. We later find out that they

did in fact go to high school together and that the jock slept with Dante's girlfriend, which further positions Dante as a loser type. *Clerks* borrows conventions from the teen pic in order to depict twentysomething life, which at the same time mirrors the connection between adolescence and emerging adulthood. At the same time, these allusions to the teenage film may be read as a tribute to the genre. Smith's admiration for John Hughes is no secret. He has expressed his desire to be "the John Hughes of the 1990s" (in Levy 1999, 211) and has described his films as "John Hughes films with four-letter words" (Gora 2010, 325). In fact, speaking about *Mallrats* (Kevin Smith, 1995), his sophomore effort which also features two twentysomething slacker protagonists, he described it as "a John Hughes movie" (Muir 2012). The film's end credits even include a nod to Hughes in which Smith thanks him for giving him "something to do on Saturday nights."

A feature that Kevin Smith's and John Hughes' early films share is the fact that both filmmakers' first few films are set in a microcosm shared across different movies. As Smokler explains, four out of the six teenage films written by Hughes take place in the fictional suburb of Shermer, Illinois. The real-life locations where characters live are within walking distance from each other, which suggests that they would inhabit the same spaces. Kevin Smith (2017) himself acknowledges that he stole Hughes' "idea of a connected universe." He even alludes to the universe of John Hughes' films in *Dogma* (Kevin Smith, 1999), where Jay and Silent Bob decide to go to Shermer, not realising that the suburb is fictional, because Hughes' films made it come across as a place free of drug dealers where they might have a chance to make good money. Homages and admiration aside, the fact that Kevin Smith conceives his films as close to those of John Hughes stresses the fact that his emerging adult characters share a lot with Hughes' teenagers and positions them as separate from the adult world. Like the members of *The Breakfast Club*,

Dante and Randal occupy a liminal position as individuals in transition. Although Kevin Smith's homage to the films of John Hughes is, as we have seen, conscious and widely acknowledged by the filmmaker, this positioning of emerging adult characters as separate from the adult world—or, at least, from certain parts of it—is not unique to his films. In fact, it is a feature that appears consistently throughout emerging adult films, independently of whether they make use of character types that tend to appear in teenage films and of whether they make allusions to the protagonists' teenage selves.

In *Clerks*, Jay and Silent Bob occupy the lowest level of the scale of adulthood. They contrast not only with Veronica's maturity, but also with Dante and Randal, who, as has already been seen, try their best to get by working as little as possible. Dante and Randal may not be very productive or care about their go-nowhere jobs, but at least they manage to hold on to them without getting fired. Jay and Silent Bob, on the other hand, opt out not only of the rat race but of the world of work altogether. Instead of working, they hang out outside the *Quick Stop* making trouble and trying to push weed. What is more, they do not seem to feel trapped in their situation or to even consider whether they would be better off leading a more structured life. While Dante, as his name implies, seems to be stuck in hell or purgatory, Jay and Silent Bob like it that way. The film hints that there might be more to Jay behind the profanity, aggressive behaviour and criminality. When Dante has relationship trouble, Jay makes a point of reminding Dante of all the good things Veronica does for him, actions towards which Dante himself seems to be blind. In doing this, Jay reveals a common sense that had not been disclosed until now and makes the spectator wonder whether Jay and Silent Bob live in the margins because they cannot do any better or because they simply do not want to. As Randal says, Jay "has no delusions about what he wants. Us… We like to make ourselves so much more important than the people who

come in here to buy a paper (…) If we're so fucking advanced, what are we doing working here?" Randal hints that aspirations and self-importance, rather than status, may be the key to their unsatisfied lives. Clerks hints that the key to satisfaction may be to follow Jay and Silent Bob's example and opt out completely.

Growing up is selling out

Empire Records showcases both kinds of conflict, between teenage members of different cliques and between emerging adults and those who are further up the adulthood scale. Due to its setting in a record store, the characters vary in age but not so much in nature, which makes the film contrast with teenage films that take place in an educational setting that functions as a microcosm of society. Although the teenagers who work at the store belong to different cliques, all of them are misfits in some way and the film does not emphasise the role that the high school hierarchy plays on teenagers' lives as much as more conventional teenage films like *The Breakfast Club* do. This teenage world lacks stereotypically popular characters, who would presumably not find working at a record store cool enough for them. Corey can be classified as a nerd, but her good looks and alternative outfit position her as a different, cooler kind of nerd. As Shary argues, smart girls are rarely portrayed as stereotypical nerds. While nerds are traditionally portrayed as lacking style, smart girls tend to be both smart and stylish (2002, 33). These two sides to her are reflected in her choice of clothes, which mix innocence and sweetness with rebellion and sexiness. She is wearing a tartan skirt that looks like a school uniform and thus positions her as a studious girl. The skirt, combined with the fluffy baby blue mohair jumper, grants Corey a certain degree of innocence that reminds the spectator that she is

perceived as a good girl who does what her family expects of her. This innocence contrasts with her combat boots, which carry rebellious connotations, and with the fact that both the skirt and the jumper are very short, exposing her legs and midriff. Her outfit thus reveals Corey as a contradictory figure who may not be as innocent as she initially looks.

Similarly, Gina does not fit neatly into a clique. While she is popular with boys, her open attitude towards sex would make her less popular among girls, who often subject their peers to double standards. Besides, the fact that she works at the music store not only positions her as an outsider, but implies that her family do not have the means to grant her every wish, which is often the case with popular girls. As has been discussed before, popularity often goes hand in hand with purchasing power, which may be another reason why none of the employees are at the top of the high school hierarchy. Debra and Mark can be placed in the heterogeneous misfit group, which includes stoners, skaters, punks, metalheads and other alternative types who may have a rebellious attitude but are generally harmless and thus do not fit into the criminal group. Although conflict between different character types does not constitute the main narrative force of the film as it did in *The Breakfast Club*, the teenage characters—particularly the three girls—clash often. By the end of the film, characters open up to each other, exposing their vulnerabilities and realising that, in Debra's words, "nobody has it all together." *Empire Records* is similar to *The Breakfast Club* in that it emphasises the fact that adolescence is a challenging time for everybody, no matter their status, beauty or academic performance. Teenage characters are not portrayed in reductive terms, but as complex individuals, and the similarities between them, particularly their attachment to the record store, to their co-workers and to what the store represents—a safe space where they can be themselves—prove to be stronger than their differences.

The array of emerging adults working in the store constitutes a pretty homogeneous group. While other types of jobs may include co-workers who are eager to work their way up the corporate ladder, working in a record store is not a job that careerist young people would choose. As a result, the store is populated partly by emerging adults looking for a moratorium before they make decisions regarding their adult lives and partly by others who are happy to work somewhere they like despite the lack of promotion prospects. Joe and Jane, the two older characters, provide a different outlook. They reflect longingly on the fact that they used to be cooler than they are now and have to deal with greater responsibility than younger characters, particularly when it comes to dealing with difficult bosses. Yet, although older, they align themselves with the rest of the employees, which helps to establish a difference between the sort of adulthood that is seen as something to be avoided and an alternative, less materialistic, more authentic sort of adulthood that does not require individuals to give up their identity in order to grow up. Joe and Jane do not dress in a particularly professional way. In fact, at the beginning of the film, one of the employees asks Joe why he is wearing "boss threads." So-called boss threads are made up of an unbuttoned white T-shirt and a black leather jacket that Joe is wearing to appear more professional during Rex Manning's visit, which implies that he would usually dress much more casually. The antithesis comes in the figure of the store owner. Although Mitch looks younger than Joe, he is marked as more adult than both Joe and the rest of the *Empire* crew, some of whom may even be the same age as him. His business attire marks him as someone who has outgrown his youth and contrasts with Joe's more casual clothes (fig. 3.8). At the same time, his willingness to sell the store to *Music Town*—together with his wish that his father had not turned his grandfather's toilet business into a music store— accentuates his rejection of contemporary youth culture. In a time when conventional

markers of adulthood have lost their meaning, participation in youth culture, which includes both the music and fashion that Mitch rejects, may be considered one of the indicators—although not a foolproof one—that an individual is yet to attain adulthood. Mitch embodies the adult values that the protagonists reject, and his presence serves to highlight the protagonists' youthfulness and to separate them from the adult world, regardless of whether they are teenagers or emerging adults.

Fig. 3.8. A focus on financial gain, together with professional looking clothes, mark Mitch (left) as a successful adult, while Joe's casual clothes and passion for music align him with his younger employees.

As we have seen, intra-generational conflict is present in both teenage films and emerging adult films, but it is presented differently. While the status of teenage characters is defined against the high school hierarchy, in emerging adult films cliques—if present—do not play as large a role and are largely substituted by an individual's position as far as their transition to adulthood is concerned. Where high school success is measured in terms of popularity, adult success is measured in terms of maturity, stability and focus on one's career. Those who have been able to leave their youthful passions behind, dress conservatively and are career-oriented are considered to be making a more successful transition to adulthood. However, as can be seen in *Empire Records*, emerging adult

characters do not see these swift transitions as desirable. In fact, they often consider fast routes to adulthood and career success as a surrendering of their individuality for the sake of conformity, and characters who are eager to embrace adult values are often positioned as antagonists. This contrasts with the way in which popularity is portrayed in teen films.

Although teenage films often subvert the status quo and popular characters are shown as superficial and lacking values, popularity may be coveted by those characters who are further down the social scale, at least temporarily. *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004) constitutes a good example of this complicated relationship with popularity. Although "the Plastics," as the popular girls are called, are consistently portrayed as the antagonists, the protagonist temporarily falls under their spell. Cody (Lindsay Lohan) infiltrates the group in order to spy on them and she quickly becomes acclimatised, discarding her tastes and personality and becoming mean like them. The film underscores the intoxicating allure of popularity and the complex relationships that teenagers have with it. In other films, like *Pretty in Pink* (Howard Deutch, 1986) or *She's All That* (Robert Iscove, 1999), characters who are not popular fall for somebody who is. These films subvert and reinforce the high school caste system simultaneously. On the one hand, a romantic happy ending in which characters date outside their clique may be seen to undermine the rules of popularity. However, the positioning of popular characters as objects of desire over not-so-popular options underscores the appeal of popularity and maintains the status quo.

The relationship between emerging adults and adult success is different from the relationship between teen film characters and adolescent success in that emerging adults almost always have a different conception of what constitutes *real* success, which they

measure in terms of a personal self-realisation and fulfilment that is found by forging their own adult standards and rejecting traditional markers of adulthood. Although emerging adult characters often have friends or partners who followed a straightforward route into adulthood, and can therefore be seen as more successful—the emerging adult equivalent of the popular crowd—the protagonists are not usually jealous of their status or look up to them. Sometimes, as in *Empire Records*, these characters are positioned as antagonists, while in other films their lifestyle is not reviled, it is simply shown as an option that the protagonists have chosen not to follow. That is the case of Veronica in *Clerks*, whose proactive, nurturing attitude Dante does not disapprove of but refuses to follow himself.

3.2.3 Teen love vs twentysomething love

Love features prominently in both teen films and emerging adult films. Both adolescence and emerging adulthood are largely concerned with the development of one's intimate relationships. While teenpics usually focus on the characters' first forays into sexual and romantic relationships, emerging adult films tend to concentrate on serial monogamy, successive medium-to-long term relationships in which emerging adults try to figure out the type of person they would like to settle down with. Additionally, emerging adult films also deal with hookup culture, casual sex and developing one's sexuality. Unlike teenage characters, emerging adult characters are assumed to be sexually experienced and often discuss their sexuality openly. In teenpics romantic and sexual firsts are often connected to the characters' transition to adulthood. Losing one's virginity is often marked as a rite of passage into adulthood, and it often takes place on prom night, thus connecting sexual experience with another rite of passage that opens the door to

greater independence from adult-controlled institutions. Those characters who are more experienced tend to feel more mature and often associate having had sex with becoming a woman or a man. However, in those emerging adult films that deal with early emerging adulthood maturity is not usually achieved through love. Whereas in films that deal with late emerging adulthood a romantic happy ending may be connected to the protagonist's willingness to settle down and make long-term commitments, characters in their early twenties are usually not concerned with making long-lasting commitment. Instead, it is going through different kinds of romantic and sexual experiences that is seen as an important part of one's formative years.

Another aspect that differentiates onscreen representations of teenage love and emerging adult love is the nature of the obstacle standing between the couple. As Shary points out, in teen films these obstacles are external. Shary names familial expectations as the most common obstacle that comprises aspects "from financial and social status to appearance and manners" (2002, 215). Other external obstacles that may make a relationship harder for teenage characters are age, race, and belonging to a different group within the high school hierarchy. In contrast, emerging adult characters are their own worst enemy when it comes to matters of the heart. The barriers to a successful romantic union tend to be internal. That is, they stem from the characters themselves, from their insecurities about themselves and their partners, which often lead to a break-up. Emerging adult characters tend to have a large amount of self-doubt regarding their readiness to take certain steps into adulthood and they even doubt whether they deserve to be loved or wonder if they will ever be able to love someone fully. At the same time, they also tend to have doubts regarding whether the person they are currently involved with is the best they can do or whether someone better might come along at a later date.

These features can be seen clearly in the three films. The romantic unions in *The Breakfast Club* happen between members of different cliques. Bender, the rebel, is coupled up with prom queen Claire, while varsity man Andy ends up with Allison, the basketcase. These matches are problematic on several levels. To begin with, Andy shows no signs of being attracted towards Allison until she goes through a makeover to fulfil a more traditional version of femininity. Ally Sheedy (2007), who played Allison, explains that her makeover consisted mostly of taking off layers rather than applying additional ones. Up until this point, Allison had been using her clothes and hair as a way of isolating herself and protecting her vulnerable self from those around her, so by removing those layers she is showing a willingness to open up and allow herself to connect with her schoolmates. However, the makeover makes her look like a completely different person, conveying the idea that she will not be loved unless she conforms to normative conceptions of beauty and discards the parts of her that make her an individual (fig. 3.9).

Fig. 3.9. Allison's romantic success comes at the expense of her individuality.

Claire and Bender's union is problematic on a different level. Molly Ringwald herself pointed out in an article revisiting her teenage films in the age of #MeToo that

Bender consistently harasses Claire, teasing her, sexualising her and purposefully trying to make her feel uncomfortable. There is even a scene in which "it is implied that he touches her inappropriately" (2018). As Nelson argues, this behaviour does not draw Claire away from him, as would be expected, but it leads her to take the first step towards a romantic relationship, thus contributing to the perpetuation of "some unhealthy ideas about the type of behaviour that's acceptable in relationships" (2011, 92). The fact that the romantic couplings are so unlikely suggests that the unions between the five characters will be over by Monday, when the five students resume their daily lives and forget that Saturday detention ever happened. The obstacle standing between Claire and Bender or Allison and Andy is that, as the students discuss during detention, popular characters are unlikely to acknowledge a bond between themselves and less popular characters in public. Dating outside their clique would garner the disapproval of their friends. Moreover, it would constitute a threat to their status at the top of the high school hierarchy, as dating below their station might make them less popular.

In *Empire Records*, status also stands as a barrier between A.J. and Corey, whose union can only take place once A.J., who is directionless and has become stuck, makes some changes in his life and positions himself closer to the high-achieving Corey. A.J., who is slightly older than Corey, has been working at the store for 5 years and, despite having artistic ambitions, he has done nothing that will help him become an artist or work in a creative field. Corey, on the other hand, is an extremely ambitious high school senior who has just been admitted to Harvard. As A.J. is painfully reminded, Harvard-bound girls do not date store clerks. Like Allison in *The Breakfast Club*, A.J. needs to make some changes in order to overcome the differences between him and his potential partner, but these changes differ from Allison in that they are internal rather than superficial and they

allow him to stay true to his passions. While Allison's makeover made her shed her individuality, A.J.'s decision to go to art school in Boston to be near Corey allows him to retain the part of himself that he values the most—his creativity—and to move forward on his road to adulthood. Although A.J. is no longer a teenager, his love for Corey retains a degree of innocence and idealism that is characteristic of teen love, which signals his immaturity and suggests that his emotional development has not evolved much since he was a teenager. The fact that he is not very experienced in the romantic realm is underlined when he asks Joe for advice on how to tell Corey he loves her. His youthful optimism regarding his love for Corey contrasts with the often cynical attitude towards relationships expressed by emerging adults.

Teenage love is often shown in an idealised manner, focusing on grand romantic gestures and accompanied by a romantic soundtrack, whereas emerging adult love tends to be filmed in a naturalistic way, reflecting the ups and downs of a long-term relationship and focusing on establishing intimacy. The way in which A.J. and Corey's final union is filmed shares more with the representation of love in *The Breakfast Club* than with that of *Clerks*, which emphasises A.J.'s immaturity as well as the fact that one of the members of the couple—Corey—is still a teenager. After the fundraising party, Lucas, the night manager whose gambling kickstarted the night's events, breaks the fourth wall to remind the audience that not everything is perfect yet, cutting to a shot of A.J standing behind the large Empire Records sign on the store's roof. When Corey appears, A.J. stands in front of the sign, suggesting that the time for him to leave the store has come. Corey reproaches him for not using his artistic talent and tells A.J that she is in love with him. While she says this, she pretends to punch him in a way that resembles a children's game, which highlights their innocence and young age. After Corey's declaration, A.J. reveals that he has in fact

applied to art school in Boston in order to be near her. This change puts both characters on a similar level regarding future prospects and facilitates their union. As Shary argues, teen film characters tend to believe that their love is true and will last forever (2002, 214). In this case, although A.J. is an emerging adult, the fact that he is willing to make a relevant life decision based on where the girl he loves is going to school shows the kind of overwhelming belief in his love that is more characteristic in teen films such as *Say Anything* (Cameron Crowe, 1989), where the main character also follows his girlfriend to school. The fact that A.J.'s change is motivated by Corey is emphasised by the lyrics of Gin Blossom's "Til I Hear It from You," the song that plays during their first kiss. The lyrics, which state "I don't want to take advice from fools. I'll just figure out everything is cool until I hear it from you," mirror the weight that AJ grants Corey regarding major life decisions. Like the song's narrator, A.J. will only take advice from one person: Corey.

Similarly, Allison and Andy's union in *The Breakfast Club* is accompanied by an extradiegetic song whose beat mimics Andy's accelerating heartbeat when he sees Allison after her makeover. The song, aptly titled "Love Theme," matches the characters' feelings as the camera focuses on the way they look longingly at each other. When Allison steps into the library after her makeover, Andy slowly tilts his head with a stunned look on his face. The camera movements follow the characters' gaze as they walk towards each other, their eyes fixed on the other's face (fig. 3.10). The romanticism of the moment is further emphasised by the use of warm tones and close-ups with a short depth of field that blur the library in the background, indicating that detention is almost over and highlighting the characters' emotions. However, despite the heightened romanticism of this scene and the symbolic exchange of items at the end of the film, where Andy gives Allison the letter from his varsity jacket and Claire gives Bender one of her earrings, no reference is made

regarding the future of the couples. In fact, popular characters had previously acknowledged that they would probably not say hello to their less popular detention partners the following Monday, which suggests that these romances will end as soon as detention is over.

Fig. 3.10. Teenage love is idealised despite its poor future prospects.

In *Clerks*, Dante's self-doubt and immaturity is the main obstacle standing between him and his girlfriend. Although he is in his early twenties and in a relationship, Dante is still obsessed with his high school girlfriend. His inability to let go and move on from his teenage romance is holding him back and preventing him from growing up. Dante idealises his teenage relationship with Caitlin (Lisa Spoonhauer) despite the fact that she cheated on him on numerous occasions, and he becomes very upset when he finds out she is engaged.

At the same time, he fails to appreciate his current girlfriend's efforts to help him. Veronica brings him homemade food, encourages him to change his life and defends him from angry customers, resembling a motherly figure that stands in contrast with Dante's immaturity, inability to initiate change and lack of confrontational skills. Whereas the obstacles to the unions in *The Breakfast Club* and *Empire Records*—like social class, high school cliques and going away to college—are external, in *Clerks* the element standing in the way of the couple's success is Dante himself. His relationship with Veronica is not shown through close-ups of a long kiss or romantic music. Instead of focusing on grand romantic gestures, emerging adult films often place their focus on the mundane, on the little displays of affection present in everyday life, which can be seen when Veronica brings Dante homemade lasagna or when Dante does her nails (fig. 3.11).

Fig. 3.11. Emerging adult love focuses on the everyday.

The three films include conversations about the characters' sexuality, and all of them make a point of highlighting the double standards that women are subject to. The difference between them is the aspect of sexuality that they address. While *Empire Records* and *The Breakfast Club* focus on the loss of virginity, particularly girls' virginity, *Clerks*

explores promiscuity, a difference that reflects the fact that emerging adults tend to be more sexually experienced than teenagers. Dante and Veronica talk about how many sexual partners they have had. At first, Veronica expresses her disappointment at the fact that Dante has had sex with more people than her. However, it is later revealed that Veronica has not included oral sex and that she has performed oral sex on a very large number of partners. This turn of events, which effectively positions Dante as the member of the couple with the least sexual experience, angers and frustrates him. The fact that, for Veronica, oral sex does not constitute sex reveals a desire to partake in sexual relations but a reluctance to be considered a promiscuous woman. By allowing herself some form of sexual activity and avoiding intercourse, Veronica feels sexually satisfied but avoids going all the way. At the same time, this misunderstanding concerning what sort of sexual activities constitute sexual relations highlight the lack of rules that pervades contemporary relationships (Illouz 2019)

The Breakfast Club openly addresses society's contradictory messages regarding women's sexual activity. As Allison says, "if you say you haven't, you're a prude. If you say you have…you're a slut! It's a trap. You want to, but you can't, but when you do you wish you didn't, right?" Sex is also used as a weapon by Bender, who asks Claire about her sexual experience in order to intimidate her, knowing fully well that there is no right answer to his questions. If she answered, regardless of whether she admitted to having some sexual experience or none, Claire would be mocked because of it. When he asks her these very private questions he is standing in front of her desk, and shot from a low angle, which makes him come across as menacing and powerful. When the spectator sees Claire's visibly uncomfortable reaction, Bender's arm remains onscreen, taking up half of the frame in a way that suggests Claire is caught in a trap (fig. 3.12). For teen film girls virginity is

often considered a handicap that marks characters as less mature than their peers. At the same time, sexually active girls are often mocked and taken advantage of. Both attitudes are displayed in *Empire Records*, where Gina's sexual experience is held against her while Corey is so desperate to lose her virginity that she throws herself at a minor celebrity who has seen better days. In contrast, the sexual lives of teenage boys barely receive any attention in the two films, reflecting society's disproportionate concern with girls' sexuality. In contrast, emerging adult women have more freedom when it comes to expressing their sexual desires and talking about their sexual experience.

Fig. 3.12. Are you a slut or a prude?

As we have seen, the representations of emerging adult and teenage love differ both in narrative and visual terms. In teen films, the weight that adolescents give to their first romantic and sexual experiences is visually represented through an idealisation of moments that the spectator knows are likely to be fleeting. Teenage love is unlikely to last in the case of *The Breakfast Club*—it may even be over as soon as detention is. Nevertheless, romantic music, along with a focus on the characters' emotions and on symbolic exchanges of possessions that are both dear to them and representative of who

they are convey the magnitude of the moment. Similarly, in *Empire Records* the union between A.J. and Corey is not likely to be forever, but the film celebrates it as if it was. The setting, on top of the store's roof, suggests that the couple is on top of the world, while the fact that their romantic union takes places behind the shop's vintage neon sign, which reads "Empire Records. Since 1959," gives it an aura of hope: if the store survived for nearly fifty years and succeeded in facing difficulties, maybe their relationship will share the same fate.

In contrast, emerging adult films often represent love in a deromanticised manner. Like Dante, emerging adult characters constantly doubt themselves and their relationships. They often worry that their partner might not be the right person for them and they either have hope that something better may be around the corner or, as in Dante's case, regret the ending of a past relationship. The focus shifts from first loves and first times to serial monogamy and sexual experience is generally assumed in emerging adult characters who, like Dante and Veronica, often debate their sexuality in a way that is absent from teen films. In short, both types of films represent the romantic experiences and expectations that are typical of the life stages that they represent. The inexperience of adolescence, together with the symbolic weight given to romantic and sexual initiations, result in narratives that differ both thematically and visually from those that focus on emerging adults, which tend to foreground a more cynical and less idealised view of romantic and sexual relationships.

3.2.4 The spaces of youth

Youth is often described as an in-between stage, as the moment when individuals cease to behave like children but have not yet matured into adulthood. Similarly, emerging

adulthood, the latest phase of youth before transitioning to adulthood, constitutes an in-between stage where individuals are neither teenagers nor fully fledged adults. Thus, youth can be considered what Van Gennep calls a liminal period (Thomassen 2009, 6; Mary 2015, 160). Filmic representations of both teenagers and emerging adults convey the liminality that characterises both life stages by placing the protagonists in liminal spaces which are designed to be transitory, such as hallways, parking lots and street corners. Teenage films often take place in high schools, buildings whose use is designed to be temporary, a space that adolescents pass through on their way to adulthood. The focus that teen pics place on high school graduation underscores the transient nature of adolescence and, by extension, of the spaces of adolescence. The relationship between the spaces of the teenage film and those of the emerging adult film is similar to the relationship between the two life stages: they share some elements in common but others have been left behind.

Educational institutions cease to be central in emerging adult films, where the workplace appears as a common setting. But working spaces are not as prevalent in emerging adult films as educational institutions are in teen films. Some emerging adult films, like *Clerks* and *Empire Records*, are set in the protagonists' workplaces, but these spaces are not usually as important, possibly due to the fact that many emerging adult protagonists consider their jobs to be temporary arrangements that they will give up once they fulfil their dreams. Instead, the workplace is usually one of many locations that the protagonists inhabit. The spaces where the protagonists hang out are relevant in both genres, with the difference that in emerging adult films the protagonists inhabit a larger variety of spaces. This may be related to the greater freedom that emerging adults have compared to teenagers and to the fact that most emerging adult films take place in urban settings that provide the protagonists with more leisure options. Freedom is also linked to

another characteristic of emerging adult films: the emphasis they tend to place on movement. Emerging adult films often show characters who seem to be on a constant journey. They are often shown moving around the city and a significant number of emerging adult films begin and end with movement, highlighting the protagonists' status as individuals in transition. Although all of the films analysed in this chapter are set in a restricted space, which limits the characters' movements, differences between the way in which teenagers and emerging adults move can be observed.

Unlike teenagers, emerging adult characters are free to come and go as they please. Their life paths are less fixed than those of teenagers and they are no longer under parental control, which results in a greater emphasis on—sometimes rather aimless—movement. *Empire Records* begins with Lucas, one of the emerging adult characters, driving to Atlantic City, where he gambles the store's money in a desperate attempt to save it. The scene underscores the fact that emerging adulthood comes with more freedom but also with greater responsibility. Lucas is old enough to gamble and to spend the night away from home without anybody worrying about him, but his rash decision proves that he is not mature enough to follow Joe's instructions or to be trusted with money. In *Clerks*, Dante and Randal show the same immaturity when they leave their jobs to play hockey on the roof, to attend a wake, to rent a film at a different video rental store and to get changed for a date. While in other emerging adult films the protagonists' movement symbolises their quest to find a suitable adult identity, in *Clerks* and *Empire Records* it highlights their unreadiness and unwillingness to take on adult responsibilities and suggests that journey towards adulthood is far from over. In contrast, characters in *The Breakfast Club* have less freedom of movement. Four out of the five protagonists are driven to school by their parents, which emphasises their dependence on their parents and the power that parental

control exerts over them. When the five characters leave the library, defying adult authority and running around the corridors, they run into metal bars that block their escape. They are framed behind bars (fig. 3.13), trapped in a liminal space—the corridors—that mirrors the in-betweenness and constraints of their life stage, which is heavily regulated by adults.

Fig. 3.13. Teenagers have limited freedom of movement.

Some of the spaces characteristically inhabited by teen film and emerging adult film characters constitute what Marc Augé (1995) denominates non-places. Augé defines non-places in opposition to anthropological places as those that "cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (78). They are spaces of supermodernity where individuals leave their identity behind and come to be defined in terms of their relation to the non-place they are utilising: as consumers in the supermarket or the shopping centre, as passengers at the airport or as drivers on the motorway. Non-places, as Bauman explains, are transitory spaces that "discourage the thought of 'settling in'" ([2000] 2012, 137). That is, they are meant to be used for as long as it takes to do the shopping or reach one's destination. Although it may be argued that a convenience store does not constitute a non-place for those who work in it, *Clerks* features characters who

spend a substantial amount of time at the convenience store without any desire to buy anything. Instead of using the *Quick Stop* for consumption purposes, Randal sees it as a place where he can socialise with his friend, while Jay and Silent Bob occupy another non-space—the parking lot—for a use which is not the intended one. Instead of using it as a place to leave their vehicle while they go shopping, they use it to hang out and sell drugs, repurposing it into a place of socialisation, consumption and crime. In *Empire Records*, an independent business characteristic of a previous era is going to be turned into a chain, which would effectively make it a non-place where consumers would be able to buy exactly the same as everywhere else across the country and employees would be stripped of their individuality. Their rebellion against corporate values can also be read as a rebellion against the lack of spaces available for young people to socialise.

Stores are spaces that customers visit for a short period of time. People usually have a look around, pick something to buy, pay and leave. However, in both films these spaces are repurposed into a site of socialisation rather than one of consumption. In his book about spaces for consumption in the post-industrial city, Steven Miles argues that "to belong to contemporary society…is to be a consumer" (2010, 23). The fact that characters use these spaces not to consume but to hang out, positions them at the margins of society, as individuals who do not belong, who are not quite the ideal citizen, thus mirroring the liminality of youth. As Campbell (2004, 20) argues, young people tend to seek spaces where their identity can develop free from the constrains of adult supervision. Both the *Quick Stop* and the *Empire* constitute safe spaces for the films' protagonists, where they can socialise and choose who to become without influence from parents or bosses, both of whom remain absent throughout the film. Both films showcase inventive uses for the store's rooftop, a space that is not designed to be used at all. In *Clerks*, the employees play

a hockey match on it, while in *Empire Records* it serves as a makeshift stage for the party and also as the setting for Corey and A.J.'s final union (fig. 3.14). The characters' use of space shows a tendency to subvert a space's intended use and highlights the fact that young people often lack spaces of their own and have to resort to creative uses of the spaces available to them. This subversive use of spaces can also be observed in *The Breakfast Club* when the protagonists are shown dancing around the library: a space which is conceived as a site of learning, begins the film as a site of punishment and ends up becoming a site of celebration and bonding which, ironically, partially returns the space to its intended use—by the end of the film the five teenagers have learnt valuable lessons about themselves and their peers.

Fig. 3.14. Young people lack spaces of their own and resort to creative uses of the spaces available to them.

The three films analysed make a similar use of space: they emphasise the way in which the protagonists' freedoms are constrained by work and school, liminal spaces that mirror the liminality of youth and the need for young people to repurpose spaces into sites of socialisation and leisure. This brings to the fore the similarities between adolescence and emerging adulthood, which is also aided by the fact that the emerging adult protagonists are still in their early twenties. However, despite this small difference in age, emerging adult characters have more freedom of movement. Their movements show that greater freedom and responsibilities are not necessarily matched by greater maturity, which underscores the fact that, for them, adulthood is a work in progress.

3.3 Conclusion

Emerging adulthood has a fixed starting age, but the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood is a gentle slope rather than a cliff edge leap. The freedoms and responsibilities of emerging adulthood come gradually, and so does the shedding of one's adolescent identity and viewpoints. As a result, those films that deal with early emerging adulthood portray the challenges of protagonists who may still see certain aspects of life in adolescent terms despite the fact that they are no longer teenagers. Emerging adult films make use of teen film conventions in order to convey a quasi-adolescent viewpoint and lifestyle, but they also foreground challenges that are unique to emerging adulthood. The two genres sometimes bleed into each other as the two life stages do, a generic interplay that fades into the background as the protagonists mature.

A comparative analysis of *The Breakfast Club*, *Empire Records* and *Clerks*, has revealed the undeniable: that the three films are very similar despite the fact that they depict individuals going through different life stages. They all highlight rebellion against authority, an opposition between youth and adult values and portray superiors as incompetent. However, while in *The Breakfast Club* all adults seem to be to blame for the protagonists' problems, *Empire Records* shows how in emerging adult films the protagonists rebel against a very specific sort of adult values that they see as a loss of individuality and authenticity. Generational conflicts also take place with members of the same generation. *The Breakfast Club*, as is typical in teenage films, highlights the role of the high school hierarchy, while in the two other films cliques—although not altogether gone—play a lesser role, and the difference between those who have acquired more or less adult responsibilities becomes a source of conflict. Additionally, *Empire Records* also features a different sort of generational conflict: between emerging adults and the younger generations, who remind the protagonists of their age and help them mature, sometimes by allowing them to take on a mentoring role, which can be seen in *Empire Records* when Lucas and A.J. accept criminal delinquent Warren (Brendan Sexton III) as a fellow employee.

The deromanticised depiction of love in *Clerks* falls in line with emerging adult film conventions and contrasts with the idealised view of teenage love shown in the other two films. Emerging adult characters have more experience and more freedom to experience. Their greater freedom is conveyed through the films' use of space and, particularly, through the characters' ability to move. However, they fail to use this independence productively, which marks the protagonists' immaturity. The progressive acquisition of new adult responsibilities is a key element in emerging adulthood, and the protagonists in

both *Empire Records* and *Clerks* still have a long way to go as far as responsibility is concerned. Emerging adult characters in both films have the chance to prove that they can handle responsibility by opening and closing the stores, handling other people's money and selling substances that cannot be sold to minors. Their failure to follow instructions denotes their immaturity in both films. Lucas spends other people's money, while Dante and Randal close the stores and sell cigarettes to a child. Their immaturity makes them lawbreakers, which could carry serious consequences. In contrast, teenage characters can be irresponsible without so many worries. For instance, Bender is fully aware that the worst that can happen to him is having to spend more Saturdays in detention, while Warren's decision to show up at the store wielding a gun is almost laughing matter for the adults around him. Both *Clerks* and *Empire Records* show that growing up implies taking on new responsibilities and that this maturation process may be longer or shorter depending on the individual, thus underscoring the individualised nature of the transition to contemporary adulthood.

CHAPTER FOUR

There's No Place Like Home: Homecoming Narratives in Emerging Adult Films

Homecoming narratives abound in emerging adult films. More often than not, films that feature a return home organise their entire narrative around this journey. Homecoming films usually begin by showing the reasons that drive the protagonists' return home— usually a personal crisis or a high school reunion—and finish with the end of their stay there and their return to normal life, which usually sees the protagonists enlightened and ready to make a positive change towards adulthood. The films' narrative structure is therefore framed by a backwards journey in which the protagonists retrace the steps that led them from adolescence to independence. This chapter concentrates on homecoming films, high school reunion films and films that feature reunions of high school friends, leaving aside those that, like *Rough Night* (Lucia Aniello, 2017) and *About Alex* (Jesse Zwick, 2014), deal with a reunion of old college friends. Although these films also deal with the transition to adulthood and the negotiation between one's past and present selves, these films differ from the ones analysed in that the protagonists—who are either in late emerging adulthood or fully-fledged adults—revisit their early emerging adult years

instead of their teenage years. As a consequence, they lack the reflection on the themes of home, family and high school or childhood friendships that predominates in homecoming films.

The chapter will begin with an outline of the different types of homecoming narratives and a discussion of the main aspects of the transition to adulthood highlighted by each one of them. I will then provide a brief analysis of two of the main features that differentiate homecoming films from other emerging adult films: their ambivalence towards nostalgia and their suburban and small town settings. The third and last part of the chapter is a close reading of the film *Young Adult* (Jason Reitman, 2011), which portrays a thirtysomething's inability to leave her adolescence behind in what has become an abnormally long transition to adulthood. *Young Adult* combines scenes that recreate high school social dynamics with rites of passage that mark a character's status as an adult and the protagonist's personal crisis and failure to grow up, thus effectively combining the most prominent themes present in homecoming films.

4.1 Types of homecoming narratives

Homecoming narratives in emerging adult films can be roughly divided into two categories: those that feature reunions and those in which the protagonist returns home. In reunion films a ceremony or celebration often provides an excuse for a group of old friends to get together again. The reunion may take place in their hometown or somewhere else and it usually celebrates a rite of passage into adulthood, most commonly a wedding or a high school reunion. While reunion films possess a celebratory nature despite the

protagonists' often less than ideal circumstances, films in which the protagonist returns home tend to be bleaker. Most of the time protagonists go back home as a result of a personal crisis that has rendered them unable to look after themselves or to carry on with their previous lifestyle. In these films, protagonists often boomerang back home after graduating from college, after a break-up or after losing their jobs.

4.1.1 Reunion films

Films that feature wedding and pre-wedding celebrations, such as *Bridesmaids* (Paul Feig, 2011), and *Bachelorette* (Leslye Headland, 2012), emphasise both the attainment of adult milestones and some characters' difficulty to do so, while placing a focus on the changing nature of friendships as we age. By contrast, in those films in which a member of the group has died, such as *Wasted* (Matt Oates, 2006), the emphasis is placed on the inevitability of time. These films usually take the form of multi-protagonist films (Azcona 2010) in which some of the characters have moved on to adulthood while others remain in emerging adulthood, which highlights the arrested development of those who still have some growing up to do. The focus is thus on the different pace at which people evolve, which underscores the highly individualised nature of the transition to contemporary adulthood (Arnett 2004, Blatterer, 2007). In these films, the feeling of home is not evoked by a physical site, but by the relationships forged during one's youth or by a holiday destination that they visited growing up. For instance, in *A Good Old Fashioned Orgy* (Alex Gregory and Peter Hyck, 2011), a group of friends get together for one last party at a family holiday home in the Hamptons upon learning that it is going to be sold. Similarly, the protagonist in *Camp Takota* (Chris Riedell and Nick Riedell, 2014) returns to the camp

she used to go to when she was a child, where she joins her childhood friends working as a camp counsellor. The group of friends and the holiday site function like the parental home in that they stand for the safety of a more innocent and carefree past that contrasts with the challenges and uncertainty of adulthood.

4.1.2 High school reunion films

High school reunion films centre their narrative around the protagonists' 10-year high school reunion, an event which forces them not only to return home, but also to come face to face with their high school classmates. Unlike other reunion films, which place their focus on the value of lifelong friendships in which the group sometimes functions as a surrogate family, high school reunion films bring to light past tensions and dramas. As Keiko Ikeda argues, high school reunions are sites of "collective reflexivity" that force those involved to think about the way their lives are going while offering them a chance to rewrite their life story (1998, 35). As was discussed in Chapter Three, high school proms function as a testing site for an individual's success in the fulfilment of middle-class gender roles (Smith [2017] 2019, 69). The high school hierarchy, which sees its official culmination in the election of the prom king and queen, determines who has come the closest to ideals of femininity and masculinity, and the prom gives students on the brink of adulthood a chance to assert their potential as future successful adults. In a similar vein, it could be argued that high school reunions constitute the site where the successful negotiation of the same class and gender norms is *confirmed*. Like senior proms, high school reunions are loaded with ideological baggage. Attendants are expected to prove to those who knew them as teenagers that their evolution into adulthood has been smooth and

fruitful. It is a chance for young adults to show their professional and personal achievements and to prove that they are either as successful as they were in high school or more successful than their peers expected. These achievements tend to focus on the attainment of professional and material success and on the creation of a family unit. In other words, high school reunions reinforce the same middle class heteronormative ideals as high school proms. Stacey Abbott (2009) acknowledges the connection between high school proms and high school reunions and goes as far as to analyse high school reunion films as teen romantic comedies with adult characters.

In high school reunion films, these events often constitute a source of anxiety for emerging adult characters who have not achieved the sort of stability or success expected of them. This is best exemplified by *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* (David Mirkin, 1997), where the protagonists carefully self-fashion new personas—and new, adult looking outfits—for their reunion in an attempt to impress their former tormentors. Embarrassed by their lack of direction, the protagonists decide to claim that they invented post-its, hoping that such a claim to fame would make others perceive them as successful. In order to convey an image of adult sophistication, they ditch their usual colourful outfits for black power suits and put their hair up in French twists, combining symbols of female competence and glamour that they believe fulfil other people's expectations of them (fig. 4.1). However, their cluelessness regarding the mores of small-town adulthood becomes evident when they enter the party, especially when they face the popular girls who used to bully them, all of whom are dressed in shiny fabrics in beige and pastel pink, have their hair down and are visibly pregnant. To these women, a successful transition to adulthood is not marked by their career achievements, but, rather, by their fulfilment of traditional gender roles.

Fig. 4.1. *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* (David Mirkin, 1997): After their businesswoman makeover, Romy and Michele still fail to fulfil the gender ideals valued by their former classmates.

A failure to conform to traditional career expectations is shown in *Grosse Pointe Blank* (George Armitage, 1997), where the protagonist, who works as an assassin, nervously rehearses his introduction in front of the mirror saying "Hi, I'm Martin Blank, do you remember me? I'm not married, I don't have any kids, but I'd blow your head off if someone paid me enough." This anxiety regarding their reunion usually comes from a fear of what others will think of them. When being thrown back into a high school setting, the same fears and anxieties the characters felt as teenagers come to the surface, together with the pressure to fit in and not to be deemed a loser. As Abbott argues, in high school reunion films the protagonists "re-enter the generic parameters of the teen rom-com" (2009, 54) so, like teenage films, they engage with the high school hierarchy, but this time from an adult perspective. High school reunion films underscore how individuals belonging to different high school cliques evolve through the years, often subverting the status quo and showing those who were popular as damaged or uncool and vice versa. In other words, high school reunion films resort to the same character types that appear in teen films but portray them

in a new light. Characters often defy expectations of what their life after high school would be like, turning into what Ikeda refers to as "late bloomers" or "fallen idols" (1998, 18).

Former popular girls are often married and pregnant, which apparently signals a smooth evolution from their teenage personas as the most physically attractive. However, their story is often not what it seems. In *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion*, the most popular—and meanest—girl is now married to her high school sweetheart and expecting her third child, but she is also cheating on him. In *Ten Years* (Jamie Linden, 2012), the high school's most desirable girl is now a mother of two, but the kids have different fathers and she lives at home with her alcoholic mother. Similarly, former jocks are often portrayed as damaged individuals. In *Beautiful Girls* (Ted Demme, 1996), Tommy (Matt Dillon) used to be a hockey star, but now he is an adult who cannot commit to his partner because he is still hung up on—and having an affair with—his high school girlfriend. Similarly, in *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* Billy (Vincent Ventresca) is an adulterer with a drinking problem. On the other side of the spectrum are those who became successful after high school. In teen film nerds are at the bottom of the social hierarchy, while in high school reunion films their intellectual abilities and studying habits have paid off, often making them very rich. This is the case in *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion*, where former nerd Sandy Frink (Alan Cumming) arrives at the reunion in his own helicopter, and in *Grosse Pointe Blank*, where a former nerd now owns a successful software company.

High school reunion films tend to align those who were popular in high school with conservative values or to portray them as unable to move on from their adolescent success.

In contrast, those who were outcasts when they were teenagers are usually more progressive, creative and successful. The fact that they did not conform to the unwritten rules of high school popularity has enabled them to forge their own path into adult success, which they often find using skills that they were mocked for as teenagers. For instance, nerds are often able to succeed thanks to their intellectual abilities, while Romy (Mira Sorvino) and Michele (Lisa Kudrow) eventually find success thanks to their original sense of style, which was mocked by popular girls both when they were teenagers and at the reunion when they exchanged their businesswoman outfits for their own creations: pink and baby blue mini dresses in shiny fabrics with playful details that denote their creative, fun-loving personalities (fig. 4.2). These films, then, reject traditional, straightforward paths into adulthood and give preference to highly individualised transitions that highlight a person's uniqueness and ability to think outside the box. Those who stayed home tend to be portrayed in a negative light, and so are those who work in non-creative professions such as insurance or sales. Traditional career paths and early family formation are thus usually perceived as boring and uninspired, while creative professions and delayed marriage and parenthood are portrayed as the path to adult success.

Fig. 4.2. *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* (David Mirkin, 1997): For Romy and Michele success lies in individuality, creativity and sisterhood.

4.1.3 Returning home

Now that the prevalence of social media allows us to satisfy our curiosity regarding old classmates online, high school reunions have become redundant. As a result, high school reunion narratives are almost non-existent today. Instead, the most common type of homecoming narrative is one in which the protagonists travel back to their hometown—and in most cases to the parental home—for a more or less long period of time as a result of a crisis or a major life change. Whereas in reunion films characters return home or get together with their school friends for an event that usually lasts a single night, in these films characters either go back home for an undefined period of time or move back in with their parents. The prevalence of this sort of homecoming narrative in the 2010s reflects the growing difficulty for young people to become financially independent in the aftermath of the Great Recession. The term "boomerang kids" has been used to designate young adults who move back into the parental home after a period of independence since the 1980s (Davies Okimoto and Jackson Stegall, 1987). Both Generation X (Broad 1998) and the millennial generation (Parker 2012) have been called "the boomerang generation." Recent data show that the trend to boomerang back home continues upwards, reaching levels that had been unheard of since the Great Depression. According to the Pew Research Center, in July 2020, 52% of young adults aged 18-29 lived with their parents. Although the COVID-19 pandemic is partly to blame—it pushed the percentage up by four points in only five months—the percentage of boomerang kids has been rising steadily since the late 1980s (Fry et al., 2020). Student debt, unemployment, housing costs and a lack of prospects are cited among the reasons why emerging adults flock back to the nest (Kutner 1988, Farris 2016).

The number of narratives with boomerang kids as protagonists attests to these changes. Boomerang kid narratives are as old as emerging adult films themselves. After all, in *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), the protagonist is a boomerang kid who moves back home after graduation. However, up until the 2000s these narratives were few and far between[1]. Out of the corpus of films studied in this dissertation, in the 1990s only *SubUrbia* (Richard Linklater, 1996) deals with a character who has moved back into his parents' home—or, rather, into a tent in his parents' garage—after dropping out of college. The next decade sees the number go up slightly: five films feature emerging adults boomeranging back home, three of those after graduation and two due to a personal crisis[2]. In the next decade, however, the number triples: fifteen films have protagonists who move back home or, in the case of *Camp Takota*, to a place that evokes a feeling of home. Also different is the reason that motivates this return home: college graduation constitutes a reason in only two of these films, a romantic break-up in five of them, mental health issues play a role in three, an obsession with an element of their past and the death of a loved one in two, and general lack of fulfilment and being expelled from college are reasons that motivate the characters' returns in one film each. The motivating factor that appears the most often, though, is unemployment or the inability to make ends meet on precarious employment, which plays a role in seven of the films[3]. After 2010, homecoming narratives show the difficulty to settle down in a post-recessionary landscape, as well as the threats to

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[1] For data regarding homecoming films, including the reasons for the protagonist's returns distributed across the three decades, see Appendix A.

[2] The protagonists in *The American Poop Movie* (Joe Kingsley, 2006), *Post Grad* (Vicky Jenson, 2009) and *Adventureland* (Greg Mottola, 2009) move back home after graduating from college, while in *Lonesome Jim* (Steve Buscemi, 2005) the protagonist boomerangs back home after he runs out of money and in *Garden State* (Zach Braff, 2004) the protagonist's return is motivated by his mother's death and his decision to stay is partly motivated by his lack of success as an aspiring actor in LA.

[3] In many of these films several factors are combined. For instance, in *Girl Most Likely* the protagonist's return is motivated by unemployment, a break-up and a suicide attempt.

one's well-being that the precariousness of contemporary adulthood poses. Jobs and relationships are temporary, living independently without a romantic partner or a housemate is out of bounds for most and those who are employed often find themselves so frustrated with the nature of their jobs that they are driven to despair.

Fig. 4.3. In *Colossal* (Nacho Vigalondo, 2016), a wide-angle lens creates visually larger spaces, emphasising the void left by her parents' death and the feeling of emptiness that has driven her to despair.

In most of these films, the protagonists temporarily retreat to a position of dependence on their parents or on a sibling who may or may not live in the family home. In the case of *Adult Beginners* (Ross Katz, 2014), *Happy Christmas* (Joe Swanberg, 2014) and *The Year of Spectacular Men* (Lea Thompson, 2017), siblings (both older and younger) take on an almost parental role, providing shelter and, sometimes, employment to the protagonists and regulating their behaviour as a parent would. Less often, the protagonists return to an empty family home after losing their parents. For instance, in *Blue Jay* (Alexandre Lehmann, 2016) the protagonist is charged with the task of emptying his late mother's house, which he intends to renovate and sell, while in *Colossal* (Nacho Vigalondo, 2016) the protagonist moves back into her parents' house, which stands completely empty after their death. This physical emptiness, which is highlighted by the

use of a wide-angle lens, emphasises the protagonist's spiritual void (fig. 4.3). Through being physically placed in their childhood home, protagonists are forced to confront who they were growing up and to assess—and reconsider—their progress—or lack thereof—thus far.

A return home usually forces the protagonists to reflect on their evolution since they left. When this return home involves moving back into the parental home, emerging adult protagonists need to renegotiate their relationship with their parents and siblings. Both boomerang kids and their parents need to find a way to relate to one another as adults, which at times proves challenging. In some instances, as in *Post Grad* and *The Lifeguard* (Liz W. Garcia, 2013), one parent coddles and infantilises their newly returned adult child while the other one pressures them to grow up and move back out. Sometimes parents have taken their children leaving the nest as an opportunity for personal or professional growth. Upon moving back home, emerging adult characters often find these changes unsettling and blame their parents for having moved on. In films where a parent has died, the protagonists often resent the surviving parent for starting a new life. This can be seen in *Adult Beginners*, where the protagonist's father is now living in Florida with his new wife and shows no interest in his children's lives. Similarly, in *The Year of Spectacular Men* the protagonist's widowed mother has started a relationship with a younger woman who is closer in age to her daughters than to herself, which becomes the source of intergenerational tension.

Protagonists sometimes find that they no longer have a space of their own. Their bedroom might have been given another purpose, often related to the parents' new-found hobbies or professional projects. For example, in *The Lifeguard* the protagonist's room has

been turned into an office for her mother to work on her belly dancing business. Similarly, in *Unicorn Store (Brie Larson, 2017)* the protagonist's bedroom has been turned into a gym, which relegates her to the basement. Other films show characters occupying unusual spaces within the family home—the shed in *Adult Life Skills* (Rachel Tunnard, 2016) and the garage in *SubUrbia*—, which highlights the fact that the protagonists are trying to inhabit a space that no longer belongs to them. By positioning the protagonists at the margins of the family home, these films emphasise the fact that it is time for them to flee the nest. The growing distance between emerging adult characters and their family may also be conveyed through framing. For instance, in *Tiny Furniture* (Lena Dunham, 2010), the distance between the protagonist, Aura (Lena Dunham) and her younger sister is emphasised through physical barriers that create vertical lines between them (fig. 4.4). At the same time, the closeness of her mother's relationship with her sister is conveyed through shots that emphasise their unity and keep Aura at a distance. The protagonist is often framed behind her mother, at opposite ends of the screen or at a different level (fig. 4.5).

Fig. 4.4. *Tiny Furniture* (Lena Dunham, 2010): Framing highlights both the strained relationship between Aura and her sister and their contrasting natures: Aura is paralysed while her sister is mentally and physically active.

Fig. 4.5. *Tiny Furniture* (Lena Dunham, 2010): Shot composition and the direction of Siri's gaze underscore her strained relationship with Aura and her focus on her youngest child.

Films about boomerang kids, then, partly focus the narrative on the renegotiation of the protagonist's relationship with their parents. They often need to change their point of view as far as their parents are concerned and to begin seeing them as complex human beings with needs and desires of their own. The protagonists need to come to terms with the fact that their initial departure not only kickstarted a major life change for themselves, but also for their parents, who, relieved of their caretaking duties, suddenly found themselves with more time and space. Emerging adult protagonists need to learn not to go back to childish or adolescent behaviours when their parents are around, as well as to take responsibility for their actions and to respect their parents' space. One of the films that explores this relationship in depth is *Tiny Furniture*. When Siri (Laurie Simons), Aura's

mother, leaves home for a few days, the protagonist invites a man she barely knows to stay over and she lets him sleep on her mother's bed. Together, they drink her mother's wine and eat her food. She rejects all her household duties and fails to look after her hamster, which she ends up killing and putting in the freezer. In short, Aura behaves like a child who has been left alone for the weekend. This rejection of her responsibilities is highlighted by shots of the mess she has made accompanied by the sound of her mother's answering machine messages. Although she is technically a grown up, Aura craves the sort of love and affection that a child gets from a parent. She yearns to sleep in her mother's bed and, when apologising to her, she sits on her lap like a child would. The film ends with Aura and her mother in bed together after a heart to heart. Aura has learnt that her mother's path to success was not as quick as she once believed, and her mother has learnt that she still has some mothering to do. Both mother and daughter have opened up to one another as adults, exposing their vulnerabilities and worries, which in turn has brought them closer together. Although Siri (Laurie Simmons) is still giving her back to Aura, her daughter's openness regarding her fears and anxieties has led to increased intimacy.

4.2 Homecoming and nostalgia

In emerging adult films, the journey back home is almost never one that the characters are looking forward to. Although the protagonists usually *choose* to return to their hometown, unless they are returning for a celebration such as a wedding or a high school reunion, they see this option as a last resort when they have nowhere else to go or nobody to turn to. In some extreme cases, like in *Just Friends* (Roger Kumble, 2005) and *Girl Most Likely* (Shari Springer Bergman and Robert Pulcini, 2012), unforeseen

circumstances—an emergency landing and a suicide attempt—force the protagonists to return home, while in *Camp Takota* the protagonist agrees to return while she is blackout drunk, a choice that she later regrets. Emerging adult characters do not yearn to go back home, they resign themselves to the fact that they have no other choice. Their reluctance to return home reveals an ambivalent attitude towards nostalgia. The word nostalgia has its roots in the Greek word *nostos*, which means return home, and *algia*, which means pain, was coined in the late 17th century to denote the homesickness felt by Swiss mercenaries whose longing to return home resulted in symptoms that would nowadays be defined as depression (Davis 1977, 414; Boym 2001; Cross 2015, 9). In emerging adult films, the relationship between a return home and an existential crisis remains, although it is inverted. As Susan J. Matt explains, movement has become integral to American identity, and homesickness is seen as a sign of immaturity and maladjustment (2011, 4). Consequently, coming home is regarded as a failure. Emerging adult characters do not feel depressed because they are far from home. On the contrary, their existential crises arise from an inability to support themselves as independent adults, which in turn forces a return home once they run out of resources.

The word nostalgia no longer denotes a pathological condition. Instead, it refers to a mostly pleasurable but bittersweet feeling that sets in when an individual thinks about the past. As Davis explains, nostalgic experience is related to positive feelings such as "past beauty, pleasure, joy, satisfaction, goodness, happiness, love" and almost never to negative ones like "pain, unhappiness, frustration, despair, hate abuse, etc." (1977, 418). Nostalgia therefore involves a careful process of selection and elimination through which the individual rewrites the past, choosing "what to remember and how to remember it" (Wilson 1999, 299). This privileging of positive emotions often makes individuals look at

their past through rose-tinted glasses, granting some aspects of their past an overwhelmingly high value that does not correspond with reality (Davis 1979, 36-37). Those homecoming narratives in which the protagonists choose to return home despite being able to support themselves show a nostalgic idealisation of their adolescence, which is perceived as a less complicated and uncertain time.

An idealised view of adolescence can be seen in *The Lifeguard*, a film in which the protagonist, a newspaper reporter living in New York City, moves back home to run away from an unfulfilling job and a love affair that is going nowhere. Once there, she decides to take up her old summer job as a lifeguard, assuming that this change, which she defines as "getting back to basics," will bring back the happiness she lost somewhere along the way. As Wilson (1999, 297) points out, nostalgia deals with a past that cannot be recaptured, which may result in unhappiness. The wish to return to a certain time in the past is an unfulfillable one, while the wish to return to a place from one's past is always unsatisfactory because both place and individual have changed. Similarly, longing for an old love often tends to be nothing more than chasing rainbows. As can be seen in *Ass Backwards* (Chris Nelson, 2013) and *Young Adult*, longing for a high school boyfriend becomes an unhealthy attachment that the protagonist needs to renounce in order to grow up. Nostalgic longings to return to adolescence are therefore represented as obstacles towards the protagonists' maturity. However, not all nostalgic attachments are perceived as negative. Sometimes a nostalgic look at the past is needed in order to reassess one's priorities.

Nostalgia involves a dialogue between past and present. Although the object of nostalgia is in the past, the reason why we feel nostalgia in a particular moment is

motivated by our present situation. Davis argues that nostalgic feelings are not necessarily motivated by the time that has passed since the events that we feel nostalgic about took place, but by the way in which they contrast with our present situation, and that nostalgia is always related to "present fears, discontents, anxieties or uncertainties" that the individual may not be aware of (1977, 417-420). It could then be argued that an emerging adult's decision to return home in times of crisis is always motivated, to a certain extent, by a subconscious desire to recapture the certainty and safety of childhood and adolescence. The path to contemporary adulthood is rarely a straightforward one. It tends to be full of twists, turns and cul-de-sacs, which may make emerging adults long for a time in which they knew exactly what their goals were and how to achieve them. Even emerging adult protagonists who are not paralysed by an obsession with their past usually express nostalgic feelings towards their high school dreams and aspirations. For instance, the protagonist in *Adult Beginners* looks at a caricature portrait of himself that he got for his bar mitzvah in which he is surrounded by all his hobbies and mournfully says "I guess I had a lot of interests." On the road to adulthood, Jake (Nick Kroll) has lost sight of those things that used to mean a lot to him, becoming materialistic and superficial, and looking at a portrait of his past self gives way to nostalgic feelings towards the more passionate and enthusiastic person that he used to be. Similarly, in *Lonesome Jim*, pictures of writers on his bedroom wall remind the protagonist of his unfulfilled dream to become one.

Nostalgic yearning has been described as a type of mourning (Rubenstein, 2001, 5). In those homecoming films in which the protagonist returns home due to someone's death or illness, the physical loss of a loved one is combined with the intangible loss of the protagonist's youth. Mourning for the dead and mourning for one's irrecuperable youth are inevitably enmeshed: the loss of that person and the emptiness of the spaces previously

inhabited by them marks a turning point in the protagonist's development, death confirms the irrevocability of time and the impossibility of retreating to a previous stage of development. In *Other People* (Chris Kelly, 2016), David (Jesse Plemons) goes back home to look after his ill mother. When she refuses further treatment, preemptive mourning for his mother's loss is combined with mourning over his past relationship, a string of professional rejections and a damaged relationship with his father. The combination of grief for his mother and his youth is best summed up when David exclaims: "I'm gonna be fucking 30 years old. And then mum is gonna be dead, and then what? Are we gonna be closer then? Like, do I still come home? Because I want to!" David fears that, by losing his mother, he may lose a place to call home. In *Adult Life Skills* the protagonist cannot face life on her own after losing her twin brother, so she retreats into the shed in her mother's garden, which is full of her brother's possessions and of memories of their times together. Although she refuses to make plans to move out or to celebrate her 30th birthday, which marks both a milestone on her road to adulthood and her first birthday without her brother, she eventually realises the only way forward is to acknowledge change and to destroy the shed at her party with the help of her loved ones.

Characters who resist nostalgia often see themselves immersed in it. The protagonists in *Girl Most Likely* and *Just Friends*, who initially were so adamant not to go home that only an accident could lead them there, wear their teenage clothes throughout the films, visually merging their current and past selves. Significantly, it is those characters who are the most reluctant to go home that end up being forced to look like their adolescent selves. The fact that an emergency took them home means that they were unable to pack a suitcase and must therefore make do with whatever clothes they left at home when they moved out. In *Just Friends*, having to wear his old plus size clothes reminds Chris (Ryan Reynolds)

that he was not always a wealthy playboy who disregards women's feelings, but an overweight teenager capable of treating women well and showing love and affection. Similarly, in *Girl Most Likely* Imogene (Kristen Wiig) is forced to wear clothes that detach her from the affluent circles she has frequented in Manhattan. The film begins with her attending a charity event in a lavish setting where every single woman is clad in elegant beige and white dresses, which contrasts with the 1980s and 1990s clothes that she wears later on, which often feature bright colours and garish patterns (fig. 4.6). She is also seen wearing a *Friends* T-shirt, which sets her youthful love of pop culture in opposition with the high culture event that she is involved in at the beginning of the film.

Fig. 4.6. *Girl Most Likely* (Shari Springer Bergman and Robert Pulcini, 2012): Imogene's unplanned return forces her to wear her teenage clothes

What homecoming narratives seem to suggest is that the past is necessary to move forward, but one must not dwell upon it. While those characters who are overly attached to their teenage years must let go of their regressive wish, characters who have tried to break free from their past must embrace it. Although an excessive attachment to the past is detrimental to the present (Lowenthal 2015, 132), nostalgia has also been found to reduce

loneliness (Zhou et al. 2008), increase optimism (Cheung et al. 2013) and promote well-being (Seidikes et al. 2016). Nostalgia is related to the identity-building process, it lets us gain a "sense of who we are, what we are about, and (…) whither we go" (Davis 1977, 419). Nostalgia has been found to increase self-continuity, the sense that one's past and present are connected. At the same time, self-continuity is related to higher well-being, while a lack of self-continuity is thought to foster negative feelings and anxiety. In other words, a healthy dose of nostalgia will lead individuals to perceive their past and present as a coherent journey instead of as a collection of unrelated events (Seidikes et al. 2016). According to Davis, "nostalgia thrives on transition" (1979, 49), and this tendency to look back at one's past nostalgically is particularly accentuated during the transition to adulthood (42, 56).

Homecoming narratives reflect the benefits and dangers of nostalgia. Those characters who have chosen to sever all links to their past tend to lead superficial lifestyles that eventually lead to a crisis that brings them back where they began so they can reassess their lives, while those who are overly reliant on their past become paralysed by it. The dangers of glorifying the past have fatal consequences in in *The Lifeguard*. The protagonist, Leigh (Kristen Bell), befriends Jason (David Lambert), a local teenager who has plans to move away with his friend Matt (Alex Schaffer). As their friendship turns into a relationship, Leigh pressures Jason into staying in their hometown, which drives Matt, who is desperate to leave, to suicide. This tragic event underscores the protagonist's inability to see small town living as anything less than idyllic. At the end of the film, Leigh's growth is marked by her acknowledgment that a relationship with Jason is not viable and her giving him the money she wins in a journalism prize in order for him to move away and start a life of his own. That is, Leigh has learnt that a separation from one's

past is necessary in order to grow up. In contrast, an excessive distance between the protagonists and their past can prove detrimental. In *Adult Beginners*, the protagonist must let go of superficial relationships and learn to value family ties and crave commitment. When Jake's mother was dying of cancer, his sister Justine (Rose Byrne) could not get hold of him. During their mother's illness, Justine left law school to look after their mother, but Jake ducked his responsibility as a son. This avoidance signals an inability to take other people's situation into consideration and to take on a nurturing role that is necessary in adulthood. The end of the film shows Jake working in the city again, but this time he rushes back home when there is a family emergency. Boomeranging back home forces Jake to look after his nephew and bond both with him and with his sister, realising the value of real emotional connections and rearranging his priorities so that family comes first. As we have seen, Jake and Leigh have opposing attitudes regarding their home and their past: the former has tried to disengage himself from it, while the latter idealises it. It is through their return home that both protagonists modify the way they feel about home and learn key lessons that will aid their transition to adulthood. Jake realises the importance of stability and meaningful emotional bonds, while Leigh learns that what she considered idyllic can also be a nightmare. The outcomes of these two homecoming journeys, exemplify the position that emerging adult films take regarding homecoming narratives and nostalgia, which is that, in order to grow up, emerging adult characters must establish a healthy relationship with their own past, one that is neither a complete rejection nor romantic glorification.

4.2.1 Collectively consuming the past

Homecoming narratives not only showcase nostalgia through a return to the site of the characters' childhood and adolescence, but also through the use of props, costume and pop culture, particularly music that was popular during the protagonists' youth. Although less common in films whose protagonists boomerang home after graduating from college, a substantial number of homecoming films display what Gary Cross (2015) calls consumed nostalgia, which he defines as "the longing for the goods of the past that come from a *personal* experience of *growing up* in the stressful world of *fast capitalism*" (13). Cross argues that consumed nostalgia was born in the late twentieth century as a consequence of the frantic pace of consumption in which trends fall in and out of fashion faster than ever. Individuals may define themselves through certain products, and their eventual disappearance may threaten their sense of identity. This threat prompts individuals to attempt to recover the lost objects, which are often related to the popular culture consumed during childhood and youth (13-15). He considers this return to the products of our childhood as an attempt to establish continuity in the face of an "ever-accelerating pace of change that robs us of our identities" (20) and to establish a bond with other people who share the same memories (56).

During the 1970s and 1980s, teen films engaged in consumed nostalgia through a return to the past. Starting with *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973), a number of films set in the 1950s and 1960s showcased the fashions and popular culture of the past and cast a nostalgic look at a more innocent time. At the same time, these films transcended the generational divide: although they are teenage films aimed at Generation X teens, their setting made them attractive to ageing baby boomers eager to reminisce. Consumed

nostalgia is articulated differently in emerging adult films. Some films are exceptionally set in the past, like *Adventureland* and *Take Me Home Tonight* (Michael Dowse, 2011), all of which are set in the 1980s. However, emerging adult films tend to be set in the present. Even flashbacks into the protagonists' adolescence or childhood are few and far between. Instead, the past is seen through the eyes of a character's current situation, usually through a return home. In homecoming films, the protagonists often go back to their childhood bedrooms, which function as a time capsule of the 1990s. Posters, old toys and outdated fashions encourage protagonists and spectators alike to participate in a communal longing for the products of their adolescence while cementing generational consciousness (fig. 4.7). Similarly, high school reunion films place an emphasis on the music and fashion of the characters' teenage years. These films' soundtracks rely heavily on tracks popularised in the 1980s or 1990s, and the films' nostalgia for that era is often emphasised by the use of older technologies like vinyl records or cassette tapes.

Fig. 4.7. *Girl Most Likely* (Shari Springer Bergman and Robert Pulcini, 2012): The past is very much alive in Imogene's teenage bedroom.

Speed (2000, 25) differentiates between revivalist and nostalgic texts, defining those that focus on consumed nostalgia as revivalist and those that idealise "a subjective and naturalised relationship to the past" as nostalgic. This distinction resembles Davis' concepts of collective and private nostalgia, respectively. He argues that collective nostalgia is related to longing for "symbolic objects of a highly public, widely shared and familiar character," while private nostalgia is related to objects related to the individual's biography that cannot be shared by a large number of people, such as "the memory of a parent's smile" (1979, 222). The music and fashions of the past that engage characters and spectators in consumed nostalgia in the films that Speed classifies as revivalist texts like *Grosse Pointe Blank*, constitute instances of collective nostalgia. They are elements shared by the vast majority of a generation and possibly by younger generations with an interest in retro fashions. Homecoming films also exhibit private nostalgia that is specific to the characters and not shared by their entire generation. However, in these films private nostalgia tends to be related to rites of passage and coming-of-age moments that are experienced by almost every teenager, such as first loves and rejection, graduation, childhood friendships and feuds and familial bonds, which makes private nostalgia collective by evoking a nostalgic feeling in the spectator for similar events in their own biography.

4.4 Small-town returns

Small-town settings set homecoming and reunion narratives apart from other emerging adult films, which usually take place in urban settings. In some exceptions characters return to the city where they grew up. For instance, *Tiny Furniture* takes place in

New York, *Happy Christmas* sees the protagonist returning to Chicago and in *The Year of Spectacular Men* home is in Los Angeles. However, most homecoming narratives are markedly non-urban[4], which sets emerging adults in an environment different from the one they usually inhabit. The city usually provides the backdrop against which the quest to follow one's dreams is played out. Its theatres, music venues, comedy clubs and media and publishing companies provide emerging adults with opportunities to monetise their creative hobbies which are lacking in small towns Public transport networks allow them to move freely and cheaply without relying on a car or worrying about drinking and driving or about getting a lift home. In the city, emerging adults are free to come and go as they please, which gives them a higher degree of self-reliance.

By contrast, the small towns where they grew up usually symbolise stagnation, uniformity and a lack of movement and opportunities. Movement has been described as "fundamental to modern identity" (Dawson and Rapport 1998, 5-6) and, in the U.S., moving is generally connected to the idea of moving up in life, which is at the core of the American Dream (Duany et al. 2010). In recent years, technological developments have allowed people to work remotely, without having to settle down in a specific place. As a consequence, digital nomadism has become an aspirational lifestyle in which individuals, many of whom have given up their homes, work remotely while travelling for pleasure (Sutherland and Jarrahi 2017, 6). Advances in transport and communications have shrunk the world, making it easier to travel and widening the array of possible life trajectories. In

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[4] Over 70% of the films a analysed are set in small towns. Suburban areas and mid-sized cities tend to be portrayed in a way that sets them apart from the hustle and bustle of the big cities where emerging adults tend to live. For instance, *Other People* is set in Sacramento, which has a sizeable population, but the protagonist emphasises the fact that the gay scene in New York City is much more lively. Hometowns are seen through a big city lens, which makes them come across as smaller than they really are. When it comes to the suburbs and residential areas within bigger cities, the protagonists rarely venture downtown, therefore giving the impression that they are inhabiting a much smaller space than before their return.

light of these developments, the options available to young people in the suburbs seem smaller than ever. As Duyvendak (2011, 242) points out, those with strong location ties often come across as antiquated or ill-advised. This attitude towards those who choose to remain in their hometown is reflected in homecoming films. In *The Lifeguard*, the protagonist goes as far as to admit to thinking that everybody who never left town is a loser, while the protagonist in *Camp Takota* refers to the city as "the real world."

Some homecoming films also highlight the lack of opportunities for those who cannot leave. This is explicitly addressed in *Wasted*, a film in which two friends in their early twenties go back home to attend another friend's funeral. Their friend Bender (Jason McDowell)—named after the rebel in *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985)—died jumping off a cliff while inebriated. In the film, those characters who left town are by no means well-adjusted adults, but they differ from their friends who stayed in their attitude towards the future. The lack of options in their small town drives young people to vandalism, drug dealing and use and the kind of reckless behaviour that led Bender to his death, whereas those who left their hometown have hope in the future. *Garden State* also shows the lack of options young people face in small towns. Two of the protagonist's friends work as gravediggers and steal jewellery off corpses, while another one lives in his mother's basement and works in a Medieval theme park dressed up as a knight. The only young person who does not seem to be entirely aimless is another friend who used to be into drugs but sold out and became a policeman because he "couldn't think of anything better to do." However, the protagonist also suffers from a lack of opportunities. Andrew (Zach Braff) is an aspiring actor who works in a Vietnamese restaurant wearing an Asian costume and make-up that makes his eyes appear slanted. Even though he has aspirations, he finds himself working a menial job that, like his friends' jobs in New Jersey, is slightly

demeaning. However, despite the aimlessness and lack of future prevalent in his hometown, at the end of the film Andrew decides not to go back to Los Angeles, favouring close human bonds over a large array of opportunities.

In some instances, homecoming films advocate for a return to small town values. The city's manic pace, focus on material success and rampant individualism contrast with a less hectic and more predictable lifestyle, a lack of greed and an emphasis on community and homemaking. Those characters who settle down in small town or in the suburbs often work in jobs that give back to the community, like teaching in *Adult Beginners* and *The Lifeguard*, healthcare jobs in *Just Friends* and *Lonesome Jim* and the police force in *Garden State*. Others often have to adjust their expectations and set themselves lower goals or abandon their artistic dreams and sell out. *Girl Most Likely* features a character who, despite having studied music at Yale, is happy working in a Backstreet Boys cover band, while in *Post Grad*, yuppie thirtysomething David (Rodrigo Santoro) can only afford his lavish suburban lifestyle because he gave up on his dream of becoming a filmmaker to direct infomercials instead. In *Adult Life Skills*, the protagonist's ambitious entrepreneurial goals contrast with his old schoolmate's contentment working as an assistant manager in a grocery store. At the same time, the sophisticated party he throws at the beginning of the film contrasts with his schoolmate's social life: having brunch with his school friends. However, his unexciting life is depicted as positive in comparison to Jake's. While Jake came across as popular and successful at the beginning of the film, most of his relationships were superficial and ended as soon as his business failed. By contrast, his schoolmate has managed to establish and maintain a real connection with those around him, a type of bond that seems to be hard—if not impossible—to forge in the big city.

Going back home may become the source of inspiration that the protagonists need to move forward in life. In some films, as in *Lonesome Jim* and *Garden State*, they may choose to move back home for love, acknowledging that their artistic pursuits are going nowhere. In others, the protagonists draw inspiration from their experience and write about it, fulfilling their dreams of becoming writers. In *Camp Takota*, aspiring writer Elise (Grace Helbig) stops writing supernatural young adult books in the style of a popular saga and writes about her experiences at camp instead. Her book about camp finally helps her to achieve her dream of becoming a published author. Similarly, in *Girl Most Likely*, Imogene's trip back home puts an end to her writer's block. She writes a play inspired by her experience and finally becomes a successful playwright. Significantly, at the end of the film she is shown attending her play's premiere with her entire family, who are dressed in garish clothes that look out of place in the sophisticated Manhattan circles she frequented at the beginning of the film. Imogene herself is wearing a red dress, which sets her apart from the wealthy women dressed in beige, black and white.

Imogene's success has not brought her back to the wealthy intellectual crowd she so admired at the beginning. Instead, she boards a white limousine with her family, confirming her newly found appreciation for family values and her rejection of the superficiality that characterises the rich. Both the beginning and end of the film are accompanied by songs by the band Blondie that comment on the action. At the beginning, when she is getting ready to go to the party in which she finds out her boyfriend is cheating on her, "Sunday Girl" plays in the background. Debbie Harry sings "hey, I saw your guy with another girl. Looks like he's in another world," which anticipates the unpleasant discovery Imogene makes at the party and emphasises the fact that she does not belong in his world. The song continues playing while she tries to contact her boyfriend with no

success and when the protagonist arrives at the party and nervously applies lipstick before making her entrance, further highlighting the difference between her and the other women in attendance. The song playing non-diegetically during and after her play's performance is "Dreaming," which highlights the fact that, thanks to her return home, her dream has come true. A similar shot of Imogene applying lipstick establishes a firm contrast between the protagonist's insecurities at the beginning of the film and her self-confidence at the end. While at the beginning she attempts to smile but cannot, casting a sad glance upon herself, at the end of the film she manages to smile confidently, a new found confidence that she has found thanks to the kind of emotional support that was denied to her in the big city.

4.5 Growing up is harder if you peaked in high school: arrested development in *Young Adult*

Young Adult, emphasises the fact that the attainment of traditional markers of adulthood does not necessarily guarantee adult status. The film follows Mavis Gary (Charlize Theron) as she goes back to her hometown in an attempt to win back her high school boyfriend Buddy (Patrick Wilson), who has just become a father for the first time. Despite the fact that Mavis is well into her 30s, has been married before, lives on her own and is financially independent, she remains stuck in adolescence. She is selfish and unable to feel empathy for those around her and to establish lasting connections. Although she lives on her own, she is portrayed as unable to look after herself. The film's opening scene shows her lying face down on an unmade bed next to two empty bottles of wine, with her hand still holding a wine glass and the television on (fig. 4.8). On television, a young girl

cries about not feeling pretty and having bad self-esteem, suggesting that the protagonist also feels that way.

Fig. 4.8. Cold light and muted colours underscore Mavis' existential crisis, while the mess in her apartment reflects her mental state.

4.5.1 Rewriting oneself into adolescence

Mavis is on a downwards spiral of self-sabotage that leads her to drink herself to oblivion every night, procrastinate and fail to look after herself or her dog. Her existential crisis seems to have been triggered by the end of *Waverley Prep*, the young adult book series she ghostwrites. Writing about Kendal Stickland, a popular teenage girl who functions as Mavis' alter ego, allows the writer to relive her adolescence over and over again, constantly recalling the best time of her life and narrativising her own life story. For the protagonist, the act of writing works as a form of identity building. By recreating an idealised version of herself as a young, popular, successful and effortlessly beautiful teenager, Mavis comes to believe that she is all those things. The book series is therefore so

intimately intertwined with her ideal self that putting an end to it involves a painful separation process in which Mavis has to accept that she is no longer the popular young girl that she once was.

The end of the series should mark the end of Mavis' pathological attachment to her own adolescence: once the series is over she will be left without a teenage fantasy to hold on to. The protagonist's reluctance to write the last book in her series therefore suggests her inability to imagine a life in which she is ready to let go of her teenage self and an unwillingness to close that chapter of her life. Since Mavis' writing is informed by her own experience and readiness to leave adolescence behind is not something she has felt, she cannot bring herself to write about it. At the same time, her own existential crisis is preventing her from adopting a cheerful adolescent voice. As she walks towards her desk, which she only does after procrastinating by playing video games and eating, a loud wind sound conveys her anxiety regarding her writing and serves as a reminder that she lives on a very high floor, with her feet far from the ground and her head in the clouds, out of touch with reality. When she finally gets to work, her laptop shows a blank document named "pieceofshit.doc," a dating website and a website that sells designer goods. The open windows on her computer reflect her loneliness, her desire to present herself as a fashionable woman and her attitude towards her writing and, by extension, towards her life.

Giving up her fictional alter ego forces Mavis to give up a constructed version of herself and face the fact that she is a lonely woman approaching middle age. This gap between fiction and reality is emphasised by the fact that Mavis is not a recognised author, but a ghostwriter. Even though she writes the books, she is not the one who receives credit

for her success. Her fictional idealised self does not even belong to her, but to the creator

of the book series, whose name appears on the cover. When she visits a bookshop she finds

the series on the clearance counter (fig. 4.9) and she is confronted by one of the employees

when she signs some copies. The fact that her name does not appear on the cover devalues

the books and prevents the bookshop from sending them back to the publisher. As Marie-

Alix Thouaille argues, within a neoliberal context in which the border between one's

identity and one's work is fading, Mavis' professional failure marks her as socially and

economically useless (2019, 504). This uselessness is emphasised by the fact that her

books have lost their popularity, which reflects a generational shift: her (much younger)

readers have grown up and moved on from *Waverley Prep*, while new generations of young

readers prefer other series. This highlights Mavis' position as someone past their prime, as

a has-been whose vision of adolescence is no longer relevant to teenagers.

Fig. 4.9. The signs in the bookshop allude not only to the demise of the book series, but also to Mavis' state. Like the books, she used to be popular, a "former bestseller" that has now lost its appeal.

The widening gap between Mavis' adolescence and her real life is highlighted when she receives an e-mail from her high school boyfriend announcing the birth of his first baby. While her peers have moved on and become adults, Mavis is still holding on to her past or, rather, to a re-imagined version of it. To her, the fictionalised take on her adolescence that she constructed in the *Waverley Prep* series seems to be more real than her actual lived experience as a teenager. Buddy's e-mail prompts the protagonist to go back to her hometown, convinced that Buddy will dive into her arms and leave his life behind, letting go of all the attachments formed after adolescence. Mavis does not seem to stop and wonder whether Buddy still likes her and the thought that he might be happy with his current life does not seem to cross her mind. Instead, she desperately holds on to the delusional idea that his feelings have not changed since high school and that he is being held hostage, trapped in a life he does not want. Writing from a teenager's point of view has prevented her from developing an adult perspective, which can be observed in her interactions with her peers. When her date says he used to be a volunteer teacher in Asia, she replies "oh my God, yikes!" like a teenager would. Similarly, when she learns that Buddy's wife is the drummer in a band, she reveals her immaturity by saying "oh my God, embarrassing!" Her childish views and the way her lines are delivered, magnify the breach between Mavis' biological age and psychological one.

4.5.2. Constructing womanhood

The contrast between Mavis and her peers is twofold: they are more mature than she is and, at the same time, she is more sophisticated than them. In emerging adult films, the contrast between more and less mature characters is usually reflected in the way they dress.

Whereas emerging adults often dress casually, their more mature peers tend to present themselves in a more elegant way that denotes their adult status. However, in Mercury, a Midwestern small town, almost all adults are seen wearing plaid shirts and jeans. Luxury and sophistication are reserved for those who, like Mavis, live in the city. Nevertheless, through most of the film, Mavis' costume choices reflect both her mental state and her attachment to adolescence. Her look is mostly messy and unkempt. Most of the time she is seen wearing hoodies, jeans, pyjamas and Ugg boots (fig. 4.10). At the beginning of the film, her Hello Kitty T-shirt hints at her unhealthy attachment to the past and her childishness. As the narrative progresses and the extent of her delusion is revealed, Mavis starts wearing Buddy's high school hoodie and using a scrunchie on her hair, items which are both relics of a distant time and symbols of popularity[5]. Buddy's hoodie reveals that he was an athlete in high school, which places him at the top of the high school hierarchy, while scrunchies were motifs that symbolised popularity in *Heathers* (Michael Lehmann, 1988), a teen film that came out during Mavis' adolescence. The veiled reference to *Heathers*, a film which provides a dark critique of popularity, reminds the spectator that Mavis' popularity and good looks conceal meanness and cruelty.

Fig. 4.10. When she is not dressed to impress, Mavis' look reflects both her attachment to adolescence and her inability to look after herself.

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[5] Scrunchies, elastic hair ties covered by fabric, were invented in 1986 and quickly became popular. They remained fashionable through the 1990s, but had become a fashion faux-pas mocked by *Sex and the City*'s Carrie Bradshaw by the early 2000s. *Young Adult* precedes their comeback in the late 2010s (Radin 2019).

Mavis uses clothes and her performance of femininity as a shield under which she hides her vulnerabilities. Whenever she is going to see Buddy, she dresses in a provocative and sophisticated way that sets her in stark contrast with everybody else in Mercury, as well as with the decidedly non-chic surroundings and her usual unkempt self. The film highlights the constructed nature of this version of Mavis by preceding each date with a montage showing her journey from slob to snob. In these makeover montages the specific form of femininity that Mavis wants to embody comes across as painful and extremely laboured. Detail shots of sharp nail clippers and machines, together with a painful expression on her face and a shot of her lying on a bed covered by white towels while receiving a steam treatment, make her look like a patient undergoing a surgical procedure. There is nothing enjoyable about the process—which is emphasised by cold, unflattering lighting—or about the result, which briefly shows Mavis give herself a confident look on the mirror only to cut to a close-up of her face looking forlorn as she waits for the time to leave (fig. 4.11). The short distance and shallow focus emphasise the sadness in her face and suggest that the makeover has failed to give her the self-confidence she expected, while hard lighting creates shadows on her face, lighting only the front in a way that makes it look like a mask and serves as a reminder of the constructed nature of her chic, confident persona.

During the second makeover—before she sees Buddy for the second time—a voiceover narration of her writing establishes a stark contrast between her real and imagined selves. Kendal Strickland, Mavis' fictional alter ego, is described as a "gracious effortless beauty that glowed from within" who never feels insecure or jealous, which sets her apart from other girls. This narration is accompanied by shots of Mavis curling a clip in hair piece designed to cover up bald patches. The dissonance between narration and image

emphasises the artificiality of the version of herself she wants to present to Buddy and the incredible distance between her real self and her imagined one. At the same time, it highlights Mavis' identification with her fictional character, whose narrative gets more and more enmeshed with Mavis' life as the film goes on, culminating with the death of Buddy's fictional self, a killing which signals Mavis' new-found willingness to let go of him. However, in Mavis' world nothing is what it looks like, and her killing off Buddy's character does not necessarily imply that she will adopt a more mature attitude.

Fig. 4.11. Femininity is a mask that Mavis wears. Lighting and setting emphasise the fact that she remains unhappy inside despite the change in her appearance.

4.5.3 Former popular girl seeks meaningful connection

In high school popularity determines teenagers' worth, and in order to be popular one needs beauty, wealth and the right clothes. However, as it is obvious in the case of Mavis, beauty and wealth do not have the same power in adulthood. These shallow markers of

success are nothing but a façade designed to conceal the loneliness and lack of fulfilment that Mavis feels. The protagonist's attempts to present herself as a glamorous, successful adult are undermined by both the narrative and the formal elements of the film. Framing and mise-en-scene emphasise her isolation and her emotional distress. She is usually framed alone, sometimes from a long distance in large settings that highlight her loneliness. For instance, she is seen alone in an empty car park, as the only person walking down the street while everybody else is driving and eating alone in the fast food establishments that she hates (fig. 4.12-14). Her living spaces—both her apartment and her hotel room in Mercury—are messy, cold and grey, almost lifeless, a reflection of her joyless existence. The exterior of her apartment, a tall apartment building with a large "for rent" sign, provides an image of drab uniformity (fig 4.15). It is a temporary space whose characterlessness serves as a reminder that, regardless of how popular and special she was in high school, adulthood has made her just another face in the crowd. As she sits in her cell-like balcony, a slightly vertigo-inducing high angle canted shot emphasises her loneliness and emotional imbalance, while the bars, whose shadows are reflected on the floor, suggest her entrapment in her current situation. At the same time, the high height serves as a reminder of the long distance that separates her delusional position from reality and of the anxiety she feels towards closing a chapter of her life (fig. 4.16).

Figs. 4.12-4.15. Framing emphasises Mavis' loneliness.

Fig. 4.16. The protagonist's delusions prevent her from having her feet on the ground.

When she is framed together with someone else the contrast between Mavis and the person she is talking to is evident, which again sets her apart from everyone else, marking her isolation and disconnection from reality. When Mavis attends social events in her

hometown she makes an effort to look as different from Mercury residents as possible. At Champion O'Malleys sports bar her chic attire contrasts with the casual clothes favoured by other customers, a difference which is emphasised by her position in the middle of the frame, surrounded by empty tables that function as a border between her and the rest of the bar. Point of view shots of the glances she casts on other patrons further accentuate this divide (fig. 4.17). The bar's front wall reads "where everyone's a winner," a tagline that contrasts both with her opinion of people who frequent that kind of establishment and with the desperate nature of the protagonist's situation, highlighting the inconsistency between appearance and reality: no matter what Mavis wears or how successful she says she is, she is definitely not a winner.

Fig. 4.17 Mavis looks like an outsider in her own hometown.

All of Mavis' romantic interactions are marked by awkwardness. At the beginning of the film, her adolescent attitude differs from her date's more mature worldview, a contrast which is emphasised when, after sex, she is shown dressed in a Hello Kitty T-shirt, lying rigidly still and casting a disappointed glance first at her lover and then at a printed picture

of Buddy's baby, which is sticking out of the handbag she took to her date, giving an almost literal connotation to the concept of emotional baggage (fig. 4.18). This situation repeats itself at the end of the film after she has had sex with Matt (Patton Oswalt), when she is seen wearing a Replacements T-shirt, another allusion to the pop culture of her adolescence, and looking upset. Both men seem to sleep placidly with an arm around her, while she always hides behind clothes that serve as reminders of an adolescence that is long gone and remind the spectator of the reason behind her inability to establish emotional connections with the men she dates.
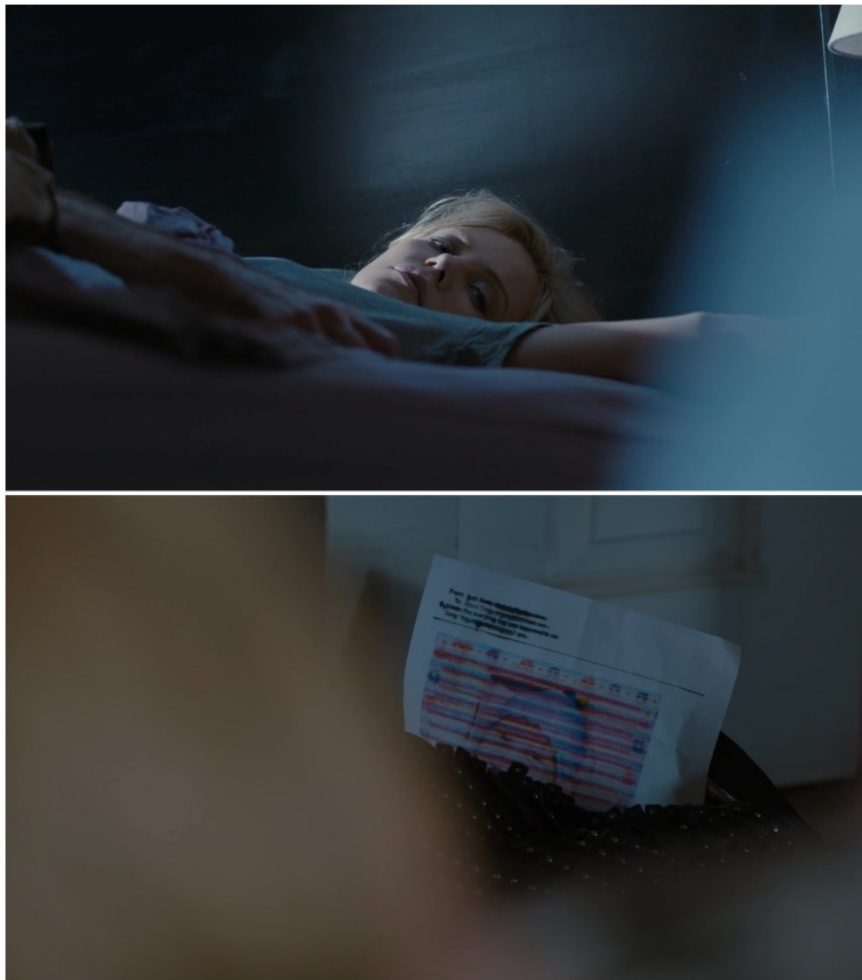
Fig. 4.18. After having sex, Mavis looks offscreen and an eyeline match reveals that she is looking at a photo of Buddy's baby.

Similarly, her drunken kiss with Buddy is characterised by an absence of romanticism. The previous scenes have shown Buddy adoringly looking at his wife during

her show while Mavis tries to keep his attention away from Beth (Elizabeth Reaser) by awkwardly trying to start a conversation about their shared sexual history, so the spectator has no doubts as to where Buddy's loyalties lie. Their kiss is fuelled by a drunkenness that Mavis has carefully orchestrated by buying shots, when she knew fully well that Buddy barely drinks anymore. Her predatory behaviour is emphasised by the fact that the kiss is shot in almost total darkness in a dimly backlit close-up that makes their faces mere silhouettes. While they talk, only a line along Mavis' profile is illuminated, while Buddy's concerned look is almost impossible to make out (fig. 4.19). This darkness reminds the spectator that Mavis is unable to read Buddy's feelings. Despite having witnessed and heard about his relationship with his wife, her delusions override reality and she continues to believe that he will jump at the opportunity to run away with her. The film denies a romantic portrayal of the fulfilment of her delusional desires, encouraging the spectator to see this moment for what it is: the result of a manipulative, delusional mind.

Fig. 4.19. Lighting reminds the spectator that Mavis' romantic moment is only romantic in her mind .

For someone who was popular in high school, Mavis is remarkably alone in her hometown. She does not seem to have kept any friends from her teenage years. The people she interacts with either remember her as a superior being they never had access to or resent her. Her relationship with her parents is non-existent to the point that they are not even mentioned until she bumps into her mother in the street. During her interaction with them, she is framed alone while her parents are shown together, which indicates the disconnect between parents and daughter. They also seem to have a distorted perception of her: when she announces that she thinks she is an alcoholic, her parents laugh it off as joke, while they keep talking about her eating habits, hinting at an eating disorder that she does not seem to have. Although there is no further talk about the subject, this conversation may suggest a past eating disorder that Mavis suffered during her adolescence, which would make her parents concerned with her past instead of with her current situation, thus mirroring Mavis' attitude towards her own problems. Another sign of their lack of empathy towards their daughter is the fact that they have not removed her wedding photos from the wall and do not understand why she would want them gone. Instead, they claim the wedding is a happy memory of a successful day and that they like her ex-husband. Like Mavis, her parents seem to be unable to let go of the past and to accept that their daughter's marriage is over. Although Mavis' parents share concerned looks when she longingly talks about her relationship with Buddy, their relationship with their daughter is strained, lacking communication, trust and empathy.

When she decides to go to Mercury, Mavis has nobody to call and nobody to stay with, not even her parents. In her efforts to become more glamorous, Mavis has pushed away her past only to realise that she peaked in the past. Her efforts to distance herself from her upbringing, together with her disdain towards those who never left Mercury, have

left her without anyone to turn to in troubled times. Her situation is so desperate that she befriends Matt, an old schoolmate that she used to make fun of. Matt and Mavis constitute two examples of arrested development. Both characters remain attached to their adolescence in different ways, and in both cases things are not what they seem. At first sight, Matt comes across as an immature man-child who still lives in his teenage bedroom, wears band T-shirts and plays with action figures. However, once the character's backstory develops we learn that he was violently abused in high school, which led to a crippling injury that changed his life forever. He seems to live in the past because, for his entire life, every single day is determined by an incident that took place during his adolescence. His inability to move forward does not stem from immaturity, but from a disability that hampers his movement.

Matt is the only character who shows genuine concern for Mavis and talks to her in a straightforward manner. He keeps repeating that Buddy is in a happy relationship, that she cannot wreck his life like that and that she needs to get help, advice that falls on deaf ears. Matt's immaturity is superficial, it is related to clothes and hobbies, while Mavis' is located at the core of her being and cannot be hidden by adult-like outfits. As the film's director Jason Reitman explains, both characters are broken in different ways: while Mavis is broken on the inside, Matt is broken on the outside (Reitman 2011). The difference between the two is that, while Mavis may one day seek help to overcome her problems, grow up and become an adult, Matt will never be able-bodied again. He is thus doomed to remember high school forever. The unlikely friendship between Matt and Mavis serves as a reminder that their high school years are long gone. When they were in high school, both characters were at opposite ends of the popularity scale: Mavis was popular while Matt was an outcast. Nevertheless, time has shrunk the distance between them. In what

constitutes a complete status reversal for Mavis, she is now at the bottom of the scale. She may still be beautiful and wealthy, but those qualities alone are not enough to guarantee adult success. Her refusal to mature and move forward in life, together with her lack of empathy and inability to forge long-lasting, meaningful emotional bonds, mark her as unfit for adulthood. In Matt's case, his status as an outcast solidified when his classmates beat him up, leaving permanent injuries. Although he is more emotionally mature than Mavis, the violence he suffered has left indelible physical and emotional trauma that will never allow him to move at the same pace as the rest, neither physically nor emotionally. Significantly, part of Matt's injuries affect his ability to perform sexually, rendering him unable to carry out a normal sexual relationship, which positions him in a perpetual pre-sexual state more characteristic of a child.

The gap that separated Mavis and Matt in high school is alluded to in their conversations about the past and in the way Mavis talks about Matt when she's with Buddy, describing him as "creepy," "doughy" and "always lurking." Although the film does not make use of flashbacks to show the protagonists' adolescence, several interactions reveal that she fulfilled the mean girl stereotype: beautiful but passive-aggressive and cruel to those she perceived as inferior to her. Matt and Mavis' first interaction also reveals a lot about her teenage self and her current self-perception. Mavis does not remember Matt despite the fact that his locker was next to hers all through high school, and when he says they went to high school together she retorts: "at the same time?," which suggests that Mavis was as self-absorbed as a teenager as she is now. Her answer also points towards her delusions regarding her own age and status: she is so immersed in her adolescent fantasy world that she cannot believe someone who looks like Matt is the same age as her. Despite her initial contempt towards Matt, she keeps coming back to him. His adolescence weighs

over his shoulders in the same way hers does, which brings the two characters together in an unlikely union.

Matt is the only person Mavis fully confides in. The fact that she still sees him as inferior, just like she did in high school, prevents her from caring about what he will think about her, which allows her to be completely honest with him. This connection between the two, gradually builds up until they have sex at the end of the film. After Buddy rejects Mavis and reveals that everybody feels sorry for her, Mavis goes to Matt's house, strips naked and asks to wear his T-shirt. By getting naked, Mavis symbolically rids herself of the clothes she uses as a protective shield. Instead of hiding behind her good looks and chic outfits, she shows herself with no adornments, revealing that her glamorous exterior has imperfections too. One of Mavis' breasts is higher than the other and her hair is too thin, imperfections that are highlighted throughout the film but never revealed to anyone but Matt. By revealing her imperfections, Mavis is showing Matt that she now knows she is an outcast just like him, which is further reinforced by her wearing his clothes.

Their sexual encounter is filmed in a way that downplays sexual pleasure while placing an emphasis on the characters' vulnerability. As they both take off their clothes, the camera focuses on their physical defects. By removing her clothes, Mavis allows herself to stop feigning perfection and to show herself as a damaged individual, while in Matt's case his nakedness emphasises his injuries. When they kiss, a long shot allows the spectator to see Matt's bedroom, a messy and mismatched environment where posters of 1990s punk rock bands coexist with an assortment of old-fashioned porcelain decorations depicting floral motifs and bucolic landscapes, a contrast which resembles the differences between them (fig. 4.20). Like the bedroom's decor, the two characters look unsuited to each other

and, at the same time, they are hopelessly stuck in the past, in a time when those decorations might have been modern and fashionable. The sexual union is neither seen nor heard. Instead, their embrace is followed by a succession of detail shots of Matt's action figures accompanied by melancholic music, which further emphasises Matt's vulnerability. He customises action figures as a hobby, mixing and matching parts to make them different, which can be read as an attempt to immerse himself in a fantasy world in which being a misfit is seen as heroic.

Fig. 4.20. Matt's bedroom, like Matt and Mavis, is stuck in the past.

Even though he is more emotionally mature than Mavis, Matt's scars are not only physical. When Mavis complains that nobody loves her, Matt replies: "guys like me are born loving women like you," which suggests that to a certain extent he still feels like an overweight teenager pining for a pretty cheerleader. Earlier in the film, Matt and Mavis run into Mavis' cousin, a jock who was left paralysed after a car crash and who, despite his disability, remains active and maintains a positive attitude. The appearance of this character serves as a reminder that Matt was ostracised *before* he became disabled, and that

his injuries are a product of a hate crime caused by the prejudice and superficiality that characterises the high school hierarchy. After their accidents, Mavis' cousin remains a jock while Matt remains a misfit. Despite the fact that he was at the bottom of the popularity scale that dictates status in high school, Matt peaked in high school: he will never be more mobile or less scarred. While influenced by the teenage perceptions of others, Matt does not see teenage Mavis as a perfect prom queen: he is aware of how cruel and self-absorbed she was as a teenager, which to him contradicts her idea that Mavis was at her best as a teenager.

Adolescence weighs heavily on other characters too. Matt's sister looks up to Mavis like she did in high school and, just like when they were teenagers, Mavis does not know who she is or see her as her equal. Similarly, Beth's bandmates see Mavis in adolescent terms, one of them describes her as a "psychotic prom queen bitch" and casts a disapproving look upon her in one of the few shots in which a character other than Mavis functions as the focaliser (fig. 4.21). After the show, the women in the band are framed together in a defiant attitude that reinforces the idea that they belonged to the same clique in high school and that they did not socialise with Mavis' kind. As for Buddy, although he has discarded his jock persona, he hangs out at a sports bar and still believes the rumour that Matt is gay, which reveals that he remains as uninterested in someone like Matt as he was in high school despite the fact that he frequents the bar where Matt works and therefore comes into contact with him often enough to know the truth. Although other characters are not paralysed—mentally or physically—by their adolescence, they have not fully left it behind either, which suggests that in a small town like Mercury there is little room for reinvention and shedding one's past self is not an easy task.

Fig. 4.21. In the rare instances when Mavis is seen through another character's point of view, she is depicted as an outsider trying to wreak havoc in the group's dynamics.

4.5.4 Unfulfilled nostalgic wishes

Mavis' return to Mercury represents the opposite of reinvention. It is an attempt to undo the changes she has made since she graduated from high school and left her hometown, a nostalgic attempt to recapture a moment in which everything seemed perfect and she felt in control. Besides her writing and her obsession with her teenage boyfriend, other elements in Mavis' life point towards a nostalgic idealisation of the past. When she is alone she dresses like a teenager, plays video games, watches television programmes made with a teenage audience in mind, drives a retro car and listens to the music of her youth. However, her attempts to go back to adolescence are futile. Her nostalgic wish is an unfulfillable one, which increases her alienation and despair. Although Mavis is largely delusional, her writer's block, together with tricotillomania—a compulsive disorder that makes those who suffer from it pull their hair—suggest that she is aware of the fact that her endeavours are doomed. Three scenes show Mavis reaching for the back of her head to pull out her hair. The first one takes place at the beginning of the film when she sees a photo of Buddy's baby for the first time, which indicates that her compulsive hair pulling is fuelled by events that trigger negative thoughts. Buddy's baby reminds Mavis that, even though

her fictional alter ego is in a relationship with Buddy, she lost him long ago, which is reinforced when she looks at Buddy holding his baby after he has rejected her and reaches for the back of her head. This sense of loss is also present the second time we see Mavis pulling her hair. This time, she is watching a talent show in which a young, blonde girl sings to an adoring audience, another reminder that she is no longer young and lacks the talent to be a writer in her own right.

Mavis' engagement with nostalgia is perhaps best represented in the car scene as she drives to Mercury while listening to a mixtape that Buddy made for her back in the day, compulsively rewinding it to listen to the same song over and over again. Detail shots of the inner workings of the cassette tape highlight the fact that she is using an obsolete technology, reminding the spectator of the time that has passed since cassette tapes were popular. Those familiar with the song that she is fixated on will know that it is "The Concept," an early nineties hit by a band called Teenage Fanclub, a name which constitutes a veiled reference to the protagonist's immaturity and her desire to go back to her adolescence. Furthermore, the act of rewinding the tape symbolically represents Mavis' journey and her obsession with recapturing the past. At the same time, the fact that she listens to the same song through her entire journey, as the city gives way to a more rural environment, reveals her as an obsessed and relentless character, while granting the song a significant role in her relationship with Buddy.

The significance of the song is shattered when Beth and her band cover it and the singer dedicates it to Beth and Buddy. Suddenly, the song—like Buddy—does not belong to Mavis anymore. The band members are standing on a stage and Beth's drums are positioned on a podium, which reminds the viewer that, even though Mavis might have

been above them in high school, they are now at the top, with Beth crowning the pyramid. The scene underscores the contrast between Mavis and Beth: they are at opposite ends of the room, at different levels and showing very different attitudes: whereas close-ups of Mavis show her preoccupied and forlorn (fig. 4.22), Beth's enjoyment is evident (fig. 4.23). The scene functions as a teen film's party in which members of different cliques share the same space: Beth and the band are positioned at the top, while Mavis is further away and Matt, always an outcast, watches from the margins.

Figs. 4.22-23 Mavis' gaze is focused on Beth, whose joyfulness contrasts with the protagonist's scowl.

Focalisation plays a key role in this scene, where dialogue is almost absent and conflict between characters is played through a symphony of looks. When the band is

introduced, a rare point of view shot from Beth's perspective shows Mavis and Buddy from a distance (fig. 4.24), a reminder that she is watching them and not oblivious to the situation that is being played out in front of her. During the concert, Matt watches Mavis (fig. 4.25) and they both share a sad look that reaffirms their friendship and their status as outsiders who understand what it is like not to be included in everybody else's fun. Embedded focalisation shows Mavis looking at Buddy, who at the same time looks at Beth with a smile on his face, showing that he is blind to Mavis' charms (fig. 4.26). Despite Mavis' best efforts to make the song her own again by reminding Buddy that they used to make out listening to it, she fails to hold his attention—and his gaze—for longer than a split second. When Buddy confirms his lack of interest in Mavis, a low angle shot of the band reasserts their—and, by extension, Beth's—position of superiority (fig. 4.27). The band members, especially Beth, engage with nostalgia in a positive way. They are able to combine engagement in youthful hobbies, like playing in a band, with their adult responsibilities. While Mavis' relationship with the past is characterised by a regressive wish to return to a time that she perceives as less complicated, Beth and the band take those elements of the past that they find enjoyable and incorporate them into their adult lives. Although they have not been playing for long, they do not hesitate to perform regardless of what their audience will think. Their relationship with the past is therefore characterised by enjoyment and community, which contrasts with Mavis' dissatisfaction and alienation.

Figs. 4.24-27 Framing and the characters' gazes establish the social dynamics of the scene.

4.5.5 Fake it till you…make it?

The two party scenes—Buddy's baby's naming ceremony and Beth's show—function as stand-ins for the prom. In teen films the prom or graduation party constitutes a rite of passage that celebrates the end of adolescence while reinforcing the values represented by the high school hierarchy. The most popular teenagers are crowned prom king and queen, which highlights the importance of popularity, good looks and trendiness while reinforcing heteronormative and middle-class values (Smith [2017] 2019, 66). As has been mentioned before, the concert scene resembles a teen film party scene due to the fact that it serves as an excuse for all the different types of characters to mingle and it visually represents the position each character occupies in adulthood. In a partial subversion of the high school hierarchy, the prom queen has been replaced by the mother at the top of the pyramid, indicating that good looks and money are not enough to be

successful in adulthood. Like the prom, the naming ceremony celebrates a rite of passage into adulthood. Beth and Mavis becoming parents, their ability to care for someone other than themselves, cements their adult status and highlights the main difference between Mavis and Beth, which involves their ability to care for others.

Mavis and Beth represent different conceptions of femininity, which is reflected in their appearance as well as their attitude. While Mavis wants to project an image of sophistication that involves expensive clothes and beauty treatments, Beth dresses casually in mostly unisex clothing and wears little make-up. Their personalities are also wildly different. Whereas Mavis is unable to put herself in anyone else's shoes, Beth is a patient and nurturing individual: her work involves teaching children with learning disabilities and she is polite and considerate even with those who treat her badly, which can be seen in the way she treats Mavis. Despite the fact that Mavis has been flirting with her husband in front of her and has exhibited a condescending attitude towards her home and her family, Beth feels sorry for Mavis and begs Buddy to invite her to the naming ceremony, which Mavis, oblivious as ever, takes as a sign that Buddy wants to run away with her. In this scene Mavis' performance of femininity changes: whereas before she was seen dressed in black, trying to project a chic but edgy image, this time she chooses a more conventional outfit—a tweed skirt, white silk shirt and beige cardigan—and wears her hair up (fig. 4.28). Her choice of clothes reflects a desire to embody a more traditional version of womanhood that she will presumably adopt once Buddy picks her. However, her actions do not match her appearance. Not only does she bring an inappropriate gift—burp cloths— that reflects her disdain towards Buddy's paternity, but she also behaves with excessive familiarity with Buddy's mother, insults Beth in her own home and misreads Buddy's pity as love.

Fig 4.28. Mavis ditches black provocative outfits for demure, elegant ones to convey her status as an adult woman, but this refashioning of her gender identity is yet another superficial change that carries no psychological evolution.

The naming ceremony becomes the setting where Mavis' status as an outcast is confirmed. The celebration of Buddy and Beth's parenthood serves as a reminder of her own failures, of her alienation and of a miscarriage she had when she was 20. As Thouaille (2019, 504) points out, Mavis has been replaced by Beth at three different levels: she has become Buddy's wife, she plays the song Mavis thinks belongs to her and Buddy and she has become a mother to Buddy's baby. On top of that, Beth is portrayed as part of the community while Mavis has nobody to turn to but Matt, the only person who was not invited to the party. This contrast between the two women is emphasised when Mavis finally has a breakdown and reveals the story of her miscarriage. While Mavis is framed either completely alone or opposite everyone else, Beth is always seen together with her guests, which conveys the idea that she is supported by a tight-knit community. At the same time, Mavis' clothes mark her as an outsider who does not belong with the group, not even with her own parents who are also positioned on Beth's side. Furthermore, Mavis is

shot from high angles that highlight the fact that she is losing her battle to win Buddy back while reflecting the low opinion that the party guests have of her (fig. 4.29). Although Mavis clearly states her hatred for her hometown, she is the one who has been shunned both by the object of her affection and by the community at large, showing that what makes one popular in high school does not have the same effect in adulthood and that change must come from within.

Fig. 4.29. Framing reflects Mavis' failure to break up Buddy's marriage. She is standing between the couple, but her position within the frame, together with a high angle, make her look small in comparison with them.

Change for Mavis only takes place at a superficial level. She changes her appearance depending on the image of herself she wants to project, but it never goes any deeper than that. This can be seen when she buys a gift for Buddy's baby. Although she looks classy and mature, she picks the plainest gift she could find. The inappropriateness of her choice is highlighted through the use of point of view shots that allow the spectator to confirm that she did see cute gifts, too. Non-diegetic music with a fast beat mirrors her anxiety as she walks through the store and comes to an end with a loud cymbal sound that signals she has

made her choice. A point of view shot reveals two towel sets in pastel colours featuring animals next to six plain burp cloths wrapped in plastic. As a close-up reveals her disgust towards the cuter items, which would make appropriate gifts, she looks to her left and picks up the plain burp cloths. The deliberateness of her actions reveals that her immaculate exterior hides pettiness and immaturity. As she walks towards Buddy's house, handheld camera movements and non-diegetic music with an arrhythmic drum beat highlight her insecurities while foreshadowing the evening's shameful outcome. Although older emerging adult protagonists usually exhibit a willingness to grow up, Mavis is portrayed as an irredeemable character. Even though she manages to accept that she needs to change, her actions show her unwillingness to do so. At the end of the film, while talking to Matt's sister Sandra (Collette Wolfe), she admits her faults but immediately reverts to "mean girl mode" when Sandra suggests she wants to leave Mercury with her, which shows that her desire to change is just superficial. Similarly, when she goes back to her hotel room she finally shows her dog affection, which may suggest that she is beginning to become nurturing, only to immediately show her true colours when talking to the receptionist. At the end of the film, the voice-over narration of Kendal's bright future after graduation contrasts with the protagonist's lack of future plans now that the book series is over, and with her dishevelled appearance. Whereas Kendal is on her way to Cambridge—presumably to go to Harvard—Mavis is driving a battered mini, wearing Hello Kitty pyjamas with no signs of a bright future ahead.

4.6 Conclusion

Emerging adult films often show their protagonists returning to the place where they grew up or reuniting with their high school friends. A substantial number of films structure their narrative around this return journey, beginning with the protagonist finding out that they need to return or getting ready to go and ending with the protagonist going back to their current home. What all these films share, regardless of the reasons that motivate the protagonists' homebound journey, is a reflection upon the protagonists' past and the state of their transition to adulthood. A return home or a reunion give characters the chance to look back at their past and assess whether their adult life is what they—and those around them —expected. This look back at the past, together with the physical return to the sites of their childhood and adolescence, often sees characters being defined in terms of high school popularity. Some characters cling to their past and others have let go of it, but almost all of them are defined by the characteristics of the clique they belonged to in high school. This process is sometimes undergone by other characters who are not familiar with the protagonists as adults. In other instances, it is the characters themselves who choose to perpetuate their self-identification with adolescent stereotypes. Allusions to the protagonists' past identities are also made through mise-en-scène, particularly through costume, setting and props that provide the spectators with clues regarding the characters' past.

Homecoming films have an ambivalent—and sometimes contradictory—relationship with nostalgia. On the one hand, these texts often indulge in consumed nostalgia (Cross 2015), allowing characters and spectators alike to find pleasure in the fads and music of their adolescence. On the other hand, the dangers of excessive nostalgia are made clear:

characters who fail to move on from their adolescent persona are often frustrated and unsatisfied as adults. These two attitudes towards nostalgia often coexist, sending the spectator mixed messages regarding the value that there is to be found in one's past. As Wohlmann (2017) argues in her analysis of *Young Adult*, nostalgia is problematised, but nostalgic commodities are depicted as objects of desire, which in her opinion reflects the idealisation of youth in contemporary culture. At the same time, those characters who are completely detached from their past and show no nostalgic feeling at all are as frustrated and unsatisfied as the overly nostalgic ones. In other words, characters who retain a nostalgic attachment to their adolescence must reassess their relationship with their past in order to rewrite the nostalgic narrative that has rendered them unable to move on, whereas those who have turned their backs on their past need to go back to it in order to remember who they really are.

Homecoming narratives are almost always set in suburban areas or small towns, which contrasts with the largely urban settings of most emerging adult films. This change in setting underscores the contrast between city and small-town values, often favouring the latter. In their search for success in the big city, emerging adult characters often become alienated, and a return to more community-oriented values is just what they need to move forward. Characters who move to the city are set in opposition to those who stayed in their hometown, who often made a smoother transition to adulthood. In some instances, smoother trajectories and diminished ambitions are seen as positive, while other films openly advocate for longer and more individualised transitions that will allow the protagonists to work in the creative industry. Homecoming films also highlight the deceptive nature of appearances: those who initially come across as well-adjusted adults are often portrayed as unfulfilled and immoral; those voted more likely to succeed in high

school are often far from successful and those who were once ostracised by their peers often become the most successful of them all.

The rising numbers of young adults living in the parental home has had a direct influence in the nature and number of homecoming narratives in emerging adult films. Out of the films studied, 16% of those made in the 1990s are structured around a return home, a percentage which rises to 19% in the next decade and reaches 34% in the 2010s. The reasons that drive the protagonists' return home have also undergone a dramatic change. Before 2012, films about boomerang kids who move back home after graduation coexist with high school reunion films, wedding celebrations and parties. Although there are some exceptions, the latter reasons dominate. After 2012, however, almost every emerging adult film structured around a homecoming narrative involves a crisis or, rather, a combination of crises, most of which are personal. Even though in films made before 2012 the protagonists go through crises too, after 2012 crises take centre stage, which illustrates how the already challenging transition to contemporary adulthood became increasingly so after the Great Recession of 2007-09. It is too early to tell what the next decade will bring as far as homecoming narratives are concerned, but the past two years have seen the release of several films in which the protagonists live at home not because they boomeranged back, but because they never left in the first place. *Big Time Adolescence* (Jason Orley, 2019), *The King of Staten Island* (Judd Apatow, 2020) and *Spree* (Eugene Kotlyarenko, 2020) feature protagonists who never left home. As Generation Z comes of age in the midst of the COVID-19 recession, for some of them, leaving home may not even be an option.

CHAPTER FIVE

From Lazy Slackers to Entitled Hipsters: A Portrait of Two Generations United by Uncertainty

The emerging adult film came into its own as Generation X negotiated its transition into adulthood in the 1990s. As we saw in Chapter Two, the 1960s, 70s and 80s witnessed the emergence of the genre, but it was not until emerging adulthood became the norm that onscreen representations were numerous enough to talk about "the emerging adult film." Arnett argues that the public first became aware of a different sort of transition to adulthood when Douglas Coupland's debut novel *Generation X* was published in 1991 (2004, 27). The media appropriated the novel's title—as well as that of Richard Linklater's first feature film *Slacker* (1990)—to label the generation born after the baby boom, and journalists were quick to describe those born between 1965 and 1980 as selfish, aimless slackers with no future prospects other than averting responsibility for as long as possible. Arnett contends that the characteristics once ascribed to Generation X were not actually generational traits, but aspects of emerging adulthood that would live on in the following

generations (2004, 4). Twenty years later, the same hyperbolic terms were used to define the millennial generation, born between 1981 and 1996.

In 1990, a *New York Times* article wondered whether Generation X was a lost generation (Barringer 1990); thirty years later, *The Atlantic* published an article titled "Millennials Don't Stand a Chance" that opened with the line "hello, lost generation" (Lowrey 2020). The same *New York Times* article quotes a study about the voting habits of Generation X titled "The Age of Indifference" (Barringer 1990). In a similar vein, millennials have been called "Generation Why Bother" (Buchholz and Buchholz, 2012) and "The Why-Worry Generation" (Warner, 2010). Both generations have been accused of being entitled and selfish, with Generation X receiving labels like "The New Petulants" (Gross and Scott 1990) and "The Whiny Generation" (Newsweek 1993), and millennials being called "a nation of wimps" (Warner 2010) and "The Me Me Me Generation"[1] (Stein 2013). Finally, both generations have been referred to as dumb, with millennials taking the lead as "The Dumbest Generation" (Bauerlein 2009) and Generation X being described as the "dumb and numb" generation (in Strauss and Howe 1991, 319), which is ironic considering that both generations attended college in record numbers (Duffin 2021). Although these portrayals are sensationalistic and sometimes differ in tone (see fig.5.1), the fact that both generations are depicted in such similar terms points towards the pervasiveness of certain elements that have become central to the transition to adulthood and proves Arnett's point that the generational traits associated with Generation X are part of something larger than that cohort.

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[1] The term the "Me" generation was also applied to baby boomers after writer Tom Wolfe published a *New York Magazine* cover story titled "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening" in which he denounced the growing self-involvement of Baby Boomers in the 1970s (Twenge 2006).

Fig. 5.1. These Time magazine covers, published in 1990 (*left*) and 2013 (*right*), illustrate the similar media treatment received by Generation X and millennials.

Longitudinal intergenerational studies are scarce, possibly due to their length and the consequent commitment required both of participants and researchers. Worth mentioning is an Australian study that followed two cohorts—a group of Xers and one of millennials—from their high school graduation until 2018, gathering data on the most relevant aspects of their transition to adulthood. The study argues that the experiences of young people from both generations point towards a redefinition of the concept of adulthood itself. Under increasingly precarious, unequal and unstable circumstances, traditional conceptions of adulthood become unattainable and the non-linearity typically attributed to transitional stages seeps into adulthood, giving rise to a new modality of adulthood no longer characterised by stability (Blatterer 2007, Silva 2013). What Generation X and the millennial generation share, then, is the experience of coming of age into the unknown. Similarly, Blatterer argues that standard models of adulthood have become obsolete and

have been replaced by a new adulthood characterised by "a loss of telos" that is "perpetually liminal" and has "no definite destination" (2007, 114). In similar fashion, in her study of working-class young adulthood Jennifer Silva argues that "adulthood is being dramatically reimagined along lines of work, family, relationships, intimacy, gender, trust and dignity" (2013, 8). By questioning the validity of standard adulthood these approaches question the very nature of emerging adulthood itself. Nevertheless, the concept of emerging adulthood remains appropriate to discuss those narratives that portray individuals struggling to move on to the next stage, whatever that stage entails or whether that goal remains within reach or has become unattainable. Although it is undeniable that stability is harder to come by and that traditional conceptions of adulthood are "obsolete, unattainable or undesirable" (Silva 2013, 5), standard models of adulthood continue to be the benchmark against which adult success is measured. In emerging adult films, the protagonists often clash with those who have managed to attain standard adulthood and with the older generation, who came of age under circumstances that made the transition into a safe and stable adulthood easier and more straightforward.

What is clear is that both Generation X and the millennial generation have had to negotiate their transition into adulthood under a new set of rules. That is not to say that there are no generational differences between them: each one of them is located in a specific socio-historical moment that has impacted their childhood, adolescence and young adulthood differently; was influenced by different technological advances and a radically different media landscape, etc. However, they both graduated into a recession and experienced global crises and new economic downturns in adulthood. Emerging adult films released between 1990 and 2019 deal with the coming of age of these two generations, and although they do showcase a number of generational differences, the core characteristics of

the emerging adult film remain consistent across the decades, which, again, suggests that the differences between Generation X and the millennial generation are not as relevant as they may seem.

The core of this chapter eschews a generational approach that focuses on the uniqueness of each generation's experience and cinematic representations. Instead, I place the focus on the elements that bind them together, particularly on the centrality of what I call settling-down narratives, which show the protagonists struggling—and often failing— to figure out two aspects of their future: what they want to do for a living and the search for a romantic partner. These narratives, which are ubiquitous in emerging adult films, correspond to the two main areas in which identity exploration takes place during emerging adulthood according to Arnett (2004). Furthermore, in the past decades, the world of work and the way we negotiate romantic relationships have changed considerably. For Xers and millennials, the process of figuring out their professional and romantic life is a lot more convoluted than it was for their parents, which unites the two generations as the first to negotiate these transitions under new circumstances. I will begin by briefly outlining the changing backdrop against which the transition to adulthood plays out, drawing from Bauman's concept of liquid modernity and the individualised society, Beck's writings on risk and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's theory of individualisation (Bauman [2000] 2012, Beck 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Then, I will summarise the main ways in which the domains of work and love have been affected by a growing sense of uncertainty and precarity. Once the context in which settling-down narratives take place has been established, I will move on to the close reading of two films in which these narratives play a prominent role: *High Fidelity* (Stephen Frears, 2000) and *Frances Ha* (Noah Baumbach, 2012), placing love and work at the centre of my analysis. Although, as mentioned before,

generational differences are not central to my analysis, the fact that *High Fidelity* has a Generation X protagonist and *Frances Ha* a millennial one, will allow me to conclude by acknowledging the fact that the films depict different generations. Here, I will outline the differences between Generation X and millennial emerging adult films, highlighting some of the aspects that establish each film as a generational text, in order to demonstrate how the elements that bind them—the settling-down narratives that structure both films—bring them—and, by extension, the generations they portray—together despite the time elapsed between them.

5.1 Settling down in a world that is constantly changing

Arnett (2004) calls emerging adulthood the age of instability, owing to the fact that young adults are more likely to change residence often and they may have to revise their future plans in the face of reevaluations and unexpected setbacks. His approach has been criticised for placing too much emphasis on individual choice and ignoring the influence of the systemic hurdles to the attainment of adult stability (Blatterer 2007, 23; Côté 2014, 184). Critics have highlighted the often involuntary nature of delayed transitions to adulthood (Côté 2014, 180) and the class bias inherent in Arnett's analysis (Silva 2013, 7). What Arnett describes as "identity explorations" is seen by others as a quest that only those with resources and privileges can undertake (Silva 2013, 7) or as a series of forced explorations motivated by employment that is often "precarious, ambiguous, and exploitative" (Côté 2014, 184). Claims that the nature of adulthood has changed are based on the growing precarity and open-endedness that permeate contemporary life. Jennifer Silva argues that the transition to adulthood has become "a precarious journey with no

clear destination in sight," which she links to "economic insecurity and social uncertainty" (2013, 29). Although her research focuses on the coming-of-age experience of working-class young adults, the precarity and uncertainty that she talks about cannot be ignored when writing about the experience of those coming from a middle-class background, like most of the protagonists in the films analysed in this thesis.

As early as 1991, Strauss and Howe wrote that Generation X could be the first generation to break the pattern of intergenerational progress. That is, they believed Generation X might be the first generation not to reach the living standards of their parents since the generation born in the 1820s and 1830s (410). Similarly, Lisa Chamberlain argues that Generation X suffered more economic setbacks than any generation since the Industrial Revolution (2008). A 2014 report shows that this cohort is, indeed, less wealthy than their parents were at the same age despite having higher family incomes, a disjunction which is at least partly attributed to higher levels of debt (Currier et al. 2014). Millennials, whose coming-of-age process has been bookended by two recessions, are no strangers to grim financial forecasts. When the financial crisis of 2007-2008 took place, the oldest millennials were in their mid-20s, which means that a large percentage of this generation graduated and entered the workplace during the Great Recession. Although it is too early to talk about the possible duration or consequences of the COVID-19 Recession, it is likely to affect younger millennials, who are now in their mid-20s, in a similar way and to constitute one more setback for those older millennials who were finally gaining a foothold in adulthood[2]. Millennials fare worse than Xers when it comes to wealth and homeownership

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[2] It is worth pointing out that Generation Z, born after the mid-1990s, is bearing the brunt of the pandemic recession, both professionally and in terms of their mental health. Under-25s face higher unemployment rates than over-25s (Gould and Kassa, 2020), as well as rising rates of depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts (The Prince's Trust Tesco Youth Index 2021), which has led the UN to declare a "mental health crisis for the world's youth" (Dodson 2020).

(Bialik and Fry 2019, Gardiner et al. 2020, Van Dam 2020, Wyn et al. 2020), and they have had the lowest levels of economic growth in the first fifteen years since entering the workforce than *any* preceding generation. The *Washington Post* journalist who analysed this data calls them "the unluckiest generation in U.S. history" (Van Dam 2020)[3].

The media have accused millennials of killing a variety of industries[4], from department stores to the 9-to-5-workday, cars, hotels and marriage, among many others[5]. These articles focus on the consuming habits of a generation whose size is large enough to influence the nation's consumer behaviour[6] while ignoring the socio-economic shifts that may make millennials less likely to work full time or to afford a car or a hotel stay. A particularly ludicrous—and relentlessly mocked (fig. 5.2.)—stereotype was born after Australian millionaire Tim Gurner emphasised the role that his thriftiness played in his success by linking young people's inability to afford a home with their consumption of overpriced avocados and lattes. His words were refashioned into sensationalistic headlines like "Millionaire tells millennials: if you want a house, stop buying avocado toast" (Levin 2017). These media portrayals of millennials as extravagant consumers who live above their means turn structural problems like unemployment and precarious employment, stalled wages or lack of access to affordable housing into personal problems whose solution is down to the individual. This falls in line with Beck's theory of individualisation.

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[3] Although all of the sources cited focus on generations in the United States—with the exception of Wyn et al. (2020), who write about Australian young adults—most of the processes that have resulted in such dire straits for Generation X and the millennial generation are global and their consequences are therefore felt across the world. For instance, Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* refers to millennials as "la generación cautiva" (the captive generation) and "generación doble crisis" (double recession generation) (Viaña 2021).

[4] Similar claims were not made about Generation X, possibly because their smaller size—especially when compared with the generations preceding and following them—meant that their consumer behaviour was not influential enough to impact the nation's habits as a whole. A Google search of "Xers killed" returns only 34 results to the 211,000 that come up when googling "millennials are killing."

[5] For an exhaustive list, complete with links to the articles that declared the death of those industries at the hands of millennials see Bryan (2017).

[6] Millennials overtook baby boomers in 2019, becoming the largest living generation in the U.S. (Fry 2020).

Beck argues that, in western individualised societies, individuals are told "to seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, xxii).

Fig. 5.2. Headlines about millennials tend to go viral and are often mocked on social media, where users and brand community managers alike turn them into memes.
Source: Know Your Meme.

Several authors have applied Beck and Bauman's theories of social change and its resulting uncertainty to the transition to adulthood (Furlong and Cartmel 2007, Blatterer 2007, Silva 2013, Wyn et al. 2020). Writing in the 1990s and early 2000s, they both argue that modernity was undergoing a substantial shift to what they called "liquid modernity" (Bauman [2000] 2012) and "reflexive modernity" (Beck 1992) characterised by increased uncertainty and unpredictability. According to Beck, one of the consequences of modernisation—which he argues overshadows progress—is an increase in the number of risks. What makes these risks different from those typical of modernity is the fact that they know neither national nor class boundaries, thus affecting everybody independently of income or geographic location, although risk is not distributed equally and some groups are more vulnerable than others (1992, 13, 23). As Bauman explains, individuals are charged with the task of dealing with fear and risk by themselves. That is, society provides its citizens with no resources with which to face the increasing uncertainties of late modernity.

Fear management has been deregulated and privatised, and it resists "all forms of communal (political) interference, let alone control" (2007, 63-64).

As the avocado toast headline suggested, in contemporary society individuals are urged to find individualised ways of dealing with systemic problems. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that categories that previously constrained and organised the life of individuals, like social class, gender, family or religion, are disintegrating. In modernity, these social groupings largely determined the kind of life an individual would lead, often setting firm boundaries and preventing them from following certain life trajectories. In contrast, contemporary life is characterised by individual choice. As Scott Lash puts it, "now the individual must be much more the rule finder himself" (2002, xi). If the individual must now choose rules to live by, contemporary life is characterised by choice. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim write about a shift from traditional biographies—largely dictated by larger social forces such as class, religion or gender—to "the 'elective biography', the 'reflexive biography', the 'do-it-yourself biography'" or "bricolage biographies" (2002, 3, ix), life trajectories in which individuals are charged with the task of deciding who they want to be and striving to attain that identity. As Bauman wrote, "needing to become what one is is the hallmark of modern living" (2002, xv).

These changes bring along with them a vast array of options from which individuals can choose their identity and biography. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim put it, "life, death, gender, corporeality, identity, religion, marriage, parenthood, social ties — are all becoming decidable down to the small print; once fragmented into options, everything must be decided" (2002, 5). Although an abundance of options sounds positive, freedom to choose is a double-edged sword. Individuals have no choice but to choose (Beck and Beck-

Gernsheim 2002, 4), and the freedom to choose brings along "an unprecedented task of coping with the consequences" (Bauman 2002, xix). The failure that results from making the wrong choices will be considered a *personal* one. The individual is thus held responsible for consequences that are often outside their control but are seen to result from choices they have made (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 24). As we saw in media depictions of millennials, individuals are blamed for the perceived results of their individual choices—killing the hotel industry, not being able to afford a house—while the systemic conditions that lead to those choices—the fact that millennials face a tough job market characterised by precarity and contingency—remain largely ignored.

Navigating an ocean full of options is no easy task. Individuals must become active forces in the shaping of their own identity. They must be able to make long term plans and to keep moving after a setback. "They need initiative, tenacity, flexibility and tolerance of frustration" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 5). The freedom to choose therefore coexists with the pressure to make the right choice, to keep oneself on the chosen path and to craft a plan B should one not succeed or should the circumstances change. A life full of possibilities is also a life full of possibilities of failure especially when the circumstances are liable to change (Bauman 2007). As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim state, "the do-it-yourself biography is always a 'risk biography', indeed a 'tightrope biography'" (2002, 3), and "failure and inalienable freedom live in close proximity and perhaps intermingle" (2002, 7).

Needless to say, coming of age amid these social changes can be a particularly taxing challenge. As we saw in Chapter One, emerging adulthood is seen as the age of possibility and instability, a time when young people are free to try on—and discard—a variety of

roles in order to figure out who they want to be, particularly in the areas of work and love (Arnett 2004). Emerging adulthood is described, then, as a time during which individuals craft their biographies into a coherent whole. However, as Bauman argues, we live in an era characterised by "fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change" ([2000] 2012, 5). Under these circumstances, planning one's future seems to be a venture that is almost determined to fail, since the idea of a fixed destination or state of being is more than elusive. Fragmentation and rapid change make it difficult to plan for the future or to determine when a transition has been completed, while the road map that served the older generations no longer works (Furlong and Cartmel 2007).

Emerging adults are in a state of becoming that some argue has become endemic. Bauman argues that being modern means "having an identity which can exist only as an unfulfilled project" ([2000] 2012, 50), thus existing in a "state of unfinishedness, incompleteness and undetermination" ([2000] 2012, 89). Emerging adult films show emerging adults grappling with the elusiveness of the ideals of adulthood that they have grown up with, often defining themselves against them and favouring an apparently less stable path that may be a better fit for a time in which stability seems to be a thing of the past. The two areas in which emerging adults carry out identity explorations—work and love—constitute the two main narratives around which emerging adult films are structured. At the same time, these two domains have undergone substantial transformation in the past decades, becoming increasingly temporary and contingent. A closer look at the changing nature of work and love will allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the professional and emotional landscapes of contemporary transitions to adulthood, whereas onscreen depictions of the search for the right job and the right partner offer unique insight into the way in which young adults navigate this uncharted territory.

5.1.1 Why don't you get a *real* job?

In films, emerging adult characters usually take one of the following three approaches to their professional life: the first and more numerous group is made up of those who have artistic aspirations of some sort and hope to make it as writers, artists or musicians; others appear to be purposeless and refuse to make any long-lasting commitments; whereas the third group is made up of those who would like to find stability but find it difficult to access jobs that would guarantee it. These different attitudes towards work fall in line with what Furlong and Cartmel state about young people's perception of the changes in the labour market that have taken place since the 1980s. According to them, some people perceive this new landscape in which the world of work is increasingly fragmented and unpredictable as one "characterised by a freedom that is unencumbered by the responsibilities of adulthood," while those who wish their transition to the world of work were as smooth as it was for the previous generations see it as "a frustrating limbo characterised by powerlessness and a lack of resources" (2007, 10). Keeping this in mind, those attempts to follow one's creative dreams or to live an unattached life and opt out of the rat race can be read as a coping mechanism, a way to avoid the frustration that comes along with playing an old game with a new rule book.

What all these characters share is a sense of precarity that permeates most aspects of their lives. While it is true that most of them are in a position of privilege granted by their race, social class, sexual orientation, educational attainment and familial support, their lives remain precarious in the sense that their position is insecure, uncertain and unsafe (Bauman [2000] 2012, 205). In order to understand the way emerging adult films approach the increasing precarity that impacts the protagonists' transition to adulthood, we must turn

our attention to the ways in which the workplace has changed in the past decades, while a look at the prevalence of the "do what you love" ethos will help us to understand why emerging adult protagonists are often reluctant to let go of their dreams despite the fact that these ambitions are preventing them from settling down.

In the past few years, several millennial journalists have taken upon themselves the task of rewriting the story of their generation, challenging stereotypes and placing the focus on the socio-historical conditions that have framed their generation's transition to adulthood. Both Harris (2017) and Petersen (2021) emphasise the impact that socio-economic conditions have had on their generation's first steps into adulthood, writing at length about the changes in the workplace that have made of their generation a precarious one[7]. In Harris' words: "we have become precarity" (82). Journalist Anne Helen Petersen, who calls millennials "the burnout generation," argues that precarity seeps into all areas of life, stating that millennials know "that we're going to work forever, die before we pay off our student loans, potentially bankrupt our children with our care, or get wiped out in a global apocalypse (…) that's the new normal, and the weight of living amidst that sort of emotional, physical, and financial precarity is staggering" (2021, xx). Petersen argues that millennials were sold an unattainable dream, namely that a college degree would lead to the American Dream provided they worked hard enough. According to her, this disjunction between their expectations regarding future employment and the reality of finding stable employment in a post-recessionary landscape has led to burnout, a condition of extreme exhaustion—both physical and emotional—that is related to workplace stress (Bährer-Kohler 2013). But the "new normal" that Petersen refers to is not exclusive to millennials.

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[7] Even though the books mentioned focus on the United States, the fact that Petersen's book has been translated into Spanish and Portuguese shows that the message resonates in other countries and that most of the difficulties faced by the millennial generation are not unique to the United States.

Wyn and colleagues argue that, although the millennial generation is the one usually described as overeducated and underemployed, Generation X was "the first to experience the disjuncture between increased educational credentials and secure work" (2020, 22). What is more, their longitudinal study, which tracked members of the two cohorts over time, revealed that experiences in precarious employment persisted as the participants grew older, suggesting that this experience of insecurity is not necessarily characteristic of one's twenties but, rather, of contemporary life.

For Judith Butler, precarity is not temporary "but a new form of regulation that distinguishes this historical time" (in Lorey 2015, vii). Lorey (2015) contends that "it is not only work that is precarious, but life itself" (9). She defines the precarious as "insecurity and vulnerability, destabilization and endangerment" (10). The insecurity and uncertainty that characterise working conditions in late modernity, then, pervade our experience, preventing us from feeling safe (Bauman [2000] 2012). Two decades ago, Beck argued that the job for life was a thing of the past and that employment conditions in first world countries were becoming more and more similar to those of the third world, stating that full time work was in the process of being replaced by "nomadic 'multi-activity'" (2000, 2). With the rise of the gig economy and the sharing economy, where somebody might have a main job, drive an Uber at weekends and rent their spare room through Airbnb, Beck's words sound like a prophecy. Both Beck (1992, 2000) and Bauman ([2000] 2012, 2001, 2003) emphasise flexibility as a key feature of contemporary work structures. For employers, flexibility means cheaper and easier layoffs, the ability to hire and fire employees on short-term contracts as needed and a lack of responsibility towards their contingent workforce, who receive no training or benefits and sometimes may not even be employed by themselves but by an umbrella company (Komlosy 2018). For employees,

flexibility may appear to imply greater freedom, the ability to keep changing and keep moving. However, this flexibility is a façade that masks precarious workers' anxiety at their disposability (Conley 2009, 52), "perpetual unrest and anxiety" (Moore 2018, 83), a sense of loss of control of one's time (Wyn et al. 2020), alienation caused by extreme individualisation that erodes any opportunities for collective organisation (Lorey 2015) and difficulty to settle down and plan for the future, both professionally and personally. Bauman argues that the rising rates of temporality in the workplace encourage a "short term mentality" where there is no room to establish meaningful, long-lasting connections, which causes a "new restlessness and fragility of goals" (2001, 146). At the same time, flexibility makes it hard for individuals to manage their non-working time. One never knows when they might be called in for work and the instability of their situation encourages individuals to work all the time, whether it is improving their chances of employability, looking for a new gig or working on their personal brand (Beck 1992, 13; Harris 2017, 87; McGee 2005, 12).

This kind of precarious professional trajectories characterised by a succession of short-term, part-time jobs—sometimes on zero hour contracts or similar contracts that offer employees no security—has now extended to the middle classes (Shell 2018). Beginning in the 1980s, temping agencies expanded and began offering white-collar positions on a temporary basis. As Erin Hatton explains in her book on the temp economy, this decade saw the creation of agencies that specialised in fields where jobs had been typically stable, such as law, medicine, accounting and business. A decade later, Manpower became "the largest employer in the United States" (2011, 105), and during the 1990s the industry experienced meteoric growth, which made temp work grow by nearly 300%. This move towards short-term employment among college educated individuals coincides neatly with

the coming of age of Generation X, which pinpoints the moment in which emerging adulthood began to become ubiquitous (Arnett 2004). At the same time, the rise of—often unpaid—internships as an almost compulsory stepping stone towards a career makes it harder for those who cannot afford to work for free to gain experience in certain industries. For those who do, the bleak reality is that their internship will not necessarily lead to a job (Standing 2011, Tokumitsu 2015). If that was not enough, those who manage to find a job are faced with the reality that entry-level jobs are often precarious (Wyn et al. 2020). Standing (2011) argues that, although young people's transitions to work have typically been precarious, the young now remain precarious for longer and find it harder to find stable work. He contends that they are more likely to be underpaid, to go through longer trial periods and to work on short-term contracts (75-76). On top of that, they are often overqualified for their jobs, which leads to "status discord" and "status frustration" (10).

A university degree used to prevent individuals from experiencing unemployment and underemployment, but that is no longer the case, especially after the Great Recession (Murgia and Poggio 2014, 63). Studies based on interviews with young people about their work lives reveal that this bleak situation creates "a mismatch between past expectations, present realities and unpredictable future" that leads to "feelings of anxiety and powerlessness and a sense of being wronged by history" (Wyn et al. 2020, 69). Their precarious situation makes young people lose their motivation and fear that they will lose the skills they acquired at university. Highly skilled workers in precarious work did not see their jobs as "real" jobs and claimed they did not allow them to grow or to feel like they belonged to a group (Murgia and Poggio 2014, 73-75). Murgia and Poggio also argue that highly skilled precarious workers are caught in a "passion trap" of sorts. That is, they studied a subject that they were passionate about and not being able to use those skills at

work leads to mental distress. The subject of passion comes up time and again in emerging adult films, where characters usually struggle to find meaningful work doing what they like best, which tends to be working in the creative industries and turning their hobbies into their careers.

5.1.2 Do what you love and you will be broke forever: chasing the creative dream

Over half of the films studied in this dissertation have protagonists who dream of making a living out of their creative endeavours or to work in creative industries such as publishing or journalism. However, this does not correspond to Richard Florida's idea of a creative class. Although these characters usually live in the same urban gentrified creative hubs that Florida writes about and they also tend to work as freelancers, his conception of the creative class, which stretches out to include not only architects, scientists and engineers, but also some healthcare, finance and law professionals, is too wide (Florida 2012). Emerging adult protagonists usually aspire to more traditional—and less lucrative— artistic careers that are almost doomed to fail from the very beginning. The percentage of artists who can make a living wage out of their craft alone is small, and the radical changes that the Internet has brought to the arts world make it even harder to do so. Although the Internet opens many doors to writers and musicians—the two most common artistic career aspirations in these films—it has also revolutionised those industries and made it harder for creatives to get paid for their work (Timberg 2015).

The value of creativity is further emphasised by the way in which characters who have chosen to follow a more conventional career path are positioned as antagonists who

are not cool or edgy enough and who value conformity over authenticity. These films generally imply that there is something wrong with those who have it all figured out at an early age or want to follow their parents' example. Traditional employment trajectories and attitudes towards work are seen as outdated and hopelessly uncool, and so are those who choose that path. As we saw in Chapter Two, this disdain, which works as a rejection of the older generation's ambitions, can be seen from the very beginning of emerging adult films, more specifically from the moment in *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967) in which the protagonist replies to a family friend's suggestion that he starts a career in plastics with nothing but a blank stare. Although Ben (Dustin Hoffman) politely says he will think about it, his lack of interest is obvious (fig. 5.3.).

Fig. 5.3. Ben's lack of interest in plastics—and, by extension, in the adult world—is conveyed through Dustin Hoffman's blank facial expression and flat tone of voice, as well as by framing that separates the protagonist from the group of adults and positions them at different levels.

In *Two Night Stand* (Max Nichols, 2014) a blizzard forces two young people who are trying to spite their exes by having a one-night stand to spend longer than they anticipated with the stranger they met on a dating website. While talking about jobs and expectations, Alec (Miles Teller), who works as a bank assistant manager, a decidedly uncool job in these films, states: "I never felt like I needed a job to define my life. (…) Since when are you supposed to like your job? I think our generation catastrophically misunderstands that." Anne Helen Petersen makes a similar point in her book about millennials. She argues that millennials aim to find a job that they love and that will impress both their parents and their peers. That is, a passion job that is also well-paid and stable but will come across as cool to their friends (2021, 68). The concept of working doing what one loves is relatively new (McGee 2005, Tokumitsu 2015). At the end of the twentieth century, self-realisation through work came to be conceived as "the right—and responsibility—of each and every individual" and it motivated individuals in the face of "shattered job security, frequent unemployment, decline in real wages and, when employed, greatly increased work time and productivity expectations" (McGee 2005, 111-112). The feeling that one is working towards a calling and that reaching one's goal will lead to self-fulfilment leads to a focus on "working on the self," which according to McGee has brought about the "belaboured self," which she defines as "the self perennially at work on itself and the self laboured over by the self" (2005, 44).

Tokumitsu sees "do what you love" as "the unofficial mantra for our time" (2014). Like McGee, she contends that the idea of virtuous work has shifted from the Protestant work ethic—based on diligence and thriftiness—to a new model that values personal satisfaction and self-realisation. This new conception of work encourages individuals to look for what she calls "lovable work." That is, work that suits the individual's preferences

and that one loves doing (2015). She sets this kind of work in opposition with "unlovable work," which is perceived as monotonous and pedestrian. This falls in line with Bauman's claim that the significance of work is now "mainly aesthetic" ([2000] 2012, 180) and that work is now meant to amuse, satisfy and lead to self-fulfilment. The "do what you love" ethos encourages individuals to focus on themselves and promotes the idea that each one of us is special enough to reach our goals if only we work hard enough. Tokumitsu argues that this focus on the self borders on pathological narcissism and it encourages individuals to ignore both the working conditions of others and the systemic impediments to one's success, describing it as "the secret handshake of the privileged and a worldview that disguises its elitism as noble self-betterment" (2014).

The idea of chasing one's true calling pushes individuals to endure uncertain and precarious working conditions, as well as to engage in what Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) call "hope labour." That is, they are likely to do the work they love so much for free, hoping that their free labour will get a foot in the door to their desired career. Although this could be applied to any number of vocations that are more likely to lead to a stable job—and therefore to a more or less settled adult life—such as teaching or medicine, when thinking about working doing something one loves, it is not uncommon to turn to one's hobbies for inspiration, which makes artistic types particularly prone to fall into this trap. Individuals striving to do what they love are likely to identify with their job at a very deep level, which leads them to endure exploitative working conditions and long-term precarity in the hopes that their future employment will lead to self-fulfilment, freedom, social prestige and an upper-middle class lifestyle (Tokumitsu 2015). Anne Helen Petersen argues that another problem that occurs when one's job is one's passion is that work becomes so enmeshed in our identity that the thought of quitting becomes problematic even when one's

working conditions are untenable. Quitting a passion job may make individuals who are actually doing what is best for them feel like they are giving up on themselves or rejecting their own identity (Petersen 2021, 86).

The pursuit of lovable jobs often leads individuals to what Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism," a situation in which what one desires is not a source of motivation that leads an individual to success, but rather an obstacle that prevents them from reaching their full potential. Berlant defines cruel optimism as "the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (2011, 24). In the case of emerging adult films, an attachment to a fundamentally insecure and unlikely career as an artist often prevents the protagonists from evolving as individuals, trapping them in a never-ending quest to reach an elusive dream. An overt attachment to the adolescent fantasy of becoming a rock star, an award-winning performer or a best-selling author blinds them to other— more realistic and feasible—options that would allow them to grow. As Berlant explains, a relationship of cruel optimism involves a "double bind": individuals are bound both to fantasies and to the promise that those fantasies represent. At the same time, this attachment to those fantasies renders them unpleasurable (2011, 51). Ironically, an overt attachment to the creative jobs that individuals have chosen because of their passion may extract all pleasure from their once enjoyable hobby.

Life Partners (Susanna Fogel, 2014) constitutes a good example of a narrative in which the relationship between a character and their creative dream is one of cruel optimism. Sasha (Leighton Meester) is an aspiring musician whose relationship with music is not what it used to be. Almost thirty and stuck in an entry-level job that she hates, Sasha struggles to make the decision to give up her rock star dreams. She talks about making and

playing music, but her guitar lingers unused in a corner of her living room (fig. 5.4.). An element that further complicates her predicament is the fact that she is not the only one to be trapped in a relationship of cruel optimism with her dreams: her parents are too. Her parents support her dreams of becoming a rock star as much as they support her economically, and their expectations remain high: they daydream about her album going platinum and about being able to hear her music at a popular coffee chain. It can be argued that Sasha's bind is not double, but triple: she is bound to her dream, to the promise that her dream represents and to the hopes that her parents have deposited in her dream. In the process, she has lost her passion for music and her growth has been thwarted by her impossibility to see beyond a dream that has lost its meaning.
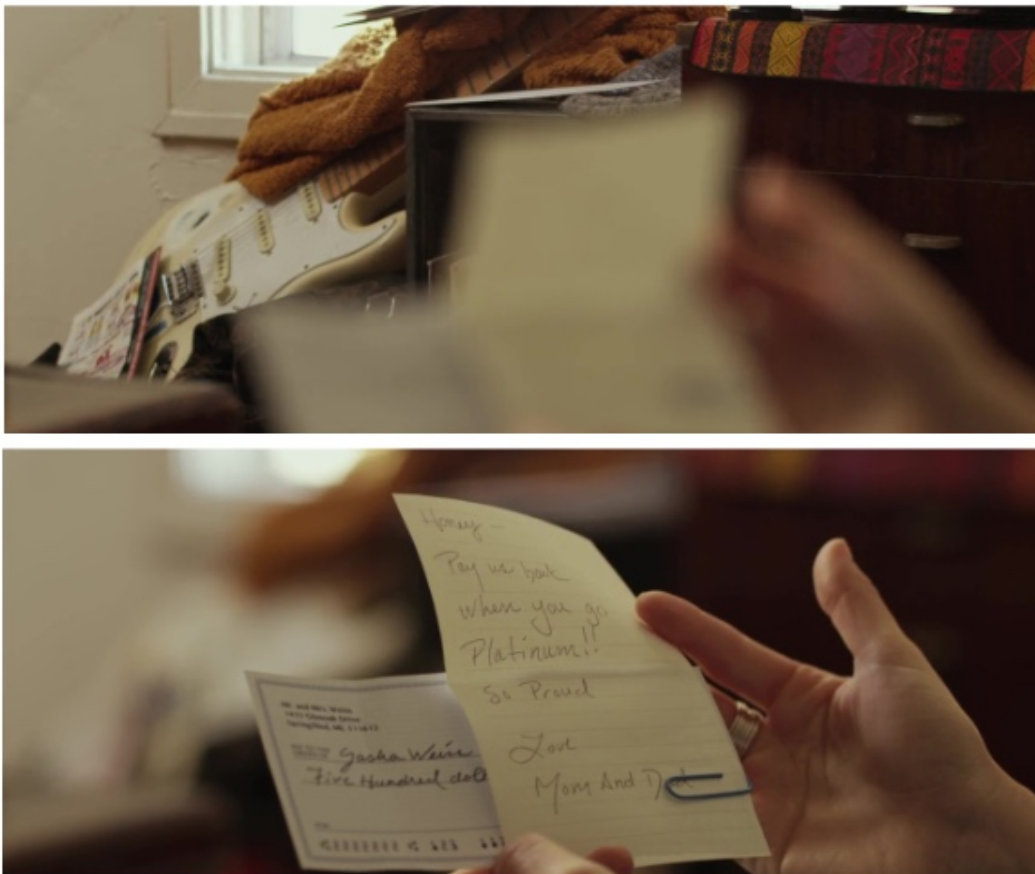
Fig. 5.4. Rack focus shifts the emphasis from the background (her guitar) to the foreground (a cheque and a hopeful note from her parents), suggesting the protagonists' current lack of interest in music and the fact that she is bound to her parents' expectations.

In emerging adult films the protagonists' artistic dreams are not usually realised. Instead, stories typically end either with the protagonist undergoing a transformation that involves an adaptation of their artistic goals into a more realistic career option or depicting the protagonist as stuck in their current state and unable to make any changes. *I Used to Go Here (*Kris Swanberg, 2020) is an unusual emerging adult film in that it begins with the fulfilment of the protagonist's dream. Kate (Gillian Jacobs) has just reached two milestones of adulthood: she is engaged and she has just published her debut novel, fulfilling her dream of becoming a writer. However, these achievements, which the spectator assumes have been a long time in the making, vanish all of a sudden: both her wedding and her book tour gets cancelled. With no plans, she accepts an invitation to her alma mater to present her book, where she becomes disillusioned with the hypocrisy and superficiality of her old creative writing professor, who functions as a stand-in for the publishing world as a whole. Instead of focusing on the protagonist's quest toward self-fulfilment, the film is concerned with the definition of success and whether her dream was realistic or a mere romanticisation of the life of the artist. College students look up to Kate, who feels like a failure and looks up to her former professor, who turns out to be a liar and have dubious morals. This process brings to light the protagonists' blindness when it comes to their perception of somebody with a career in the arts and, by extension, of the art world in general, while questioning young people's ambition to succeed in it.

5.1.3 Don't need the rollercoaster ride: hookups, break-ups and non-relationships

"Bootie Call," by British girl band All Saints, topped the UK charts in September 1998 (Official UK Charts Company 2021). The song subverts the stereotype that men

favour casual sex whereas women look for an emotional connection, positioning casual sex as a smart option that will help women avoid "the rollercoaster ride" that comes along when one lets feelings get in the way. Therefore, casual sex is framed as an act of self-care that will prevent emotional turmoil. Three years earlier, Alanis Morrisette's song "You Oughta Know" held the number one spot on the Billboard Alternative Songs chart for five weeks (Billboard 2021). In the song's lyrics, an angry woman confronts an ex who has moved on too soon, asking him if his new partner is perverted like her and if she would perform oral sex on him at the cinema, which listeners are led to believe the speaker did. A few years later, in the year 2000, No Doubt released "Ex-Girlfriend," another break-up song in which front-woman Gwen Stefani sings "I kinda always knew I'd end up your ex-girlfriend." Throughout the song the speaker berates herself for getting involved with somebody with a long list of exes, claiming that she should have thought about that before kissing him. These songs, although sung by Generation X women, were released when the oldest millennials were teenagers, and they reflect a shift in romantic and sexual attitudes that affects both generations and plays a key role in the depiction of sex and love in emerging adult films. These songs show relationships as temporary and casual, partners as easily replaceable and women as sexually emancipated and proud of it, all while highlighting the role of individual agency.

As we saw in Chapter One, greater sexual freedom and the rise of cohabitation and alternative living arrangements, together with a delay in the ages of marriage and parenthood, are some of the factors that contributed to the rise of emerging adulthood. While some of these developments are linked to the fact that young people today take a longer time to complete their education and begin their careers, this is by no means the only factor. The social changes outlined in section one of this chapter have also had an

impact on the emotional lives of individuals. It can be argued that the main difference between the emotional lives of Xers and millennials and that of their parents' generations is not the fact that the former have tended to delay marriage and parenthood but, rather, the abundance of options that they have in comparison to their parents. Young people today can decide who and when to marry, whether to marry at all, whether they would prefer to live with their partners before tying the knot, whether they want their relationship to be monogamous or polyamorous, whether they want to become parents or not, whether to opt for single parenthood, with no stable partner in sight and, thanks to reproductive technology, even whether to delay parenthood to a point that would have been biologically unlikely—if not impossible—for previous generations. These are only some of the choices that individuals today have when it comes to settling down. The dating scene is equally full of options that must be weighed and, as a consequence, of decisions that must be made. Reflexive individualisation thus extends to the emotional domain, giving way to a myriad possible romantic biographies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

Anthony Giddens argues that ideals of romantic love are tied to the distinct separation of spheres for men and women and they were therefore challenged by advances in women's autonomy. These changes, he argues, have given rise to a new type of love that he calls "confluent love," in which partners are emotional equals. This "restructuring of intimacy" has given way to what he calls the "pure relationship," a relationship "entered into for its own sake" that lasts as long as the union is satisfactory for both parties (1992, 58). The contingency that characterises this arrangement falls in line with the flexibility that pervades contemporary life according to Bauman ([2000] 2012; 2001, 23). In *Liquid Love* (2003) he argues that, in an age that places such value upon fluidity, commitment is perceived as oppressive, and lifelong commitment as "a trap that needs to be avoided at all

costs" (104). The rapid pace of change that characterises contemporary life encourages a "short term mentality" (2001) and a drive to keep one's options open should the circumstances change. Long-term attachments—together with their almost inevitable end —are, then, perceived as a risk and managed as such (1996, 24-25; [2000] 2012, 117; 2001, 52; 2003, 104). This turn to the individual has led Harrod, Leonard and Negra (2022) to assert that in contemporary intimate relationships "the 'I' often takes precedence over the 'we'" (7) and that the resources that individuals, especially women, used to dedicate to the nurturing of their relationships are now invested in "wellness and self-care" (8). That is, self-realisation seems to have replaced successful coupledom as a goal.

Bauman also argues that the word "love" now refers to a greater number of experiences than before, which encourages individuals to think of love as a skill that one must learn and that can be honed with practice (2003, 13). Relationships are seen as a tool towards self-improvement, a product that one uses until it no longer serves its purpose or until a superior model comes along. Under neoliberalism, the market mentality pervades even the most intimate bonds, making them "things to be consumed, not produced" (Bauman 2001, 157), products that can be returned or discarded at the consumer's will. Similarly, Eva Illouz (2019) contends that the marketisation of heterosexual relationships is experienced as both "choice and uncertainty" (16). By being able to choose, individuals can maximise their "well-being, pleasure, or profit" (16) but, at the same time, the lack of a code of conduct leads to "a widespread and pervasive cognitive and emotional uncertainty" (16), which means that individuals do not know how they feel, what they want, how others feel about them, how much to give in a relationship, and so on. She pinpoints the 1970s as the moment when the shift from heavily ritualised relationships to non-standard, uncertain ones took place. Courtship was governed by a set of rules known by both parties, which led

to "emotional certainty" (30). Both people courting would be familiar with those shared rules: they would know how to interpret the other person's actions and words, they would know how to behave, they would be certain of their role in their relationship and they would have a clear goal—marriage (34-35). In contrast, modern relationships are characterised by a lack of structure and telos. She argues that "the institutionalisation of sexual freedom via consumer culture and technology (…) has made the substance, frame and goal of sexual and emotional contracts fundamentally uncertain, up for grabs, incessantly contested" and that, as a result, those involved in relationships are uncertain as to "how to define, evaluate, or conduct the relationship they enter" (9).

Temporary emotional and/or sexual arrangements have proliferated. Eva Illouz also calls our attention to the existence of "situationships," which she defines as "relationships in which participants implicitly or explicitly agree that they are to be non-relationships" (2019, 153-154). In this arrangement, at least one person is emotionally uninvolved in the relationship, so the non-relationship has no future and no structure. It is defined by what it is not—a relationship—but may resemble it were it not for the participants' refusal to label it so. Casual sex, which may take the form of a one-night stand or a friends with benefits relationship (a non-committed sexual relationship with a friend), has also become more common, and hookup culture prevails in university campuses (Freitas 2013, Wade 2017). Over half of the participants in the Singles in America study have had a friend with benefits relationship or a one-night stand, and 35% had sex with a prospective partner *before* their first date. Fisher and Garcia argue that this behaviour is symptomatic of what they refer to as "slow love" (2019, 216). To them, the fact that these numbers contrast with the high number of participants looking for a life partner (86%) or who believed in lifelong marriage (89%) signals a shift in the way romantic and sexual relationships take place.

They argue that what they call the "pre-commitment stage" of a relationship is becoming longer because we are now driven to find out as much as we can about a potential partner before making a commitment (2019, 216). The emergence of this de-structured romantic narrative that begins with what used to be the end (sex) may be linked to Bauman's theories. In a society characterised by temporality, if one wants to commit to someone and assume the risk that such a long-term bond implies, one should be absolutely certain that the commitment is worth the risk.

All of these versions of love and relationships appear throughout emerging adult films. Almost every film analysed contains a—more or less—romantic plot, and for the protagonists the process of figuring out what they want and—just as crucially—what they do not want in an emotional relationship goes hand in hand with the journey of self-discovery and growth that will propel them into adulthood. In some cases, self-realisation replaces romantic love as the narrative focus in what Beatriz Oria calls "self-centered rom-coms" (2021a)[8]. In these films the focus falls on the protagonists' journey towards self-improvement, which must be completed before a successful romantic partnership can take place, thus showcasing a self-centredness and emphasis on individual agency that are characteristic of neoliberalism. In many emerging adult films, romantic narratives are problematised by the fact that skepticism towards long-term commitment and marriage runs through them. Characters not only struggle to commit, but they also choose potential partners with whom a serious relationship is either unlikely or entirely out of the question. For example, in *Before Sunrise* (Richard Linklater, 1995) the protagonists live in different continents, in *Tiny Furniture* (Lena Dunham, 2010) the protagonist actively pursues men

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[8] Although many of the films mentioned in the article—including *Lola Versus* (Daryl Wein, 2012), which the author focuses on—can be considered emerging adult films, not all of them are.

who use her and in *One More Time* (Robert Edwards, 2015) and *Carrie Pilby* (Susan Johnson, 2017), the protagonists are involved with older men who represent figures of authority—her therapist and her professor, respectively—and who are already in—supposedly—committed, long-term relationships. In other instances, the protagonists chase a fantasy, like a high school crush in *Ass Backwards* (Chris Nelson, 2013), *Young Adult* (Jason Reitman, 2011) and *Dirty 30* (Andrew Bush, 2016)

In emerging adult films, the romantic narrative is often undermined by situations that are decidedly unromantic. Key moments in a relationship, like the first kiss or the first time the couple has sex, often take place in settings or situations that are not typically associated with romance. For instance, in *Obvious Child* (Gillian Robespierre, 2014) the couple kiss for the first time after one of them farts on the other's face while urinating in the street on the night they meet, in *Lonesome Jim* (Steve Buscemi, 2005) the protagonist and his future partner first have sex on a hospital bed while one of them is working and in *Grosse Pointe Blank* (George Armitage, 1997) the protagonist tells his high school girlfriend that he loves her after shooting a man in the head. Lovers often meet in ways that reject romanticism, such as working in a sex shop in *Adult World* (Scott Coffey, 2013), after buying alcohol for —and befriending—a future partner's underage daughter in *Laggies* (Lynn Shelton, 2014) or through a phone sex line in *For a Good Time, Call…* (Jamie Travis, 2012). The fact that all these beginnings lead to happy endings underscores the lack of rules and predictability that characterises contemporary relationships (Illouz 2019) as well as what Harrod, Leonard and Negra refer to as a "tension between utopia and dystopia." The relationships' unusual beginnings remind the spectator of "romance's apparent inability to thrive in modern conditions," yet the romantic happy endings bring to the fore romance's "status as a cultural idea and driving force" (2022, 1). *Obvious Child* shows how the chronology of

relationships is often reversed. In the film, the couple kiss and have sex on the night they meet, which leads to pregnancy. Their subsequent meetings are failures: the first time she invites him to see her comedy show she leaves with a different man, while the second he leaves after she reveals that she is pregnant and having an abortion. The film ends with Max (Jake Lacey) going to the abortion clinic with Donna (Jenny Slate) and caring for her after the procedure, showing a level of companionship and tenderness characteristic of a long-term relationship despite the fact that the two of them have not even gone on a *proper* first date yet.

As we have seen, emerging adults have to navigate their emotional life under a very different set of rules than the ones their parents followed. We now live in what Pamela Haag (2011) calls the "post-romantic age," a term that she coined to designate a new mood, specific to the 21st century, that is challenging, subverting and replacing the romantic paradigm of marriage that characterised the 20th century (and had previously replaced the traditional marriage characteristic of the 19th century). In considering how this dismantling of "romantic premises and ideals around career, work, lifestyle, childrearing, or sex in marriage" (xiv) has influenced onscreen representations of intimacy, Maria San Filippo (2021) writes about "anti-illusory romcom" (5) or "post-romantic comedies" (18), which tend to favour realistic portrayals of the challenges that beset contemporary relationships, place an emphasis on "*un*coupling" (3) as much as they do on the couple's union, present ambivalent or unhappy endings and do not portray love as a prerequisite for self-fulfilment.

Zack and Miri Make a Porno (Kevin Smith, 2008) exemplifies how romanticism and a denial of romanticism sometimes go hand in hand in emerging adult films. In the following scene, romanticism is portrayed as a wish whose fulfilment is impeded by the

precarious circumstances of the protagonists. Zack (Seth Rogen) and Miri (Elizabeth Banks) are two broke twentysomething friends and housemates who decide to make an amateur porn film in a desperate attempt to make a quick buck that will allow them to pay their utility bills. During filming, the two protagonists realise that they have romantic feelings for each other. When they film their first sex scene, the romanticism of what should be an emotional and intimate moment—two people in love becoming intimate for the first time—is undermined by the fact that is it taking place in front of an audience and *for* an audience. The moments before and after intercourse contrast with the sex act both in style and tone, reminding the spectator of the fact that those two characters are not porn actors, but individuals with a very close friendship bond and romantic feelings for each other. Before they have sex, Zack and Miri are framed in long shots and three-quarter shots and they keep each other at arm's length, which contrasts with the close ups used during the sex scene (fig. 5.5). The first half parodies the conventions of porn films through a trite narrative where a serviceman knocks on the door of a scantily clad woman ready to have sex with him. Hyperbolic body language and sexual innuendoes contrast with the awkwardness of the two characters when the time to undress each other comes, which is not expected in porn and underscores the fact that they are not actors. The sex scene is filmed in a markedly non-pornographic way that highlights the couple's emotional bond, and although it is part of a porn film, it is not shown through the lens of the fictional film but as a real act of intimacy, highlighting the feelings that the protagonists have for each other. Close ups keep the focus on the protagonists' faces, avoiding nudity and emphasising the intimacy of the moment. Moreover, the emphasis is placed on kissing, tenderness and female pleasure, all of which are largely absent from mainstream porn, which tends to favour rough—sometimes downright violent—sex and male pleasure (Barton 2021, 60).

For a moment, the comedic tone shifts to a romantic one that is further underscored by the soft lighting, warmer tones and the use of non-diegetic music. Live's "Hold Me Up" plays as Zack and Miri have sex for the first time, the rock song's uplifting rhythm emphasising the excitement of the moment while its lyrics remind us of the friends' romantic feelings for each other. After they finish, the protagonists stay in each other's arms and stare at each other's eyes before Zack looks offscreen and yells "cut," reminding the spectator—and Miri herself, who seems to have forgotten where she is—that the romantic nature of their sexual encounter is nothing but an illusion, just like the film they are making.

Fig. 5.5. A change in aspect ratio—together with a closer distance, softer lighting, and non-diegetic music—differentiates the real feelings expressed in the sex scene from the acting that takes place before.

To conclude, although almost every emerging adult film is, in some way, about love, their approach to love and relationships reflect a landscape in which romantic love and a straightforward romantic narrative beginning with a first date and ending in marriage seem to be a thing of the past, which complicates the concept of settling down. Individuals are free to choose from a wide variety of potential partners and types of relationships but uncertain regarding what they want and how to proceed. Despite the prevalence of romantic narratives, these rarely culminate in engagements or weddings, and happy endings—when they happen—are not necessarily tied to lifelong commitments. At the same time, unhappy and open endings abound, mirroring the fluidity, open-endedness and

uncertainty that characterise contemporary love. In other words, emerging adult characters rarely settle down in the traditional sense even though those friends who are depicted as more mature often do. Instead of showing a definitive ending to the protagonists' emotional biographies, emerging adult films tend to focus on showing smaller but meaningful emotional developments that point towards greater maturity, less self-involvement and readiness to make meaningful commitments. When it comes to love, settling down narratives place an emphasis on the *process* rather than the outcome. That is, the focus is often on the search for the right partner and on the psychological evolution that the characters undergo as they determine the kind of partner and relationship that they would like to have.

5.2 Life is a mixtape: love and music in *High Fidelity*

Settling down narratives usually revolve around the search for love and work. As we have just seen, the quest to find the right partner often focuses on the process of meeting and discarding prospective partners, while in the realm of work the protagonists' goal tends to work doing something that they love that will allow them to become independent without losing their identity in the process. In *High Fidelity*, love, work and identity—as well as the film's narrative—are intertwined with music. The film's protagonist Rob (John Cusack) is a music lover and record store owner. His job is related to his emotional life in several ways: he started working in record shops after a painful break-up, he met his partner Laura (Iben Hjejle) through music and he uses music to express interest in other people. Additionally, it is through music that the protagonist positions himself as a discerning consumer with omnivorous taste, an authentic individual who rejects the

cookie-cutter mainstream acts. Pop music is present through the film, both as its subject matter and in its soundtrack. Diegetic and non-diegetic music play throughout the film, often establishing a dialogue with the action and narration in order to emphasise the protagonist's mental state. The film begins with Rob and Laura's break-up and ends with their reunion, but theirs is not the only reconciliation that takes place. Alongside the romantic plot, *High Fidelity* deals with Rob's dissatisfaction with his job, which is also solved at the end of the film thanks to both Laura and music. Sequences in which Rob tries to figure out where his previous romantic relationships went wrong are intercalated with scenes that take place at the record shop and show him at work. These constant jumps from the personal to the professional emphasise the fact that both of his problems stem from the same place: his attempt to fulfil a fantasy. In other films, the protagonists struggle to reach financial independence or professional success. However, what Rob longs for is status and authenticity, elusive qualities that he has been trying to attain both through his personal and professional life. The protagonist's discerning music taste and his collector's mentality seep into his professional and personal life, leading him to deem his arrangements temporary and to be on a constant lookout for something—or someone—more authentic, a rare gem whose acquisition will make him feel complete, an inability to appreciate what he already has that inevitably leads to discontent and prevents him from settling down and truly committing to his career and to his partner.

5.2.1 The love collector

Rob's love life is like one of his mixtapes: a compilation of songs by different artists, a collection. The transient nature of love and the prevalence of what Eva Illouz (2019) calls

"unloving"[9] is underscored through the film's emphasis on break-ups. In the opening scene Laura has just broken up with Rob, who proceeds to enumerate his top 5 most memorable break-ups as soon as his now ex leaves the apartment. The film is more or less divided into three parts. During the first one, a series of flashbacks accompanied by Rob's voice-over narration allow us a glimpse into his dating history. After that, the protagonist begins a quest to meet all his ex-girlfriends in order to find out why they rejected him. The third and final act focuses on Rob's growth and his attempt to win Laura back. The flashbacks into the protagonist's adolescence and twenties establish a visual connection between Rob's present and past selves, which emphasises the spectator's awareness of how little he has really changed through the years, which according to Laura is "not as much as a pair of socks." Rob's lack of emotional evolution is explicitly stated when he talks about his first break-up and says: "It would be nice to think that since I was 14, times have changed. Relationships have become more sophisticated, females less cruel, skins thicker, instincts more developed. But there seems to be an element of that afternoon in everything that's happened to me since. All my romantic stories are a scrambled version of that first one." From the beginning of the film Rob describes himself as emotionally stunted, incapable of evolution and lacking self-awareness. Instead of wondering how his behaviour may have contributed to those break-ups, he chooses to focus on the cruelty of the women he dated, thus adopting the position of a helpless victim. At the same time, when Rob talks about his past relationships, he does so with a strong feeling of resentment that makes them sound more recent than they are, showcasing an adolescent point of view that he should have discarded a long time ago now that he is in his mid-thirties.

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[9] Eva Illouz uses the term "unloving" to refer to "the unmaking of bonds" (3), which includes avoiding relationships, breaking relationships and hopping from one relationship to the next.

Rob's emotional biography offers insight into the mores of romance in the late twentieth century, such as a reluctance to commit and the prevalence of superficial relationships that last a short time and succeed each other quickly (Bauman 2003). The uncertainty and lack of rules that characterise contemporary relationships (Illouz 2019) are present from the very beginning of Rob's dating history. When he calls his first girlfriend, Rob is stunned to hear that she married her first boyfriend, which indicates that both of them had different opinions regarding what the performance of an intimate act—in this case kissing—meant. The second flashback adds a lack of knowledge regarding how and when to take the relationship to the next level. When Penny (Joelle Carter) refuses Rob's sexual advances, he breaks up with her, claiming that "it never goes anywhere." As a result, Penny feels pressured to consent to sexual relations with her next boyfriend, which leaves a lasting scar that will impede her sex life for years. This points to the increasing commodification of love and sexuality (Illouz 2019), as well as to the consequences of the objectification of women's bodies and men's sense of entitlement to them. In the flashback, Rob claims that boys felt breasts were "rightfully" theirs. Under hegemonic masculinity, boys are socialised to "use female bodies as currency to enhance their alpha status among men" (Barton 2021, 7), which suggests that what he mourns is not the emotional toll of the break-up or the missed opportunity to experience sexual pleasure but, rather, the feeling of comparative inferiority at not having been able to "possess" Penny's body when somebody else could. His third most memorable break-up constitutes an example of Giddens' "pure relationship," one that has no real purpose and will last only as long as both parties are satisfied enough (1992, 58). Rob sees his relationship with Sarah (Lili Taylor) as one that they both entered in order not to be alone, with a marked lack of romanticism. In fact, he describes her leaving him as "contrary to the whole spirit of our arrangement," making it

sound like a commercial transaction. Once again, what Rob is sad about is not losing Sarah, but his feeling of inferiority after being rejected.

Fig. 5.6. Rob's reflection suggests that his performance of coolness is nothing but an illusion.

This lack of self-confidence drives him to a mental breakdown when Charlie (Catherine Z Jones) leaves him for somebody else. Unlike the other women, Charlie has something he desperately wants: social capital. When Rob talks about Charlie, the film goes back and forth between the present and the past, which highlights that his present situation stems from this past experience—after Charlie left him, Rob flunked out of college and started working in a record store—and suggests that this break-up causes him more distress than the others. Charlie is popular within the artistic circles that she frequents, she lives in a bohemian apartment and when she speaks all eyes are on her, including Rob's. Speaking as a man in his mid-thirties, Rob describes Charlie as "an extraterrestrial, a ghost, a myth." Being with someone that he perceived in those hyperbolic terms made Rob doubt himself, and he carries this lack of confidence to the present. Rob's insecurity can be seen when he looks at his reflection on a shop window, first with Charlie and then on his own. During this flashback Rob is wearing the quintessential rebel outfit— a leather jacket, a white T-shirt and sunglasses—that marks the image that he wants to project. When we see Rob and Charlie together they look like a hip young couple, but

when we see Rob on his own, nervously adjusting his jacket's collar, he just looks like the insecure young man that he really is (fig. 5.6).

Eva Illouz argues that sharing similar tastes and enjoying the same leisure activities has become one of the main ways in which people choose their partners. In other words, the process of falling in love goes hand in hand with the assessment of a potential partner's consuming habits (2019, 166). This is the case in Rob's relationship with Laura, which starts when she goes to see him DJ and compliments his music taste. Illouz also argues that individuals whose identity is so tied to their taste as consumers are likely to reject a lover based on "irrelevant, arbitrary or minor details" and that they are quick to notice small differences regarding their style (2019, 166). Once again, Rob's relationship with Laura illustrates this. When Laura mentions the fact that the only thing that changed was her job, Rob is quick to add "and clothes, and hairstyles, and attitudes and friends." Laura's previous job as a lawyer for legal aid was cool enough for Rob, but her current job, in which she has to wear business clothes and cannot have pink hair, is not. In emerging adult films, corporate jobs are seen as uncool, as a sign of somebody who has given up and sold out, a rejection of uniqueness in favour of standardisation. Laura's evolution underscores Rob's immaturity and excessive attachment to the past. The fact that they are at different levels is suggested by the differences between their workplaces when they speak on the phone: Laura's office looks tidy and professional, whereas Rob's looks like an extension of his living room (fig. 5.7). Besides, her office is in a high-rise building, while Rob's window is so high that the office appears to be underground, which emphasises their different positions on the road to adulthood as well as her higher socioeconomic status.

Fig. 5.7. Setting and costume highlight the differences between Laura and Rob.

5.2.2. Breaking up is hard to do

High Fidelity's narrative structure resembles a break-up followed by a reconciliation. The spectator falls under the protagonist's spell only to be disappointed halfway through the film and convinced to trust him again during the last part. The film encourages identification with the protagonist from the very beginning. The opening scene begins with Rob listening to music on his headphones while breaking the fourth wall to address the spectator. A very short distance allows us to appreciate the pain in his face, while the content of his monologue about love and pop music is almost universal, given that most people enjoy pop music and have been rejected before. While he speaks we can hear the song he is listening to playing faintly in the background, further emphasising identification and hinting at the reason behind his despair. In the song, titled "You're Gonna Miss Me," the speaker addresses a lover who has departed, telling them that when they realise they made a mistake it will be too late to get back to him. The camera moves from Rob's hi-fi system to his head, following his headphones' cable, a tangible connection between him and his music that suggests his emotional involvement with the song. When Laura disconnects Rob's headphones, her actions can be read as her pulling the plug on their

relationship and her will to stop the music as a sign that his involvement with music is somehow to blame for the break-up.

The first part of the film is not dissimilar to the first stages of a relationship. Rob comes across as passionate and emotionally honest. His constant breaking of the fourth wall, together with the voice-over narration, make the spectator feel like Rob is confiding in us and making himself emotionally vulnerable. He appears to be sharing even those details that make him come across as insensitive or insecure, which leads the spectator to believe in his honesty. Along with infatuation comes a tendency to ignore red flags, however obvious they may be. We know that Rob's behaviour has been morally wrong in the past, but he seems so open about it now that we believe he has changed. Additionally, the film's restricted narration only allows the spectator access to Rob's point of view, which prevents us from contrasting the information he provides and encourages identification and idealisation. This process is aided by John Cusack's star persona as a hopeless romantic. As Richard Dyer ([1986] 2004) elaborates in his star theory, a film star is not simply an actor, but a construction that is made up of the actor's previous roles, as well as their offscreen appearances—both personal and professional—the discourse around them and any references to them in other contexts. Stars provide spectators with a set of expectations regarding the films in which they appear, and a certain performance is always engaged in a dialogue with the actor's star persona. Cusack's persona as a romantic anti-hero has accompanied him from the beginning of his career and it now forms part of the imagery of pop culture. Cusack was only 22 when he played Lloyd Dobler in *Say Anything* (Cameron Crowe, 1989) and held a boombox over his head playing Peter Gabriel's "In Your Eyes" outside a girl's bedroom. Over thirty years after the film's release, the boombox scene remains relevant as a symbol of teenage longing and heartfelt apologies. It

has been—and continues to be—parodied and alluded to in songs, music videos, commercials, films and television shows (fig. 5.8). In the teenage film *Easy A* (Will Gluck, 2010) the protagonist (Emma Stone) claims that all she wants is John Cusack holding a boombox outside her window, a statement that merges actor and character into one. This amalgamation of John Cusack with Lloyd Dobler is best summed up by cultural critic Chuck Klosterman when he writes: "They don't love John Cusack. They love Lloyd Dobler. When they see Mr. Cusack, they are still seeing the optimistic, charmingly loquacious teenager he played in Say Anything" (2003, 2-3). When Rob says everything he said to get Marie into bed was "bullshit," he adds "I've just invented a sketch of a decent, sensitive guy because I'm in the position to invent him. And I guess that charming, nervous stuff seems to work somehow." This line, which serves as a reminder of the skewed nature of the film's narrative, may be read as a self-aware nod to Cusack's star persona.

This process of identification with and empathy for the protagonist reaches its peak when we find out that Laura has been cheating on Rob. At this point, the spectator may be beginning to have the sneaking suspicion that Rob is not as nice as he seems, but this new discovery sends one back into feeling empathy and pity for Rob, who—like us—has just found out about Laura's infidelity. Rob locks himself in his office, looks into the camera and screams "what fucking Ian guy?," sharing his surprise and anger with us. Shortly afterwards we find out that, just like Rob, we have been lied to and manipulated. Rob has waited a long time to share the truth about his relationship with Laura: he cheated on her while she was pregnant, which prompted her decision to have an abortion and, if that was not enough, she lent him a large sum of money that he never paid back. This moment resembles the process of becoming disenchanted with a relationship, when those previously ignored red flags are waving right in front of our eyes and what we used to see

as an adorable quirk has become a serious handicap. Finding out that the narrator, who seemed genuinely honest, is unreliable is like finding out we have been cheated on and, like in a relationship, if he wants to regain our trust he is going to have to work for it. The process wherein the spectator makes peace with Rob goes hand in hand with his reconciliation with Laura. After he spills the beans about what really motivated his last break-up, the spectator may begin to see Rob through Laura's eyes, looking for hints that point towards emotional development and growth and pondering whether he is trustworthy, therefore experiencing the process of heartbreak and reconciliation as Rob and Laura do.
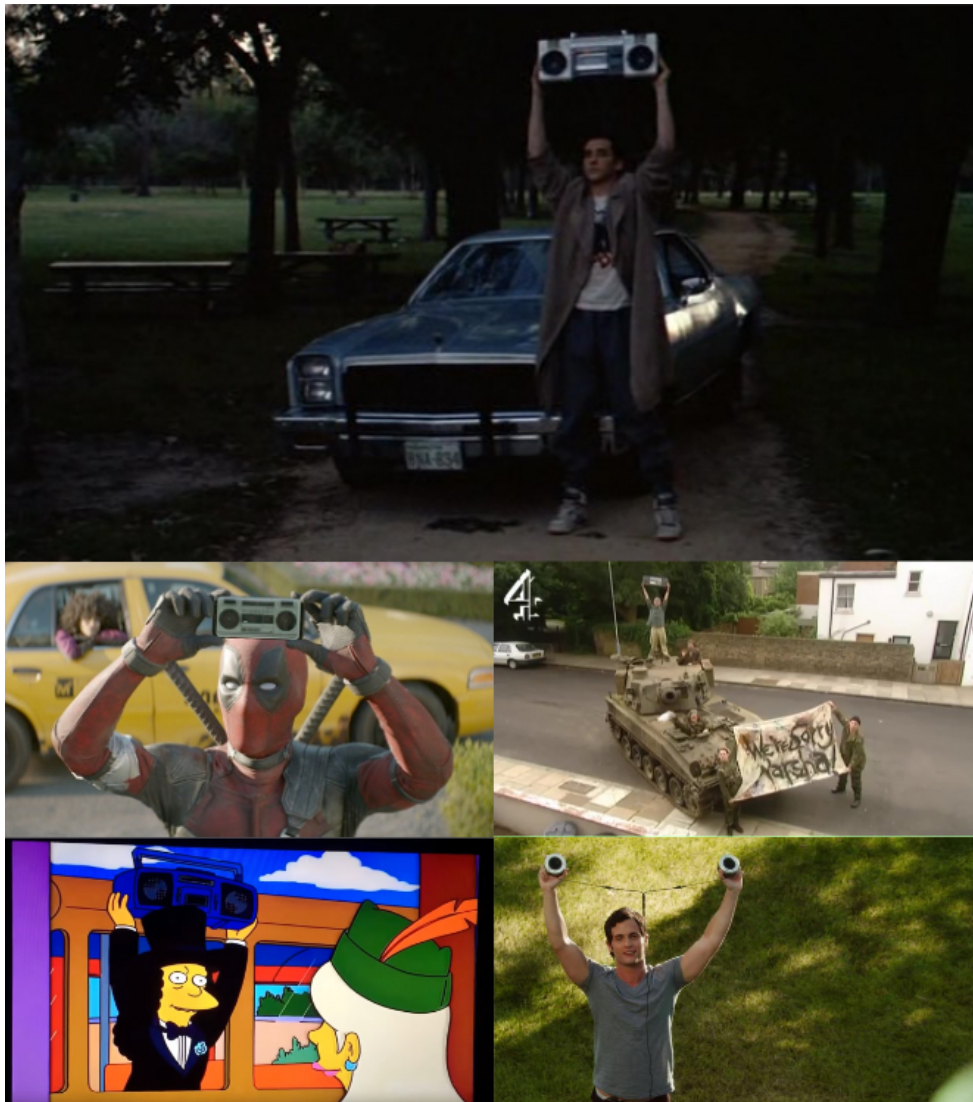
Fig. 5.8. The boombox scene in *Say Anything* (*top*) and some of its parodies: *Deadpool 2* (David Leitch, 2018), *Spaced* (Channel 4, 1999-2001), *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989–) and *Easy A.*

5.2.3 Through being cool

Rob's problems, both professional and romantic, originate in his inability to value what he already has and his tendency to romanticise and idealise music and women. As we have already seen, his past relationships—including his one-night-stand with singer Marie De Salle (Lisa Bonet)—are based both on his attempts to gain sexual or cultural status and on his desire to be admired. In short, they are a way to feed his ego. Similarly, his list of dream jobs only includes jobs that would garner him fame and adoration. At the same time, the specificity of those jobs reveals his attachment to the past and his snobbery. He would like to be a journalist or a producer, but only at a specific magazine or label and within a very restricted time frame decades ago. His hope to become a musician or a film director also seems to be unfounded in reality: he has not been seen playing an instrument or doing anything creative other than making mixtapes. The final job on the list, being an architect, is one that he does not even think he would like. It is clear that what Rob wants is not the jobs themselves, but the prestige and acclaim that they involve, which mirrors his behaviour in relationships.

The record store represents a safe place where Rob and his friends reign supreme, free to make their own rules and to make fun of those who do not live by them. They relentlessly mock customers, intimidate them, pressure them into buying what they think is best for them and even refuse to sell to certain people that they do not deem cool enough, whom they sometimes label in adolescent terms. For instance, they take delight in refusing to sell a record to a customer because he is a "geek." As a consequence, the fact that Rob is a small business owner does not make him come across as more mature or settled down. Instead, his shop represents the protagonist's lack of evolution, his fear of stepping outside

his comfort zone and his attachment to behaviours and outlooks more characteristic of adolescence than of adulthood. The record shop, an almost exclusively masculine space, functions as a site for homosocial bonding whose purpose does not seem to be making a profit but, rather, a performance of authenticity and cultural capital. Rob, Barry (Jack Black) and Dick (Todd Louiso) are what filmmaker Richard Linklater (1992) considers slackers: they want to pursue an activity that gives them pleasure irrespectively of economic profit. Rob himself places an emphasis on the fact that his record shop is located in a "neighbourhood that attracts the bare minimum of window shoppers" and that it survives because people make "a special effort" to go there.

Fig. 5.9 Emphasis on the shop's location in hip neighbourhood Wicker Park.

Right before he makes that statement, a long shot shows him walking to the store, firmly establishing its location at North Milwaukee Avenue and North Honore Street. At the beginning the focus is not placed on Rob, but on the street signs, which remain on screen for a few seconds while the camera, which is placed on a crane, moves down and forwards to focus on the protagonist (fig. 5.9). The shop's location in the heart of

Chicago's Wicker Park neighbourhood locates Championship Vinyl and its owner as members of what Richard Lloyd calls "neo-bohemia" (2002), which is seen as the genesis of the hipster culture of the 2000s (Greif 2011, 25). In his study of the neighbourhood, Lloyd (2002) describes Wicker Park as a working-class neighbourhood that experienced blight and urban decay following deindustrialisation. Gentrification began in the late 1980s, and by 1994 neglected industrial sites had been turned into creative spaces and the neighbourhood had been dubbed the next big thing by the national press, leading to an anti-gentrification backlash (Huebner 1994). It is within this context that Rob, who has been working in record shops for a decade, exists as an agent of gentrification, as one of the first or second wave of gentrifiers that helped to establish Wicker Park as the mecca of cool. In rock circles, the authenticity of an artist is seen to decline with commercial success (Hampson 1997, 80). Keeping this in mind, Rob's remark about the commerciality of his shop and its neighbourhood can be read as a way to construct his shop—and, by extension, himself—as an authentic space beyond the mainstream and perhaps as a rejection of the neighbourhood's bourgeoning hipness[10].

Despite his love of music, the record shop is wearing Rob down. He spends most of his time in the office, physically separated from Barry and Dick, whom he refers to as "the musical moron twins." He refuses to partake in Barry's antics and he displays a lack of interest in Dick's music recommendations. His dismissiveness of Barry, who is prone to fits of rage when things do not go his way, suggests that Rob has outgrown that phase of his life and it is time for him to make a change. He has been stuck in the same phase since

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[10] Conflicted feelings regarding one's status as a gentrifier is made more explicit in the TV show adaptation of *High Fidelity* (Hulu, 2020), which is set in Williamsburg and shows a neighbourhood at a latter stage of gentrification in which corporations have moved in and there is tension between businesses that are seen as authentic—like the record shop— and those which are not, like overpriced cafés or bars that offer the latest food and drink fads like frosé, frozen rosé wine.

Charlie left him years ago, and the shop is an embodiment of his inability to move on. When Rob introduces the shop he is framed behind bars (fig. 5.10) indicating his business' role in his lack of evolution. However, when Laura and Rob talk about his top 5 dream jobs, she helps him realise that owning a record store is in fact one of his dreams, highlighting the fact that the root of his dissatisfaction is not the shop but himself, which once again establishes a link between the protagonist's love life and his professional life.

Fig. 5.10. Rob believes his business has become a burden, but the burden is himself.

In order to grow up, Rob needs to stop craving admiration and give up his dreams of a life in the spotlight, which he does by opening a small record label and letting younger people take centre stage. He has to stop idealising women and jobs and to learn to see people as individuals rather than as accessories to embellish his own life. He must let go of the superficiality that makes him judge people based on their taste and of the self-centredness that prevents him from putting himself in other people's shoes. His break-ups highlight his superficiality, an excessive focus on himself, a lack of empathy, and trouble to communicate. The communication problems highlighted by his first break-up continue in adulthood and they can be seen in the opening scene, where Rob listens to a song about break-ups instead of communicating his thoughts to Laura, who is in the same room as him. This tendency to express himself through lyrics can be seen as a form of adolescent inarticulateness, a sign of immaturity. Rob also uses music to let women know he is

interested in them. Whenever he likes someone, he offers to make them a mixtape. These mixtapes are a way for him to convey his feelings through other people's words and music and to show off his musical knowledge. Simon Frith (1996, 121) writes about music identity as a fantasy that allows an individual to idealise themselves and their world. Keeping this in mind, the mixtape as a romantic symbol may be argued to represent an idealisation of the potential relationship between Rob and the mixtape's recipient: through the mixtape-making process, Rob is allowed to pick and mix those songs and representations of love that he finds the most appealing. At the end of the film Rob is making a different kind of compilation tape that marks his development into adulthood: he is making a mixtape full of songs that Laura likes. This simple act is symbolic of his psychological evolution, and it signals that he has learnt to respect other people's taste and to take their needs and wants into account. The film ends with the song "I Believe (When I Fall In Love It Will Be Forever)" by Stevie Wonder, an artist who was previously talked about in dismissive terms at the shop. The choice of artist therefore marks a willingness to leave childish preconceptions about people's tastes behind, while the content of the song alludes to Rob's willingness to finally settle down, commit to Laura and stop what he refers to as "jumping from rock to rock (…) until there aren't any rocks left."

His attitude towards love can also be related to record collecting. Like the collector that he is, Rob is always on the lookout for something new, a rare gem whose finding will provide both an emotional thrill and higher status within the community. A record collection, like his love life, is a work in progress that is never likely to be completed. There will be records to buy as long as music continues to be made, and there will always be other women holding the promise of something better. The fact that Rob organises his record collection autobiographically, following the order in which he bought the records,

represents an attempt to bring order to his life in the face of the chaos provoked by his latest break-up. Following Frith's ideas on music identity as a fantasy, this reorganisation can be read as his attempt to rewrite his story, creating the illusion that his biography is something that it is not and defining his life in the romanticised terms that a pop song offers. Although Rob claims that this autobiographical reorganisation brings him comfort, the film presents the experience as overwhelming, suggesting that this idealised reconstruction of his own life is not the answer to his problems. Rob is sitting in the middle of his living room completely surrounded by records, which merges the protagonist with his collection and makes him look swamped (fig. 5.11).

Fig. 5.11. Rob's record collection functions as an identity-building tool.

The film rejects an idealised view of romantic love in different ways. When Rob sleeps with Marie, whom he has idealised because of her talent, he seems shocked when she sees him as nothing but "a fuck." This clashes with the romanticism of "Baby I Love Your Way," the song Marie was singing at her show, and with Rob's idealised expectations of dating a musician and having songs written about him. Finally, the film deliberately shows a romanticised view of non-romantic moments, thus highlighting the dissonance

between the ideals of romantic love and reality. For instance, Rob and Sarah kiss for the first time standing by Lake Michigan with Chicago's skyline in the background as a wave crashes against the shore, the couple bathed in a soft, warm light (fig. 5.12). The romanticism of the shot's mise-en-scène contrasts with the utilitarian nature of their relationship, which is born out of fear of being alone. In contrast, relationship milestones happen in decidedly unromantic ways. Rob and Laura get back together on the day of her dad's funeral after having sex because she needs to feel something other than sorrow. The union feels like resignation rather than romantic success. Similarly, Rob's atypical proposal to Laura, which takes place at a bar, rejects the conventions of marriage proposals: he does not go down on one knee or give her a ring, and when asked why he proposed he answers he is "sick of thinking about it all the time," which is not exactly a great declaration of love. Love is not expressed in grand romantic gestures, but through everyday moments that depict the couple doing things together, thus rejecting the idealisation of romantic love. An idealisation that, together with the idealisation of the music world, has prevented Rob from growing up.

Fig. 5.12. Not what it seems. What looks like a romantic moment is nothing but an escape from loneliness.

The end of the film shows Rob as a more mature individual: he is now emotionally available, willing to make lifelong commitments, open to change, more tolerant of those whose tastes and lifestyles do not match his own and seemingly aware of the fact that he is closer to middle age than to adolescence. For Rob, settling down involves finding contentment in his business and in his partner, leaving aside the feeling that something better may be around the corner if he just waits or looks hard enough. His new-found appreciation of his career choice allows him to put a spin on his work life and try out new business endeavours while adopting a mentoring role. At the same time, he has learnt to value the comfort and familiarity of a long-term relationship. Instead of chasing new beginnings, Rob seems ready to spend the rest of his life with Laura. As we have seen, even though the film's narrative structure is centred around Rob's growth, his ability to settle down is not matched by an ending that shows a final lifelong commitment, which reflects the temporariness that characterises contemporary life and aligns *High Fidelity* with what Maria San Filippo terms "anti-illusory romcoms" (2021, 5). Rob's proposal, which seems poorly thought out, and Laura's reaction—laughing at him—deny the spectator the illusion of and idyllic happy ending. The protagonist's growth and willingness to change and settle down is therefore not marked by rites of passage that symbolise the attainment of maturity but, rather, through small—or, as in the case of his proposal, underplayed—gestures that point towards emotional development, which highlights the individualised and non-linear nature of the transition to contemporary adulthood.

5.3 The transition to adulthood as modern dance in *Frances Ha*

Frances Ha is primarily a film about moving: moving houses, moving back and moving on. These movements are tightly linked to the protagonist's search for adult stability as she chases and adapts her dreams. The narrative revolves around two of the hopes and dreams of the title character, one professional and one personal. If Frances (Greta Gerwig) had it her way, she would be a professional dancer and share her life with her best friend Sophie (Mickey Sumner). At the beginning of the film the protagonist appears to be close to fulfilling her goals—she is an apprentice dancer and she shares an apartment with Sophie—but the dream crumbles in front of her eyes when Sophie moves out and Frances is told the dance company will not be needing her for the next few months. The loss of this fantasy takes centre stage as the protagonist tries to find her way into adulthood, coming to terms with the fact that her dream is unattainable and that she needs to readjust her expectations regarding both her career and her relationship with Sophie. In order to grow up, Frances has to learn how to be realistic and how to become emotionally and financially self-reliant, but this journey from dependency to independence is not a straightforward one. Before she learns how to let go and dance solo, Frances tries to find her way in different places and situations and relying on different people—parents, friends, acquaintances and total strangers. By the end of the film, Frances has given up her dream of becoming a dancer, taking up an office job at the dance studio while she figures out how to become a choreographer, and her relationship with Sophie has shifted from an almost adolescent form of co-dependence to one of mutual support. The process of moving— around New York City, upstate, across the country and across the ocean—constitutes a journey of self-discovery in the course of which learning about herself and about others helps Frances to reappraise her goals and to reconcile her fantasy with reality. By the end

of the film, the protagonist has settled down to some extent, albeit in a non-traditional way. Frances has taken steps towards independence: she lives on her own, she has reshaped her dreams into a viable career and she has left co-dependency behind. The rites of passage that traditionally marked the transition into adulthood are rejected in favour of flexibility and adaptability, and heterosexual coupledom is deemed non-essential to the attainment of adult maturity. Settling down is therefore not understood as a transition into a fixed state of being that will remain unaltered for the duration of the protagonist's adulthood, but as a shift to more intentional and purposeful sort of movement. The end of the film does not mark the end of the road for Frances but, rather, the beginning of a new journey.

5.3.1 Drifting Towards Something: Movement as a tool for self-discovery

The protagonist's livelihood—dancing and teaching dance lessons—depends on her movements and, at the same time, the reassessment of her goals takes place as she moves from place to place. Motion is how she makes a living and also how she figures out how to *really* make a living that will allow her to move on, rather than drift, on her journey towards adulthood. At first sight, these two coexisting movements could not be more different from one another. Dancing is a choreographed, tightly controlled and predictable movement that takes place within a well-delimited space. It is also a skill that one can hone and perfect through practise. In contrast, her other movements are aimless, improvised or forced upon her by her personal circumstances. What is more, they take place around the world, taking her from New York to Sacramento and, later, to Paris. This relentless meandering fills Frances' life with movement without a destination. However, it is worth considering that Frances works in a modern dance company. Modern dance emerged at the

turn of the twentieth century as a reaction to the constrictions of ballet, which was the predominant dance form at the time, and it advocated for greater freedom of movement and self-expression (Jowitt 2006, 170). A parallel can be drawn between a dance form that rejects the strictures of classical ballet and the contemporary transition to adulthood, which is also characterised by the disintegration of previous, more restricted modes in favour of freer, less predictable ones. Isadora Duncan's[11] claim that ballet was not an adequate art form for industrial society resembles the claim that traditional adulthood is not a model that is suited to late-modernity (Layson 1987, 302-303; Blatterer 2007; Silva 2013). Frances' dancing can then be read as a rejection of rules, as a tendency to deviate from the established route and a will to live her life in her own terms. The freedom of her movements in her daily life as she runs from place to place or dances for fun contrasts with the restrained quality of the movements that she teaches children in her ballet class, further emphasising her freewheeling spirit (fig. 5.13).

Fig. 5.13. Frances' spontaneity contrasts with the controlled movements of ballet.

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[11] Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) is considered the mother of modern dance.

In a sense, Frances lives as she works: constantly moving but going nowhere. However, each one of her moves constitutes a learning experience that will coalesce into growth and progress at the end of the film. The narrative is divided into five parts that correspond to different addresses where Frances lives in the course of a few months. Her journey takes her from Brooklyn, where she lives with Sophie, to a shared apartment in Chinatown, her parents' house in Sacramento, her alma mater in Poughkeepsie and, finally, an apartment of her own in Washington Heights. In addition to these five moves, which are marked by intertitles with the address on them, Frances also lives at a friends' house for five weeks and spends two days in Paris. This emphasis on changing residence illustrates the prevalence of short-term arrangements—whether they are leases, relationships or contracts—and the importance of adaptability and flexibility in contemporary society (Bauman [2000] 2012, 2001, 2003; Beck 1992, 2000). The contingency of relationships and working situations, which in the film are liable to change at a moment's notice, prevents Frances from putting down roots. At the same time, her refusal to let go of her dancing dream encourages her to keep moving and to keep dancing. The path from her starting point (Brooklyn) to her destination (Washington Heights) is fairly straightforward, but Frances takes a number of detours that lengthen her estimated arrival time considerably. She travels over 19,000 kilometres to end up only 20 kilometres away from her starting point, a long and convoluted route which resembles her path into adulthood. Tracing her movements on a map results in a diagram that is not dissimilar to a dance step diagram (fig. 5.14), which further highlights the connection between her drifting and her dancing: she is drifting because she refuses to let go of her dancing dream but at the same time her apparently aimless drifting is part of a whole, each one of her moves make up an elaborate step that symbolises her road into adulthood.
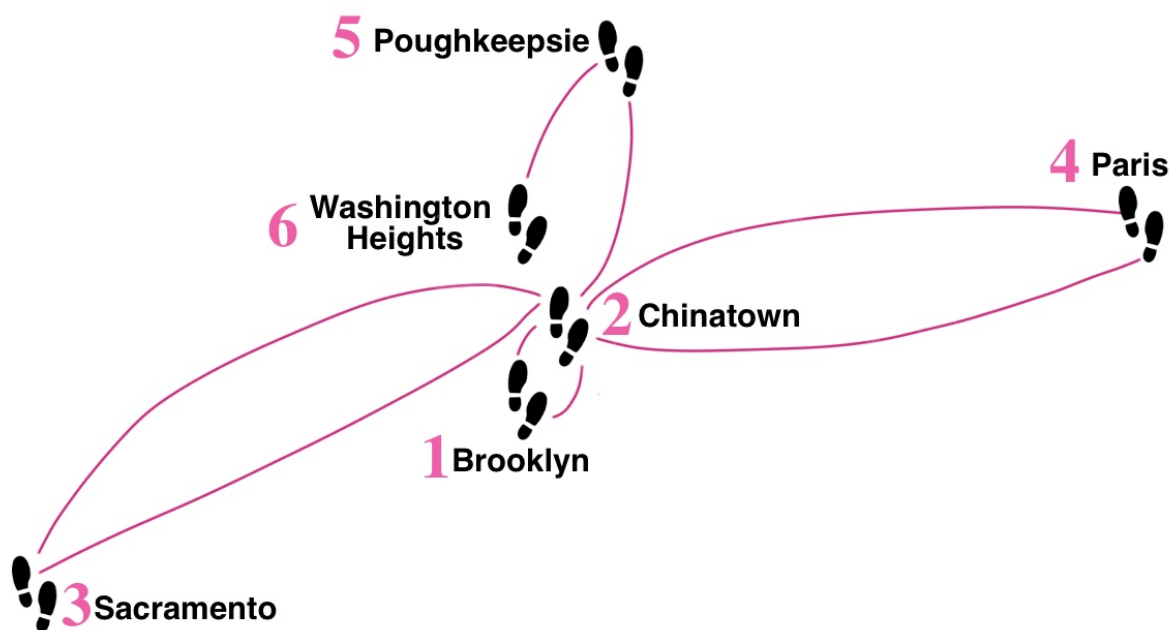
5 Poughkeepsie

4 Paris

6 Washington Heights

2 Chinatown

1 Brooklyn

3 Sacramento

Fig. 5.14. Frances' movements look like a dance step diagram.

5.3.2 Moving downwards and backwards in order to move on

Frances' drifting takes her to what we can assume were the two most influential places in her past: her parents' home and her university. As we saw in Chapter Four, homecoming narratives often see the protagonists returning home in the middle of a personal crisis. This is also the case for Frances, who travels to Sacramento for Christmas not because she wants to spend the holidays with her family, but because the dance company does not need her for the Christmas shows and she was reliant on that income to pay rent. Homeless and unemployed, Frances puts her meagre possessions in a storage unit and flies back home, defeated. Her trip is, therefore, not a celebratory one, which is underscored in the scene that immediately precedes it. Frances takes her possessions to a storage unit that is located underground. We see her going down in a cage-like lift, standing next to a chair and a handful of boxes and a Christmas wreath (fig. 5.15). The festive decoration contrasts with the bleak setting and the hopelessness of the protagonist's

situation, who seems to be trapped in a cell that is taking her down to a lower level, signalling the step back that she has taken as far as her transition to adulthood is concerned. This leap downwards is also emphasised when she arrives in Sacramento and a long shot shows her going down an escalator. The signs above her have upward-pointing arrows that serve as a reminder that the direction she is following is the opposite of the one that she is expected to follow.

Fig. 5.15. Homelessness makes Frances take a step back in her transition to adulthood.

The tiny space that her possessions take up in the lift highlights the fact that she is nowhere close to a settled life. Adulthood is often associated with the purchase of durable, quality home goods, like expensive cooking utensils or bedding with a high thread count[12]. These items signal the person's willingness to stay in one place and to make a home, as well as their purchasing power. In contrast, Frances does not even own any furniture except for a tattered chair that she has to give up because it will not fit in her storage unit. Her trying to push the chair into a space where it does not fit can be read as her attempt to

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[12] High thread count bedding is often alluded to as an item that positions those who own it as adults. For instance, in *Lola Versus*, the protagonist jokes that her thread count is two, firmly positioning herself as a non-adult. Similarly, in *Obvious Child* the protagonist jokes that the person her ex left her for probably has a thread count.

become a dancer. Like the chair, Frances has seen better days and she keeps trying to fit somewhere—the dance company—where there is no room for her. Eventually, she gives up and leaves the chair outside with a sign that says the chair "needs a home," which underscores the parallel between the discarded chair and the now homeless protagonist.

Homecoming films usually include conflict between the protagonists and their peers and family and set their present selves in opposition with their past selves, but in *Frances Ha*, the focus is not on this reevaluation of her steps towards adulthood. Instead, the Sacramento montage presents her return home as a joyful moment that allows her to be a part of something and to be looked after. The focus is on human contact and community, showing the protagonist as part of something, which contrasts with her life in New York, where she is no longer part of the dance company or of the daily lives of her friends. Before going home—and immediately after she is fired—she asks Sophie to be a part of her family. Seeing her with her actual family gives the spectator a glimpse into Frances' childhood and adolescence, which one assumes was characterised by a sense of togetherness that contrasts with her current isolation. Frances' joy during these scenes suggests that she is a person who thrives when surrounded by others, which makes her current situation even bleaker. The use of lighting highlights this contrast between community and isolation: Christmas lights give the scenes a warm glow that is nowhere to be found in her New York life. The cheerful tone of the montage is undermined by some of the actions taking place in it. We see Frances shopping with her mother and at the dentist's, which reminds the spectator that her financial situation is so dire that she needs to rely on her parents for something as basic as buying a new pair of jeans. The illusion of happiness, which is emphasised by the use of bright and cheerful non-diegetic music, is only broken momentarily. The music stops while Frances bathes, lingering in the bath too long until her mother knocks on the door and asks her how long she is going to be in there. A close-up

shows Frances' concerned look while she stares at the ceiling (fig. 5.16), suggesting that the question "how long?" does not only apply to the time it takes for her to bathe but, rather, to the time it is taking her to grow up.

Fig. 5.16. A close-up makes Frances' concern evident and reminds the spectator that her trip back home is not as happy as rest of the Sacramento sequence suggests.

Frances' second move backwards takes her to Vassar, where she finds a job as a resident advisor and server hoping that she will be able to take dance lessons again, which she is not allowed to do because she lacks student status. Her move to Poughkeepsie represents an attempt to recapture a moment that has long passed, along with the sense of possibility that the in-betweenness of college afforded her. The realisations that Frances has during these backwards moves are not made explicit, but they manifest themselves at the end of the film. By visiting her alma mater Frances realises that going back is not an option and that she is now old enough to teach other adults, while her time at home serves as a reminder that she is at her happiest when she is a part of something larger than herself. The end of the film sees Frances rehearsing her choreography with dancers who do not seem to be much younger than herself. Both during rehearsal and during the performance her facial expressions reveal the sense of joy and self-fulfilment that she feels being able to

be part of a community again (fig. 5.17). Frances' drifting, despite being either unplanned or poorly thought out, has allowed her to draw lessons about herself, about what makes her happy and what she can do, that eventually lead to maturity and self-realisation.

Fig. 5.17. Frances' joy at being part of something again and being able to dance to her own tune (*bottom*) contrasts with the sense of isolation conveyed by the scenes where she is an understudy and has to follow somebody else's moves (*top*).

5.3.3 Not what dreams are made of: Adapting fantasies into reality

Frances is a woman with a dream that is slipping through her fingers. At 27, she is close to becoming an eternal apprentice, always on her way somewhere but never reaching her destination. However, she is reluctant to let go of her fantasies, trying to reach them even after it has become clear that they will never materialise. After her boss offers her an office job and assumes that her not making it to the company means that she will stop trying, Frances claims that she is "really close to getting something." When Sophie starts a committed relationship Frances fails to take it seriously, suggesting that her friend dates somebody else and claiming that the two of them are undateable. Frances is reluctant to

face up to the fact that she is reaching an age in which one is expected to take the first steps towards stability. She claims that she "has trouble leaving places," which, given the ease with which she moves, suggests that what she really has trouble leaving is the fantasy that she has created for herself.

The use of music highlights the dissonance between Frances' dreams and her reality. Non-diegetic music plays through the scenes that are aligned with her hopes and dreams, whereas those scenes in which Frances has to face reality lack music. The film, then, alternates between an often idealised portrayal of young adulthood as a carefree time and the emptiness felt when reality kicks in. Music plays when Frances shares happy moments with those she loves and when something that she perceives as positive happens to her. At the beginning of the film, the use of music is tightly linked to her relationship with Sophie and their apparently idyllic life together. Music plays as we see the two friends laughing and behaving playfully, but it stops whenever something that constitutes an obstacle to their bliss comes up. Later on, music suggests her happiness at the idea of living together with Lev and Benji. "Domicile Conjugal,"[13] which translates as "marital home," plays when Frances says the night spent with Lev and Benji was the best she has had since Sophie left her. In contrast, moments which depict a harsher reality, like her break-up or her conversations with her boss, lack music. At times the use of music is comically incongruous. For instance, a triumphant tune plays as Frances goes to the bank to cash her tax rebate cheque, giving the impression that a small amount of money could solve all her problems. Similarly, when she moves in with Lev and Benji Frances is shown running and dancing down the street to David Bowie's "Modern Love," an upbeat song that matches the feeling of energy and happiness conveyed by her attitude and by the fast camera

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[13] This song appears in the soundtrack to *Domicile Conjugal* (François Truffaut, 1970), a film about a love triangle. This further aligns the song with Frances' new context, living with two men that she refers to as her "two husbands."

movements that follow her as she makes her way to her new home (fig. 5.18). However, this exuberant motion is undermined by the song lyrics, which suggest that she has not changed despite her movement and that she has failed to "wave bye-bye" to her old ways.

Fig. 5.18. Frances runs and dances home to the sound of David Bowie's "Modern Love."

An even more ironic moment comes when Frances travels to Paris on a whim. Frances, who has consistently shown a lack of interest in romantic love, travels to the city of love on her own. She decides to go there after an awkward party in which a couple she just met offer her their apartment, an offer that was nothing but a societal nicety that Frances takes at face value. At this dinner party Frances finds out that Sophie is moving to Japan with her boyfriend Patch (Patrick Heusinger). Her decision to go to Paris may be read as an attempt to gain entrance into Sophie's world, where social capital is conveyed through openness and cosmopolitanism (Michael 2013). Her trip to Paris is accompanied by the song "Every 1's a Winner" by Hot Chocolate, which plays throughout her time there with the exception of two moments that send her back to reality by highlighting the fact that her trip was a terrible idea: when she cannot sleep and takes a sleeping pill that results in her sleeping through most of her day in Paris and when she receives a call from Sophie inviting her to her goodbye party that same weekend. Although the film makes consistent use of French music, the trip to Paris eschews it, challenging the spectator's expectations in a way that mirrors Frances' unmet expectations and her inability to keep up her optimism in the face of adversity (Dorrian 2020, 9). The song accentuates the fact that, at this point,

Frances is definitely not winning. She has travelled halfway around the world and she is as lonely and messy as she was in New York. Besides, she lacks the time and the means to fulfil a romanticised idea of cosmopolitan selfhood through travel.

The song does not fit in its setting or context, which contributes to a deromanticised portrayal of Paris. Like the song, Frances does not fit in, jet lag has rendered her out of sync with the rhythm of the city just like she is out of sync with Sophie and her circle. Earlier on, Frances said Paris must be magic but, once there, the city is not working its magic on her. Frances walks around aimlessly, completely oblivious to her surroundings, walking past the city's landmarks without even casting a glance at them, sometimes with her back to them (figs. 5.19-20). A very telling shot (figs. 5.21-22) shows Frances trying to light a cigarette and failing. When she gives up and begins moving, the Eiffel Tower appears behind her, but she never looks at anything beyond her own concerns. Paris is nothing but a backdrop to her suffering, and she looks remarkably unsatisfied with her own situation. This sequence brings to the fore Frances' attempts to hide her disappointments under a veneer of optimism, which, as Ryan Dorrian argues, can be read as a critique of the neoliberal drive to favour positivity and repress negativity (Dorrian 2020, 9).

Figs. 5.19-22. Frances is too concerned with her problems to appreciate the beauty of Paris' landmarks.

It can be argued that the film's soundtrack allows us an insight into the protagonist's subjectivity and into the way in which she wants to narrativise her own life. The marked exclusion of contemporary music in favour of songs that were composed well before her time positions Frances as a nostalgic individual who has trouble letting go of the past, which can be seen throughout the film in her struggles to discard her dreams. At the same time, the use of songs from other films, such as *Le Mépris* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963) or *King of Hearts* (Philippe de Broca, 1966) suggests that Frances sees herself as a character in a movie, which highlights the element of fantasy that permeates her worldview. The use of music thus begins as a tool to highlight Frances' idealisation of her friendship with Sophie. Once Sophie disappoints her, music punctuates the moments when Frances feels—or wants to make herself feel—hopeful about the future or her present situation. The film concludes with a scene that shows Frances in her new home, opening her arms wide and adding her name to the letterbox, claiming this new space as one that is finally her own. Compared to the apartment she shared with Sophie or with Lev (Adam Driver) and Benji (Michael Zegen), this one may look like a downgrade, but what looks like a shabbier apartment in a less hip neighbourhood represents success for the protagonist, which is suggested by the bright, warm light that enters through the window, something that was missing from her previous living arrangements. The camera pulls in on Frances' face as she looks at her studio apartment, highlighting the look of pride in her face (fig. 5.23). Then a point of view shot shows the almost empty apartment (fig. 5.24), emphasising the fact that this is the first home that is truly her own. Up until this point, the spectator has not been able to see any of her other apartments from Frances' point of view, suggesting that she might have been looking at them through other people's eyes, as a representation of a life that is not her own, but rather of other people's success, coolness or homemaking skills.

Figs. 5.23-24. Frances' apartment may not look like much compared to Lev and Benji's, but it is her own.

This scene is accompanied by "King of Hearts le Repos," a song that has played earlier on in the film and whose use is symbolic of Frances' achievements. At the beginning of the film, Sophie and Frances lie in bed and Sophie tells Frances a fictionalised account of their lives, a fairytale in which they are both famous and successful and co-own an apartment in Paris. The use of this song again at the end of the film illustrates the protagonist's redefinition of what success means to her. She has exchanged her dreams for a less idealised, more realistic version, one that, as the music suggests, has been fulfilled. The final shot shows Frances finding out that the sign with her name on it is too big for her

letterbox and leaving part of her surname out, showing only the first two letters (Ha) (fig. 5.25). This simple action encapsulates Frances' growth and her new-found ability to adapt her expectations to her circumstances. The emphasis on flexibility and adaptability to change as the key to success, which is down to the individual (Shearer 2021, 405), echoes Beck's theory of individualisation (1992) and Bauman's writings on the fluidity of contemporary life ([2000] 2012, 2007), making *Frances Ha* a story about attempting to reach stability in the face of uncertainty.

Fig. 5.25. Frances' adaptability and flexibility are key in her transition to adulthood.

5.3.4 Love is a losing game

Frances Ha is largely unconcerned with romantic love, which is rare among emerging adult films. Hilary Radner analyses the film as a "girl crush" film, a female version of the bromance in which female friendship, rather than heterosexual romance, allows the protagonist to mature (2017, 139), while Martha Shearer reads the film as a post-romcom in which friendship and the pursuit of an artistic career displace romantic love (2021, 402-403). As I have argued at the beginning of my analysis, the narrative is

structured around Frances' often misguided attempts to hold on to her two dreams: a life together with Sophie and her career aspirations. Frances has fallen prey to the "do what you love" ethos and seems to believe that she will eventually become a dancer if only she tries hard enough or for long enough. Additionally, her lack of interest in coupledom—together with her self-centredness—leads her to assume that Sophie will want the same in life. As Shearer argues, the film is concerned with the protagonist's frustration when her fantasies turn out to be out of her reach (2021, 403). In order to understand that she needs to discard and replace her dreams, Frances must come to two realisations: that one must evolve as time goes by, and that love and passion alone are no guarantee of success.

Frances must become aware of the fact that, in order to hold on to the creative dream one needs money as well as passion. At the beginning of the film Frances naively—and selfishly—believes that everybody around her is in the same situation as her and wants the same from life. However, the dissonance between Frances' and Sophie's perceptions of their friendship and living arrangement is underscored visually. The film's opening sequence, a montage that shows Frances and Sophie's life together, initially comes across as a romanticised celebration of their friendship, which is highlighted both by the lively, upbeat music that ties it together and by their joyful playfulness. The two friends are seen running around together, playing music and dancing, pretend fighting, playing games together and sharing their daily activities. However, there are already glimpses of the tension between them. For instance, Sophie is seen working out while Frances reads a magazine and eats crisps, insinuating that Frances' lifestyle is less mature (fig. 5.26). Their co-dependency is illustrated by a shot that shows them sleeping in the same bed, while the fact that Sophie has gone to sleep while Frances is still awake looking at her computer highlights their differing lifestyles once again (fig. 5.27). At the same time, the music, which as we have already seen is related to Frances' fantasies and optimism regarding her

life, stops as soon as we see them in bed. When Frances looks at Sophie and says "I should sleep in my own bed," the protagonist is facing the reality that the rest of the sequence tried to negate: that they are no longer a perfect match. Their different position regarding their friendship is also conveyed through framing when the two of them are smoking with their heads out of the windows. Sophie is framed behind bars (fig. 5.28), while Frances is not (fig. 5.29), which suggests that Sophie has outlived their living arrangement, which now constrains her options.

Figs. 5.26-5.29. Despite the idealisation of their friendship, they are shown as opposites.

Sophie's evolution, her move and her relationship with Patch, highlight the importance of money in order to move up in the city. She moves to Tribeca, a neighbourhood that Frances cannot afford, and asks her parents to pay the broker's fee, something that Frances cannot do. Once Sophie moves out, Frances is shown in an empty apartment, struggling to find cooking utensils and staring at a room that now only contains a laptop, a chair (the same one that she will discard later on) and a pile of books. Even the makeshift bookshelf made out of boxes belonged to Sophie. As I have argued before, the

protagonist's lack of possessions signals an unwillingness to settle down. A person whose life is constantly on the move needs to travel light. Nevertheless, it can also be read as an inability to settle down as a result of her precarious financial situation and her lack of financial support. Sophie owns enough things to make an apartment a home, but we do not know whose money has bought them. When Frances moves in with Lev and Benji, her naiveté is on full show when she believes that Lev's artistic pursuits—which are never made explicit or shown—pay well enough for him to afford an apartment in Manhattan, an extensive record collection or an Eames chair. One day, after Lev goes out, Frances says "he leaves so easily," which can be interpreted as a pun on "live," suggesting that it is Lev's money—not his motorbike—that allows him to live easily and connecting Frances' "trouble leaving places" with a lack of resources to do so. Whereas Frances does not see—or, rather, prefers not to see—other people's privilege and lives under the illusion that American society is a meritocracy, Sophie is aware of Lev's privilege and of the fact that it is money, rather than effort, that plays a vital role in one's success. While Frances thinks the apartment's decor is down to Lev's skills when it comes to "finding" things, Sophie sees the apartment as a "total rich kid apartment" and "very aware of itself".

Everybody that Frances perceives as an equal is economically superior to her. She sees a kindred spirit in Benji, a supposedly broke aspiring writer who busies himself getting drunk and writing TV and film scripts that he never finishes. However, Benji spends the money he gets from his stepdad on expensive headphones and vintage sunglasses and thinks getting fired is "cool," which makes Frances realise that the broke life of a bohemian hipster is neither broke nor within her reach. Similarly, her stay with Rachel constitutes another rude awakening. Although Rachel is a dancer in the same company as her, she frequents the same circles as Sophie: people with lucrative careers whose ability to travel positions them as a cultural elite. Sophie is moving to Japan with

Patch, whose family also took them on holiday to the Galapagos. Sophie's trip upsets Frances, who says "I am also going on vacation. A long one. I'll set up my e-mail so it sends out a vacation e-mail. My voicemail will also say I'm on vacation. So if you get that, Sophie, don't worry, I'm on vacation." Her reaction emphasises Frances' anger at having lost Sophie and her frustration with the discovery that those around her have access to a kind of privilege that she lacks.

When faced with the fact that she is below her peers in socio-economic terms, Frances reacts by trying to access their world by travelling to Paris and reading Proust, decisions that she makes on a whim after being allowed a glimpse into Sophie's new world. Right after the dinner she says that maybe she should learn French first and then read Proust in French. What Frances is trying to do here is access what Elizabeth Currid-Halkett calls the aspirational class, a cultural elite that defines itself not by their inherited fortune but through "cultural signifiers that convey their acquisition of knowledge and value system" (2017, 18). While she is in Paris Frances is reading *Swann's Way*, which deals with fear of abandonment and the relationship between fantasy and reality, the exact same problems that Frances is dealing with. Her choice of book, then, emphasises both her willingness to be seen as sophisticated by others and the fact that she cannot run away from her problems. Her trip to Paris can therefore be read as a reaction to a fear of being left behind, both in emotional and social terms. As Sophie gets involved with a wealthier man, Frances' situation becomes more and more precarious, which helps her to face the truth regarding people's resources, resulting in a new found awareness of the possibility of downward mobility.

It is this realisation that allows Frances to modify her hopes and dreams in a way that suit her skills and resources, which leads to her taking steps towards adult independence. Like *High Fidelity*'s Rob, Frances has grown tired of a fantasy. In her case, the fantasy of

an artist's life in New York City. Sharing a living space with different types of individuals —a career woman, two aspiring artists and a dancer—she has learnt that nobody is making it on their own: Sophie depends on her parents to move to Tribeca and on her boyfriend's job and family to travel to exotic places, Benji and Lev are able to lead what looks like a bohemian life thanks to their families' resources and Rachel's lifestyle, although never described in detail, is also out of Frances' reach. Additionally, through her trip to Vassar she learns that her options are not as wide as they used to be when she was a student and, through a chance meeting with Sophie, that money cannot buy happiness and that other people's glitzy lives also hide unhappiness and dissatisfaction, which is also underscored during her depressing trip to Paris, which is neither chic nor romantic. By accepting her comparative lack of privilege and becoming realistic as far as her dancing skills and her chances to make it without financial help are concerned, Frances is able to refashion her goals into more realistic ones. By the end of the film, Frances is undoubtedly more settled down than when we first met her: she has a place of her own, she has a job that not only pays the bills but also allows her to use the facilities to work on her passion, and she has managed to build supportive relationships with those around her. The film is realistic in that it refuses to offer a fairy-tale ending in which Frances gets her dream job or moves into the hippest neighbourhood. At the same time, it also refuses to give Frances a romantic happy ending with Benji, who has implied that he has feelings for her. In doing so, the film rejects traditional settling down narratives that culminate in a change that is perceived as permanent—such as a dream job, the perfect apartment or a wedding—and portrays adulthood as the beginning of the next movement in the dance of life. Frances' new apartment and job may not be forever, but they seem to have put an end to the protagonist's meandering, suggesting that her future movements will be more deliberate.

5.4 Different generations, different challenges?

The protagonists of both of the films analysed share a lot despite their differences in age, gender and generation. Both Rob and Frances are lagging behind some of their peers as far as their transition to adulthood is concerned. Rob's inability to truly commit, together with his investment in the music world, prevent him from establishing more mature bonds, while in Frances' case it is her attachment both to her friend and to an unachievable dream that prevents her from putting down roots. By the end of the films, both characters have taken steps towards commitment and greater maturity in their personal and professional lives. Both of them find a different spin on their professional lives by adopting a mentoring position and giving back to those coming after them, which reflects their growing sense of maturity and an awareness of their age, abilities and possibilities. As far as their emotional lives are concerned, both Rob and Frances learn to respect and value those with different tastes and lifestyles. Additionally, Rob is also willing to make a long-term commitment to his partner, showing a willingness to finally settle down and to stop idealising romantic new beginnings.

Keeping these similarities in mind brings into question whether these films are representative of their generation or whether a generational analysis is productive at all. A longitudinal analysis of emerging adult films from 1990 until 2019 reveals that many of the genre's defining features, all of which can be observed in *High Fidelity* and *Frances Ha*, remain constant. For instance, their protagonists are overwhelmingly white, heterosexual and middle-class, and almost every film has a romantic plot of some sort—including those that, like *Frances Ha*, reject romanticism. Over half of the films[14] are set in cities, and many of the ones that are not begin and end in a city even if most of the action takes place

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[14] See Appendix B for more detailed information on the data presented in this section.

elsewhere. Journeys are also common across the three decades, and sometimes—as in *Frances Ha*—they function as a metaphor for the protagonists' road to adulthood. There is some variation regarding the ages of the protagonists. In the 1990s there are no emerging adult protagonists in their thirties. However, this can be blamed on the fact that the core of Generation X entered their 30s in the 2000s. The 2010s saw a fall in the number of films with protagonists in their early 20s, marking a turn towards a focus on late emerging adulthood. 75% of the protagonists are at least in their late 20s, which carries narrative consequences such as a lack of emphasis on the group of friends and more stress on the individual and on smaller circles, a marked increase in the number of films that feature conflict with characters the same age who are more grown up and a much greater tendency towards growth at the end of the narrative. Along with this growth comes the need for the characters to let go or something, usually an unattainable dream, childish behaviour or a toxic attachment. These changes reflect a tendency for the millennial generation to take a longer time to undergo the transition to adulthood, which may be blamed on the socio-economic context of the 2000s and 2010s, particularly on the Great Recession and its aftermath.

The issue of authenticity runs through *High Fidelity*, which helps to establish the film as a Generation X text. Generation X emerging adult films are more likely to be concerned with the issue of authenticity and selling out, which reflects the cultural impact of alternative culture and indie rock in the 1990s. Some, like *Airheads* (Michael Lehmann, 1994) and *Empire Records* (Allan Moyle, 1995), deal with the corporate takeover of the music industry, which is also mentioned in passing in *High Fidelity* when Rob threatens to close the shop and work at a Virgin Megastore instead. In the 1990s alternative culture was popular, but it was also co-opted by the mainstream, which is another preoccupation that runs through these films. In *Reality Bites* (Ben Stiller 1995) the protagonist's documentary

about her life is sold to an MTV-like channel, where it is edited in a way that manipulates Lelaina's (Winona Ryder) story. This concern with the media, authenticity and media depictions of the protagonists' generation can also be seen in *S.F.W* (Jefery Levy, 1994), which satirises MTV and the cult of celebrity. Reflections on the construction of identity through the media are mostly absent from millennial emerging adult films, although recent films like *Ingrid Goes West* (Matt Spicer, 2017), which focuses on and criticises the figure of the influencer, may signal a turn towards a greater focus on the mediated self in the future. It is worth noting that, where Generation X characters—like *High Fidelity*'s Rob— are eager to stay true to their subcultural identity and worry about selling out, millennial characters—like Frances—tend to worry about how to make it or how to have enough money, changes that reflect both the harsher economic landscape that millennials have to navigate in their twenties and thirties and the current lack of popularity of alternative rock and other subcultures where authenticity and integrity are key.

Another shift that is related to generational differences and that can be observed in both of the films analysed is the relationship with parents. Parents are absent from 68% of emerging adult films made in the 1990s, a figure that goes down to less than 36% in the 2010s. This variation reflects several generational differences between Generation X and millennials. Perhaps most obviously, it signals the fact that, as was explained in Chapter Four, millennials have moved back home in record numbers: 46% of the films made in the 2010s feature a return to the parental home, compared to only 19% in the 1990s. Another significant difference is that, in those 1990s films that included a depiction of family dynamics, none of the characters had a good relationship with their parents. In contrast, 25% of the films made in the 2010s present good parental relationships, which suggests that parents of millennials are closer to their children, many of whom consider them friends (Fingerman 2017). The experience of Generation X tends to differ from that of

millennials. High divorce rates, along with women's incorporation into the workplace, made many Xers latchkey kids who were often left home unsupervised with the television as their babysitter (Strauss and Howe 1991, 324), which contrasts with the heavily scheduled lives of the college-focused childhoods of millennial children (Harris 2017, Petersen 2021) and accounts for the absence of Xer's parents in emerging adult narratives. In *Frances Ha*, the protagonist's trip back home reflects this tendency for millennial characters to have a better relationship with their parents. Frances' parents are happy to lend her a hand whenever possible, and both parents and daughter seem happy to spend time together. In contrast, *High Fidelity* presents a more distant relationship between Rob and his parents. Even though their appearance in the film is limited to a phone conversation between Rob and his mother, the scene reveals her exasperation and frustration at her son's inability to settle down.

There has also been a relevant gender shift in emerging adult films. Whereas only 16% of the films made in the 1990s have female protagonists, over 60% of the protagonists in the 2010s are young women. Although there were some emerging adult films with women as protagonists before the 2010s, more often than not women were there to help the protagonist grow up or to tell him off for not being mature enough. The success of *Bridesmaids* (Paul Feig, 2011) and *Young Adult* (Jason Reitman, 2011) at the beginning of the decade, together with the lauded but controversial TV show *Girls* (HBO, 2011-2017) represented the beginning of a new wave of emerging adult film that draws from Claudia Weil's *Girlfriends* (1978) and Nicole Holofcener's *Walking and Talking* (1996) and places the focus on women's experiences navigating the transition to adulthood or, rather, womanhood. This shift is matched by a large increase in films directed and written by women. In the 1990s and 2000s the numbers were meagre: only 12% of emerging adult films made in the 1990s and 19% of those made in the 2000s were directed by women.

Women received writing credits in 29% of the 1990s films, with the 2000s showing a slight decrease to 25%. In stark contrast, 31% of emerging adult films made in the 2010s were directed by women, while almost 60% have women writers. Both *High Fidelity* and *Frances Ha* reflect these changes: *High Fidelity*, a film with a male protagonist, was written and directed by men, whereas *Frances Ha* was co-written by Noah Baumbach and Greta Gerwig, who also plays the film's protagonist. According to data from the Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film (Lauzen 2021), only 7% of the 100 top-grossing films between 2015 and 2019 were directed by women, and just 14% were written by women. While there is a marked tendency towards greater inclusivity in Hollywood (the percentage of top-grossing women-directed films went up from 4% in 2018 to 16% in 2020), the growth of emerging adult films with women at their centre—whether it is as protagonists, directors of writers—is much greater and can be argued to reflect other changes. It may indicate an exhaustion of the slacker trope that became popular in the 1990s and lingered until the late 2000s or the reinvention of typically women-centric genres that suffered at the box office during the past decade, like the romantic comedy or the chick flick (Cobb and Negra 2017, Oria 2021b). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it signals the millennial generation's struggle to reach adulthood, extending emerging adulthood to a wider array of protagonists than ever before.

Both *High Fidelity* and *Frances Ha* possess characteristics that position them as generational texts. *High Fidelity*'s focus on authenticity, alternative culture and slackers, along with its depiction of poor parental relationships mark it as a Generation X film. *Frances Ha*, like many other millennial films, is concerned with women's transitions to adulthood. At the same time, its emphasis on precarious employment and living arrangements showcases the greater difficulties that millennials have had to face going through emerging adulthood in a post-recessionary landscape. Finally, the protagonist's

relationship with her parents, which is one of support and understanding, reflects millennials' need to rely on parental support for a longer time, as well as their tendency to be close to their parents. Despite these generational differences, both films are bound together by a focus on the challenges that the transition to contemporary adulthood presents for the protagonists. Adulthood is portrayed as de-standardised and individualised, as a tortuous route with no fixed destination in sight where each individual must choose the version of adulthood that best fits their personality. Traditional adulthood is not depicted as the end-all but, rather, as one choice among many in the choose your own adventure book that is the transition to adulthood today. A generational approach to these films is limited in that it fails to acknowledge that the difficulties that the protagonists must overcome are, for the most part, not strictly generational but part of a larger whole. The societal shifts that have been outlined at the beginning of this chapter affect and will continue to affect all generations, and those who are beginning to stand on their own two feet feel the consequences in a particularly acute way.

5.5 Conclusion

High Fidelity and *Frances Ha* have much in common despite the generational differences mentioned in the previous section. At their core, both films are about settling down: about refusing or failing to settle down, about settling down and being unhappy, about the feeling of abandonment felt when a close friend settles down and changes their lifestyle and, most of all, about rejecting traditional settling down narratives and finding your own way into adulthood. Settling down is elusive and can no longer be marked by marriage, parenthood, a job for life or a house in the suburbs. As we saw at the beginning of the chapter, for many young adults these markers have become either undesirable or

incredibly difficult to achieve. The two films reflect the growing irrelevance of these markers by offering alternative modes of adulthood in which marriage is not a requisite to a settled down life. In *High Fidelity* marriage is deemed non-essential and even laughable, while *Frances Ha* does not even consider coupledom as indispensable. Frances' commitment is to herself and her self-fulfilment comes through her passion and her independence, rather than through a romantic relationship.

In the realm of work, both films emphasise individual solutions to the protagonists' problems, promoting neoliberal ideals of choice, flexibility and self-enterprise (McGuigan 2014). Their problems—Rob's dissatisfaction and Frances' lack of success in the dance world—are not seen within a context that emphasises the conditions of contemporary life and work that may lead to a lack of satisfaction or success. Instead, these problems occur because the protagonists are failing to maximise their assets. In this case Rob's music taste allows him to pick out bands with a fresh sound, whereas Frances' spontaneity and creativity help her to put together an original choreography. Additionally, both films reflect the "do what you love" ethos. Both protagonists have or pursue careers related to their passion and they both criticise those who do not. Laura's job as a lawyer is one of the obstacles that lead to their break-up, while Frances criticises her friend Sophie for not reading for pleasure even though she works at Random House.

A key difference between the two films is the fact that in *High Fidelity* Rob's financial situation, although not ideal, does not seem to be as precarious as Frances'. Her position is much more desperate and it reflects the changes in the workplace that were mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, like the prevalence of unpaid internships and temporary jobs and the resulting uncertainty. Even Sophie, whose job at Random House pays well enough for her to move to Tribeca, needs her parents' financial help to pay the broker's fee, which highlights that the difficulty to access housing extends to those with

"good" jobs while placing an emphasis on the role that privilege plays on the transition to adulthood. *Frances Ha* reflects the challenges of becoming an adult in a post-recessionary landscape, and its focus on self-actualisation falls in line with Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker's contention that recessionary culture is characterised by "a proliferation of recuperative, capital-friendly narratives that call on the working class to deal privately rather than publicly with economic exigencies" (2014, 25).

Love is depicted as temporary in both films. In *Frances Ha*, Lev collects one-night stands like he collects records, expensive chairs or photos with celebrities, which emphasises the prevalence of casual sex and the commodification of relationships. Both films highlight the lack of rules regarding relationships and the difficulty to communicate effectively with one's partner. For instance, Frances thinks her boyfriend is breaking up with her when he is not, a misunderstanding that in turn leads to a break up. Fear of commitment also runs through both films: Frances' refusal to move in with her boyfriend is the disagreement that initiated their break-up, while Rob's difficulty to truly commit to Laura constitutes a problem in *High Fidelity*. At the same time, romantic love is presented in a deromanticised manner. Although Sophie ends up marrying Patch, she drunkenly confesses that she does not want to marry him and that she is not "engaged *engaged*," suggesting at best ambivalence towards lifelong commitment and, at worst, that her marriage may be a mistake. The importance of marriage is also undermined in *High Fidelity* when Laura does not accept Rob's proposal, which suggests the institution's obsolescence. While in *High Fidelity* emotional growth goes hand in hand with romantic success, *Frances Ha* eschews this approach and presents self-realisation outside of the couple, leaving the door open to alternative modes of living outside coupledom.

Narratives of settling down then place the emphasis on the trial and error process undergone by the protagonists, and maturity is not measured by rites of passage, the

attainment of material wealth or possessions or the rejection of youthful tastes and behaviours in favour of those considered more mature. Instead, maturity is shown through the protagonists' psychological evolution: their growing acceptance of those who have chosen different paths, their financial and emotional independence, their ability to forge durable, meaningful bonds with others and their awareness of the place that they occupy in the world. In the films analysed, endings are happy but not overly celebratory. The end of the narrative does not see Frances or Rob as completely unrecognisable characters who have magically turned into paragons of adulthood. Both of them have learnt and evolved in the course of the films, but they both have more learning and evolving to do: Frances' apartment does not look like a home yet and, in *High Fidelity*, Laura explicitly tells Rob that he does not seem like the most trustworthy person. Adulthood is therefore not portrayed as a final form where no further development will be necessary but as the beginning of another chapter in life.

Conclusion

The emerging adult film has gone through several phases in its thirty years of existence, but, as has been demonstrated in this thesis, its core has remained unchanged throughout this period. As we saw in Chapter Three, films depicting early emerging adulthood are more likely to borrow teen film conventions, which also happens in many homecoming films like the ones described in Chapter Four. While in films dealing with emerging adulthood this borrowing emphasises the characters' young age, those where the protagonists are in their late twenties or beyond the scope of teen film conventions underscore the protagonists' excessive attachment to their past and a refusal to let go and move on to the next stage. But the presence of character types, settings or plots characteristic of the teen pic does not make these films teenage films. In some cases, as Chapter Three illustrated, the two genres overlap just like the two life stages they depict

do, but the challenges of emerging adulthood differ from those of adolescence and they result in challenges that are unique to this life stage and that largely make up the plots and narrative structures of the emerging adult film, such as the struggle to become financially and emotionally independent, finding a compromise between one's passion and a realistic career and figuring out what kind of person one would like to settle down with or whether coupled life is really what one desires.

As we saw in Chapter Five, these questions are often complicated by the fact that contemporary life is characterised by flexibility, temporality and precarity (Bauman 2001, 2007, [2000] 2012; Beck 1992). In addition, the protagonists are often blocked by unrealistic feelings regarding their career or by an excessive attachment to a creative dream that cannot be fulfilled. A feeling of stagnation permeates most of the films analysed in this thesis, which, given the emphasis placed in movement and flexibility today, positions the protagonists as unable to adapt to the rhythm of adult life. Sometimes, as in *Clerks* (Kevin Smith, 1994), stasis comes from a lack of interest in one's career. In other cases, as in *High Fidelity* (Stephen Frears, 2000) and *Young Adult* (Jason Reitman, 2011), it stems from the protagonists' attachment to their past and inability to reimagine their present. Conversely, other characters' source of suffering is in their attachment to their future: an imagined adult life that is at odds both with their present situation and their future prospects. That is the problem that plagues the protagonist in *Frances Ha* (Noah Baumbach, 2012). The same problems apply to the protagonists' sentimental lives: some of them are overly attached to exes that they associate with their adolescence or early emerging adulthood, while others keep their minds on the future. Some even crave the novelty of a new relationship and fear that, by committing, they may be closing doors to better options, which, as Beatriz Oria

argues, may result in an inability to take action motivated by the sheer number of possible romantic partners (Oria 2022, 78).

Adulthood is seen as a process of letting go, of shedding one's identity—or at least parts of it—and discarding one's dreams. This negative view of adulthood is emphasised by the protagonists' conflict with those who have followed a more straightforward route. Through these characters—who may be older or younger than the protagonists—adulthood is shown as standardised, boring and pretentious, as a never-ending chore that clashes with the spontaneity and freewheeling spirit of youth. Those protagonists who are interested in moving on face the challenge of figuring out how to forge their own path into adulthood, one that will allow them to reach more stability without compromising their identity. Although the protagonists' problems are not always solved by the end of the films, when they are it is often due to their flexibility and adaptability, through the repurposing of their passion into a different sort of creative endeavour that will allow them to both keep on doing what they love and earn money. Also part of this process is learning to accept that traditional routes into adulthood are a valid choice and that those who opt for them are not in fact materialistic, soulless drones. In short, the films favour an individualised transition to adulthood characterised by creativity, resourcefulness and initiative that can be read as an endorsement of neoliberal ideals of entrepreneurship, freedom and self-sufficiency (McGuigan 2014).

The emerging adult film across the world

Emerging adulthood is not unique to the U.S., and neither are its filmic representations. Although this thesis is concerned with representations of emerging adulthood in U.S. cinema, emerging adult films can be found across post-industrialised countries and, occasionally, in films from countries that may not have reached that stage but where some young people can afford to linger between the end of adolescence and the adoption of adult roles[1]. Emerging adult films across the world showcase many of the characteristics that have been described in this thesis. However, the challenges of emerging adulthood are not always the same across countries, and these differences are reflected in their emerging adult films. For instance, the Belarusian film *Crystal Swan* (Darya Zhuk, 2018) has an emerging adult protagonist who clashes both with the older generation and with people her own age who are moving faster into adulthood. The film emphasises movement through the protagonist's actual movement as well as through her desire to move to Chicago to pursue a career as a house DJ. So far, the film sounds very similar to the ones that have been described in this thesis. However, *Crystal Swan* is set in 1990s Belarus, immediately after the fall of the USSR, which affects both the film's plot—a convoluted attempt to get a U.S. visa—and its visual style.

The protagonist stands for modernity in a country that seems to be stuck in the past, which becomes obvious when Velya (Darya Zhuk) travels to a rural area and her fashionable and colourful style contrasts both with the bleakness of her environment and of the lives of those who live there (fig. 7.1). *Crystal Swan* depicts a country with stark borders and boundaries, both geographical and cultural, where the protagonist almost

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[1] For example, Kenyan film *Rafiki* (Wanuri Kahiu, 2018) is an emerging adult film.

seems to stand alone, trapped in a world where neither leaving nor living is easy. Besides showcasing generational conflict, the film also depicts a chasm between urban and rural youth, who lead more traditional lifestyles, lament the lack of rules after the fall of the Soviet Union and seem to have no options besides joining the army and getting married. Even their speech is different: the protagonist and her friends mark their modernity by inserting English expressions in their speech, but those growing up in rural areas neither use them nor understand them. All of these elements set the film apart from other emerging adult films, reflecting the unique challenges of the transition to adulthood in 1990s Belarus.

Fig. 7.1. *Crystal Swan* (Darya Zhuk, 2018) : Velya's feeling of estrangement in her own country is highlighted when she travels to a rural area.

European emerging adult films often emphasise free movement between EU countries, which sets them apart from U.S. depictions of emerging adulthood, which rarely feature protagonists that cross geographical borders. Some films focus on the experience of Erasmus students who spend a term or two abroad, which sometimes—as in the Spanish

film *Júlia Ist* (Elena Martín, 2017)—may be the first time the protagonist lives away from the parental home and therefore constitutes an important milestone as far as the transition to adulthood is concerned. European films also tend to feature migrants' experiences, which are practically absent in U.S. films. The German film *Club Europa* (Franziska M. Hoenisch, 2017) tackles the European refugee crisis of 2015 by telling the story of a group of twentysomething housemates from different countries who decide to take on a Cameroonian undocumented migrant as an act of goodwill. Although Samuel (Richard Fouofié Djimel) makes an effort to integrate into German culture, he still needs assistance to navigate German bureaucracy, which eventually becomes draining for his housemates. The film underscores the difference between "good" and "bad" immigrants. One of the protagonists, Jamie (Artjom Gilz), has no papers either, but that does not seem to faze him. Jamie, who is from California, is less eager to integrate into German society despite the fact that he has lived there longer: his German is not good enough and he is not familiar with some of the country's social aspects. Besides, he is selfish and oblivious to Samuel's situation: he refuses to accompany him to the immigration office because he hates going there, he talks Samuel into taking drugs for the first time and encourages him to buy expensive shoes instead of sending that money to his family. At the end of the film, Samuel is denied asylum seeker status and must leave Germany, which highlights the unfairness of the system and the fact that for unprivileged young adults the transition to adulthood is sometimes denied: Samuel is eager to learn and to work, but he is denied the opportunity. His drifting, unlike that of his housemates is neither temporary nor voluntary.

Migration features prominently in Spanish emerging adult films made after the Great Recession, reflecting the devastating consequences that it had for a generation of young

people who found themselves overeducated and underemployed and often had no choice but to leave (Murgia and Poggio, 2014; Domínguez-Mujica et al. 2016; Bessant et al. 2017). This exodus has even reached mainstream comedy, with *Off Course* (Nacho García Velilla, 2015) offering a humorous take on a sad reality: the fact that educated Spanish young people often emigrate to find a better life and, once they do, the jobs available to them are not on par with their qualifications. For underprivileged youth, like the protagonists of *Beautiful Youth* (Jaime Rosales, 2014), emigration is not precisely a walk in the park either. After Natalia (Ingrid García Jonsson) moves to Hamburg, leaving her baby behind, the only jobs that she can find are temporary. At first, her life in Hamburg offers glimmers of hope. While Madrid was depicted as a bleak place where there was no room to grow, what we see of her life in Hamburg shows her having fun, moving through the city and learning, which fosters hope for change and evolution. However, the relative optimism offered by these images is trumped by the final scene, which shows that temporality and precarity have led her to the same desperate measures that she had to resort to in Madrid: making porn films. The fact that those young adults whose parents cannot afford to support them struggle more than others is also alluded to in 1990s films like *Stories from the Kronen* (Montxo Armendáriz, 1995) and *Mensaka* (Salvador García Ruiz, 1998). Spanish emerging adults move away from the parental home at a later age (Moreno Mínguez 2003), which allows the spectator glimpses into their socio-economic background. Besides, while in U.S. emerging adult films the protagonists tend to socialise with those from their same class, in Spanish ones they often have friends from different social classes, which underscores the different challenges that those with fewer privileges have to face.

Emerging adult narratives are also common in some Asian countries. In Japan, new patterns in the transition to adulthood became noticeable after the economic bubble burst of the 1990s. As young people[2] moved into adulthood with fewer possibilities to obtain stable, full-time jobs, they were labelled the "lost generation." The media worried about "parasite singles:" twentysomethings who lived with their parents and were portrayed as spoilt, selfish and lacking the work ethic of the previous generations. There was also talk of "freeters," young people who seemed to prefer flexible, part-time jobs to a conventional career. As Brinton argues, it was not until the 21st century that these patterns were understood as the consequence of labour restructuring rather than a youthful lifestyle choice (Brinton 2011, Newman 2012). Japanese emerging adult films often show the protagonists living in close quarters with their parents. In *Kyoto Story* (Tsutomo Abe and Yôji Yamada, 2010), *Tamako in Moratorium* (Nobuhiro Yamashita, 2013), and *100 Yen Love* (Masaharu Take, 2014) the protagonists—and their parents—live in shophouses which are home both to the family business and to their living space, an arrangement that helps to highlight generational differences and the protagonists' interest in their parents' work. In *Tamako in Moratorium*, the mise-en-scène foregrounds the different work ethics of the protagonist and her father and, by extension, of their generations. An open door connects her father's office with their living room, where Tamako (Atsuko Maeda) is often seen eating, watching television and reading manga while her dad works in the background (fig. 7.2). The protagonist, who has moved back home after graduating from college, seems completely paralysed by what lies ahead of her to the point that she refuses to socialise with her peers and befriends a young neighbourhood boy instead.

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2 Or, rather, young men. Women were already experiencing high rates of non-regular employment. What happened in the 1990s is that, as Mary C. Brinton puts it, irregular employment became de-gendered (Brinton 2011).

Fig. 7.2. *Tamako in Moratorium* (Nobuhiro Yamashita, 2013): Tamako and her father live together, but their lifestyles are miles apart.

Tamako's isolation does not quite reach the complete social withdrawal, known as *hikikomori*, described and popularised by Saitō Tamaki in 1998, but it could develop into something similar. Tamaki describes hikikomori as an individual's decision to isolate oneself in their own home for six months or longer. This disorder is linked to the transition to adulthood in that it takes place during adolescence and emerging adulthood and can be seen as the result of a "failure to mature" (2013, 24-28). *100 Yen Love* shows a woman who has fallen deeper into social withdrawal. Ichiko (Sakura Ando) spends most of her time at home playing video games. She refuses to work, help her parents in their shop, socialise and look after her own heath and hygiene, which is emphasised by the film's very first shot: a close-up of her cracked and dry foot resting on a filthy coffee table full of empty bottles, cigarette butts and crumbs.

Both films show women who have chosen to withdraw, refusing to take on the roles that are expected of them. They live frozen in time, busying themselves with childish

hobbies like manga and video games and making themselves emotionally unavailable and, in the case of *100 Yen Love*, physically undesirable. Their refusal to let go of their adolescent selves and to make themselves emotionally and sexually available may be read as a choice not to comply with gender role expectations. Japanese society does not fare well as far as gender equality is concerned. In 2020, the country ranked 121 out of 153 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report. This inequality is reflected in the labour market: women bear the brunt of Japan's non-regular work, accounting for two thirds of non-regular workers in 2017. That is, even though the percentage of working women in Japan is high, their jobs are likely to be short-term and part-time[3]. Additionally, women often quit the workforce once they become mothers (MacNaughtan 2015, Jones and Seitani, 2019). Under these circumstances, achieving adult independence without the support of a parent or a partner becomes harder. The apathy and ennui of these protagonists may then be seen to represent a paralysis motivated by the difficulties that Japanese women face to make it on their own, a decision not to take part in a system that is rigged against them.

Similarly, South Korean films highlight issues that are more prevalent in Korean society than in others, like the pursuit of a job in the public sector as a way to guarantee future financial stability. South Korea's young adults go to university in very high numbers and graduate into a precarious labour market. In fact, university graduates face higher unemployment rates than those with a high school diploma. Under such pressure, a great number of university graduates choose to try their luck in the civil service and prepare for the lowest-rank civil service exams, which increased competition. These jobs, which used

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[3] In 2017, 55% of working women were engaged in non-regular work, compared to only 21.9% of working men (Jones and Seitani, 2019).

to be pursued almost exclusively by high school graduates, pay less than jobs in the private sector, but they offer more security (Song 2020). In *Our Body* (Han Ka-ram, 2018) a 31-year-old woman decides not to sit the civil service exam that she has been preparing for for 8 years and takes up temporary jobs instead much to the dismay of her family, while in *Our Midnight* (Lim Jung-eun, 2020) a job in the civil service is used to mark the protagonist's old university friend as an adult, emphasising the contrast between the security of a job in the public sector and the contingency of the protagonist's short-term contracts. Films with younger protagonists sometimes place the focus on the demands of the South Korean education system. In South Korea, gaining admission into one of the top three universities is seen as crucial for young people's future, which results in a competitive and stressful school experience that has been compared to child abuse (Koo, 2014; Santandreu Calonge, 2015). In *Twenty* (Lee Byeong-heon, 2015) the protagonists—a group of 20-year-old university students—blame the South Korean education system for their virginity and compare themselves with German teenagers, who, to their minds, have it easier and lose their virginity at an earlier age. *My Tutor Friend* (Kyeong-hyeong Kim, 2003) highlights the role that privilege plays in this race for education. In the film, a 21-year-old university student whose family has financial trouble tutors a privileged man her own age who is still in high school and behaves like a teenage delinquent. While privileged young people are allowed to linger and even fail without ever fearing for their future, those from less privileged backgrounds must not only excel themselves, but also help others to excel.

Israel's unique geopolitical circumstances lead to very different takes on emerging adulthood than those found anywhere else. First of all, Israeli society is more collectivist than U.S. society, which implies that communal and family values are held in higher

regard. Additionally, Israel has been involved in a significant number of political conflicts and wars with neighbouring territories—eight wars since its declaration of independence in 1948—contributing to a sense that one's life is in danger, which may lead to anxiety and stress. Finally, the majority of Jewish 18-year-olds serve compulsory military service for two to three years, which simultaneously places them in situations of high responsibility that may lead to greater maturity and delays the moment at which emerging adults begin exploring their options (Mayseless and Scharf 2003; Scharf and Mayseless 2010). *Zero Motivation* (Talya Lavie, 2014) portrays this experience in the Israel Defense Force as a paralysing and imprisoning experience.

In Between (Maysaloun Hamoud, 2016) offers a very different experience of emerging adulthood in Israel. The film focuses on the lives of three Palestinian young women who live together and their struggles to negotiate their identities as individuals beyond religious, familial and gender expectations. The film's title applies to the protagonists, whose inbetweenness is multilayered, in different ways. It reflects the protagonists' position between adolescence and adulthood, their status as a minority group in Israeli society and the tendency for Palestinian-Israeli young adults to "constantly vacillate between two paths: religions and Western" (Mahajna 2017, 300). Despite their differences, their protagonists are united in their need to challenge the cultural norms that they are expected to follow: Salma (Sana Jammalieh) struggles to come out to her parents, who are Christian and eager to see her marry; Laila's (Mouna Hawa) rejection of gender conventions both attracts and repulses her boyfriend and Nour (Shaden Kanboura), a young Muslim woman attending university, clashes both with her housemates, who lead a more liberated and alternative lifestyle, and with the expectations of her parents and fiancé,

who expect her to adhere to traditional gender roles. What the three women share, then, is their will to reach adulthood in their own terms, which, as we have seen, lies at the core of emerging adult films worldwide.

The emerging adult film comes of age

Now that it has reached the age of thirty, the emerging adult film should be reaching maturity. Each decade has given rise to a different type of emerging adult film. The nineties were characterised by generational portraits of groups of friends in their early twenties, cynicism and anti-commercialism. The noughties were a transitional decade during which both young Xers and older millennials[4] were emerging adults and mumblecore films co-existed with gross-out comedies like *Freddy Got Fingered* (Tom Green, 2001). In the 2010s, the decade when most of the millennial generation went through emerging adulthood, the genre boomed both in film and television. Its growing popularity may be due to the larger size of this generation compared to the previous one. However, I argue that other factors play a role in this growth. In the 2010s, emerging adult film protagonists are older than in the previous two decades, which reflects the increased difficulty to find adult stability after the Great Recession. The films make few explicit references to the economic context in which the protagonists have to negotiate their transition to adulthood, but the sheer number of emerging adult films made in the 2010s in

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[4] This group is often considered a micro-generation between Generation X and millennials. They are variously referred to as Xennials (Oelbaum and Stankorb, 2014), Generation Catalano (Shafrir 2011) and the Oregon Trail Generation (Garvey 2015). What sets them apart from core millennials is the fact that their childhoods and early teen years were mostly analogue and most of them did not have access to the internet until they were well into their adolescence or in their twenties.

comparison with the previous two decades suggests that adulthood is more out of reach than ever.

At the time of writing, the oldest millennials are 40 years old and the youngest are 25. What this implies is that in the 2020s the emerging adult film will go through a generational handover. Although the youngest members of Generation Z are still children, the oldest ones are currently going through emerging adulthood. In 2020, Zoomers began mocking millennial stereotypes and trends on TikTok, an extremely popular social networking app whose core users are teenagers (Strapagiel 2020). The fact that teenagers are constructing their identity in opposition to millennials is symptomatic of the fact that, as far as Zoomers are concerned, millennials are old news. At the beginning of this thesis, I quoted Douglas Coupland saying that the media's treatment of millennials was just like that of Generation X (Coupland 2014). In the past few months, the media have begun to focus on Generation Z's lack of work ethics and entitlement (Giangrande 2021, Goldberg 2021), which suggests that millennials are no longer the focus of tirades against young people and that Zoomers are going to suffer the same fate as the previous two generations, at least as far as their media treatment is concerned.

What this generational shift will mean for the emerging adult film is yet to be seen, but some speculations can be made. Zoomers are entering emerging adulthood in the middle of a pandemic and its subsequent economic recession, which will undoubtedly impact their transition to adulthood, possibly leading them to their future plans in the face of uncertainty and harming their employment opportunities. The novelty of this situation may lead to films that engage with the fear and anxiety provoked by an extremely uncertain and extraordinary situation, as well as to a greater emphasis in the depictions of

parental relationships influenced by the 2020 lockdowns and the remote college experiences that followed. The drive towards greater diversity that began to be felt in the 2010s is likely to continue, given the fact that Gen Z is the most ethnically diverse generation to date and the focus that popular culture has placed on representations of diversity in the past few years (Parker and Igielnik, 2020). As I mentioned in Chapter Two, even though emerging adult films as a whole still lack diversity, the past few years have seen releases that focus on the transition to adulthood of people of colour, who previously only made rare appearances as the protagonist's love interest in films like *Party Girl* (Daisy Von Scherler Mayer, 1995), where the protagonist dates a Lebanese immigrant, and *Scott Pilgrim Vs the World* (Edgar Wright, 2010), where one of the love interests is Asian-American.

In the UK, television representations of emerging adulthood have begun to focus on versions of emerging adulthood that differ from the white, middle-class, college-educated ones that are typical across U.S. emerging adult films. Michaela Coel's *Chewing Gum* (E4, 2015–2017) and *I May Destroy You* (HBO, 2020) depict the transition to adulthood of black British women and highlight sexual agency and trauma, respectively, while *We Are Lady Parts* (Channel 4, 2021–) offers a depiction of young Muslim women that is free from stereotypes and emphasises the diversity that there is to be found among a group that is often depicted monolithically. Recent British television shows also examine the transition to adulthood in rural areas, where young adults have fewer opportunities in terms of employment and self-development. *Brassic* (Sky One, 2019–) follows a group of young adults whose turn to criminality can be read as a reaction to the lack opportunities in deindustralised rural areas (the small town where they lived used to have a textile mill),

while *This Country* (BBC Three, 2017–2020) tackles the boredom of emerging adulthood in rural areas.

There also seems to be a move into a more honest depiction of weighty social issues that were previously only briefly touched upon or even treated as a joke. For instance, *Obvious Child* (Gillian Robespierre, 2014) treats the subject of abortion with care and respect, without preaching, judging or trivialising the issue; *After Everything* (Hannah Marks and Joey Power, 2018) explores the effect of terminal illness on an emerging adult's love life; Lulu Wang's *The Farewell* (2019) depicts the clash between the protagonist's lifestyle in the U.S. and her family's in China, as well as the difficulty of having to live apart from one's loved ones; while *Promising Young Woman* (Emerald Fennell, 2020) explores the consequences of rape and presents an attachment to markers of youth as a way of dealing with grief. These narratives suggest that emerging adult films and television may move away from a stereotypical portrayal of entitled young adults and into thornier subjects. At the same time, the emerging adult experience may begin to be represented in genres that have not offered the perspectives of twentysomethings yet. Pixar recently released *Twenty Something* (Aphton Corbin, 2021), a short film about a young woman's feelings of inadequacy when visiting a night club for the first time on her twenty-first birthday, which may point towards future representations of emerging adulthood in their animated films.

Another question that needs to be addressed is whether the emerging adult category will remain valid if, like some argue, what has changed is not the transition to adulthood but adulthood itself (Blatterer 2007, Wyn et al. 2020). Films like *Greenberg* (Noah Baumbach, 2010) and *Blue Jay* (Alexandre Lehmann, 2016) have protagonists who,

despite being forty, continue suspended in an in-between stage that may be read as a new version of adulthood characterised by loosened ties, precarity and flexibility. If adulthood ceases to be associated with long-term attachment and stability, characters like the protagonists of these two films will begin to appear across films of all genres, which could render the emerging adult film obsolete, a product of a very specific moment in time when young people strived to attain an outdated mode of adulthood, unaware that adulthood itself was changing beyond recognition.

APPENDIX A
Homecoming narratives

■ Films structured around homecoming narratives
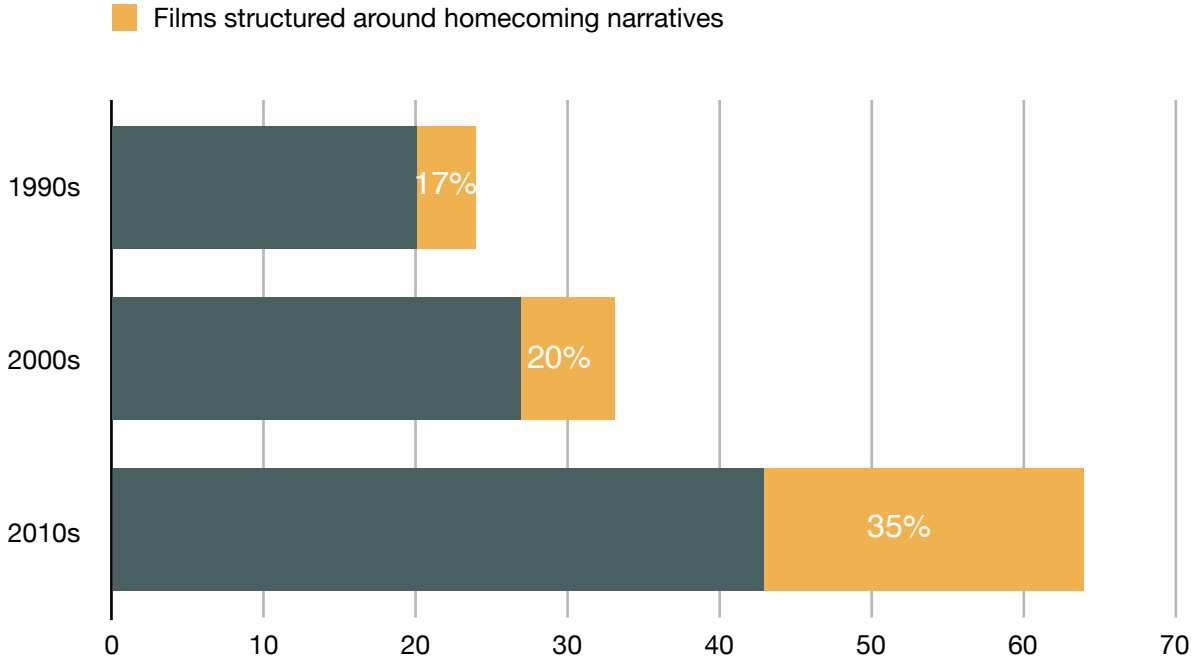
Fig. 1. Percentage of films structured around homecoming narratives in each decade
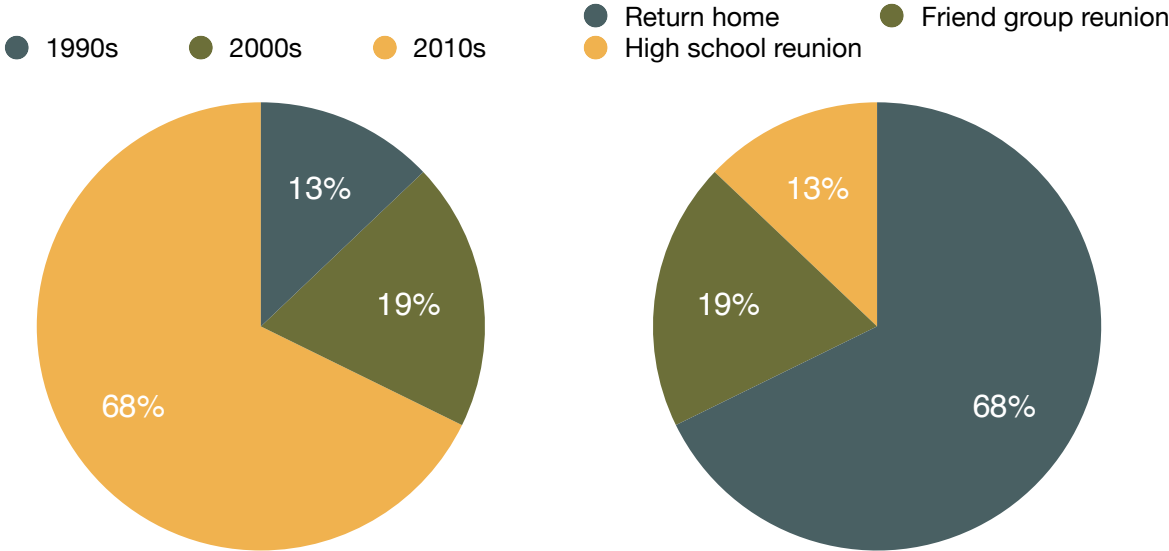
Fig. 2. Homecoming narratives distributed across decades.

Fig. 3. Distribution of homecoming narrative types
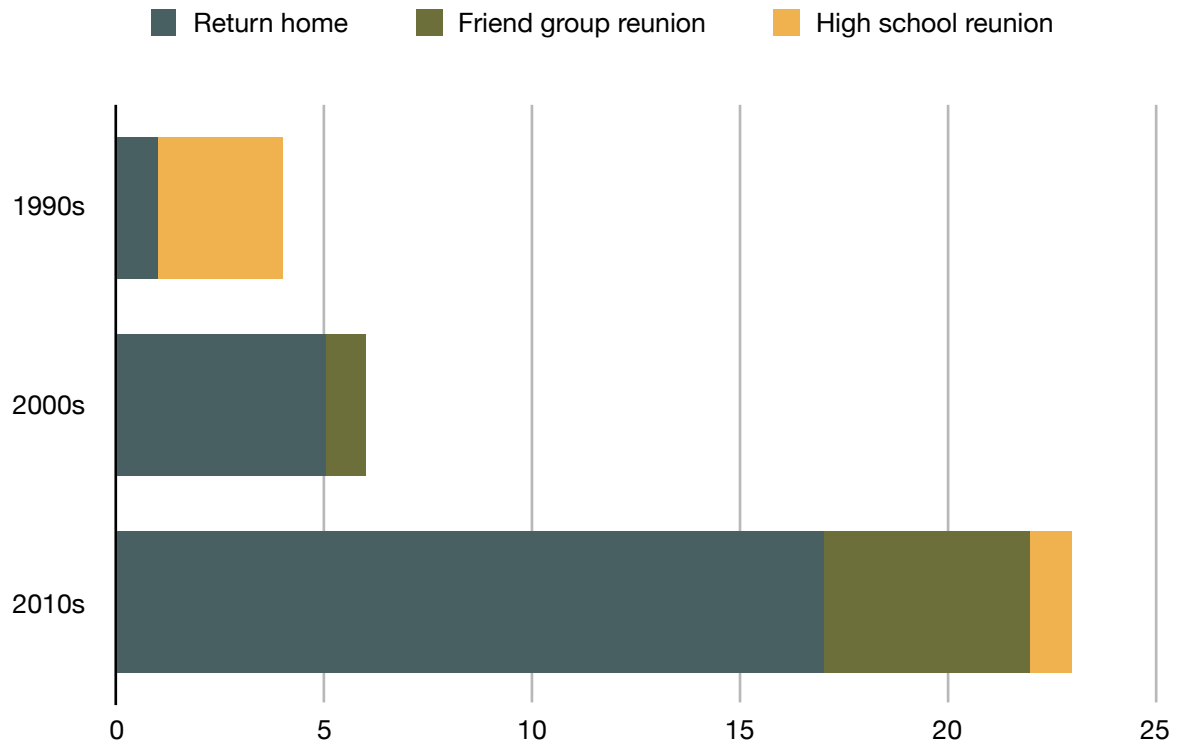
Fig. 4. Distribution of homecoming narrative types across decades
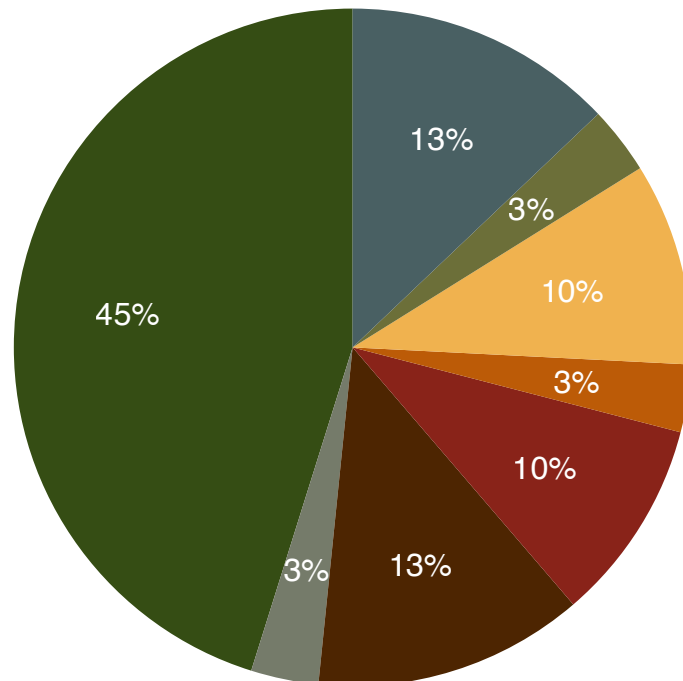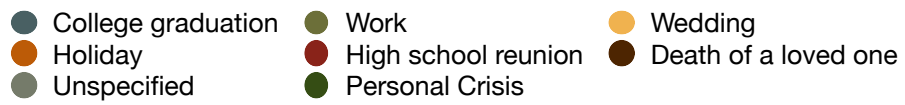
Fig. 5. Reasons that motivate the protagonists' return home
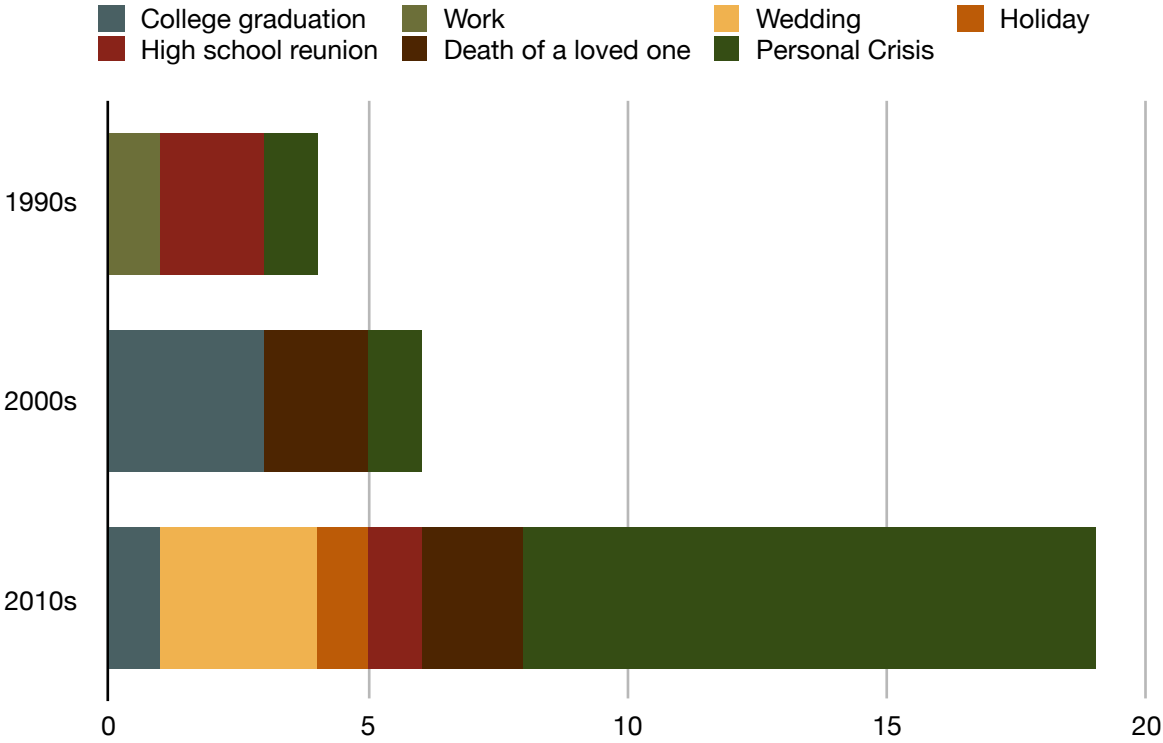
Fig. 6. Motivation for the protagonists' return home distributed across decades
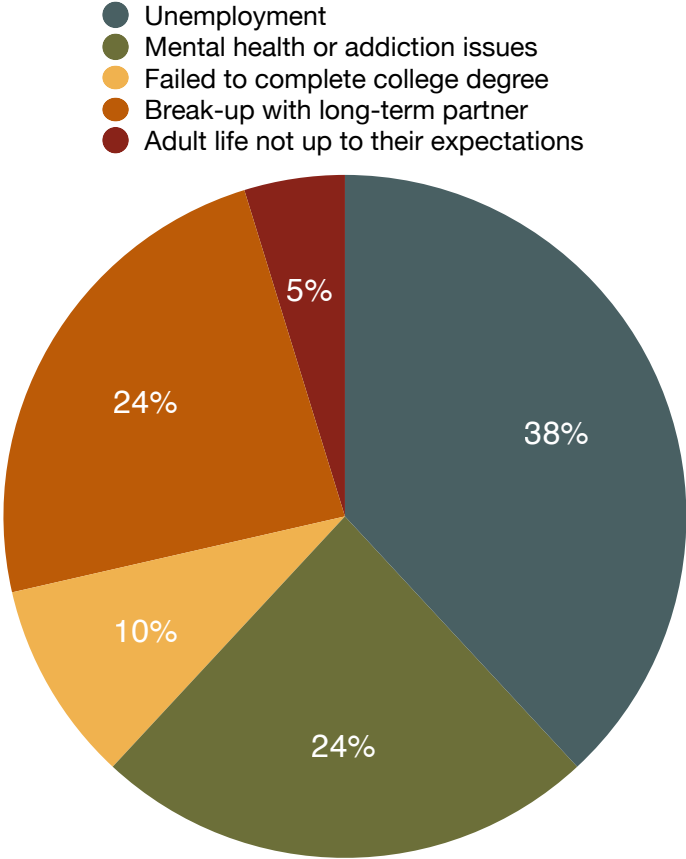
Fig. 7. Types of personal crises that motivate the
protagonists' return home

APPENDIX B
The evolution of the emerging adult film

● 1990s ● 2000s ● 2010s
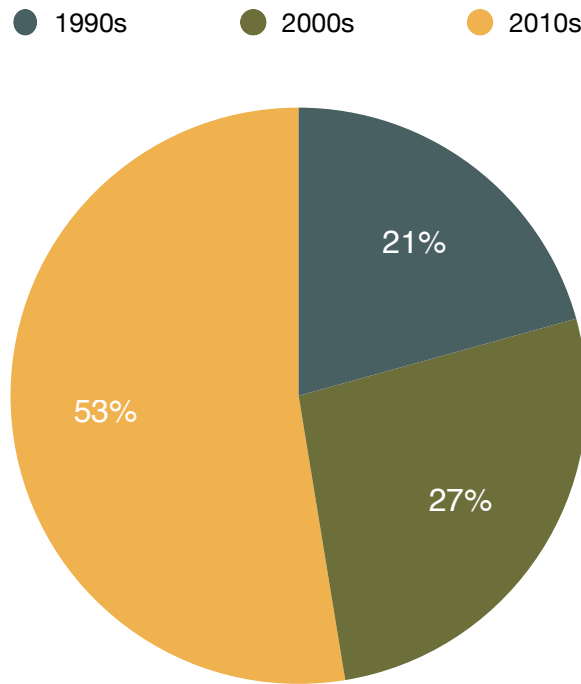
Fig. 1. Distribution of emerging adult films
across decades

● Male protagonists ● Female protagonists ● Mixed gender protagonists
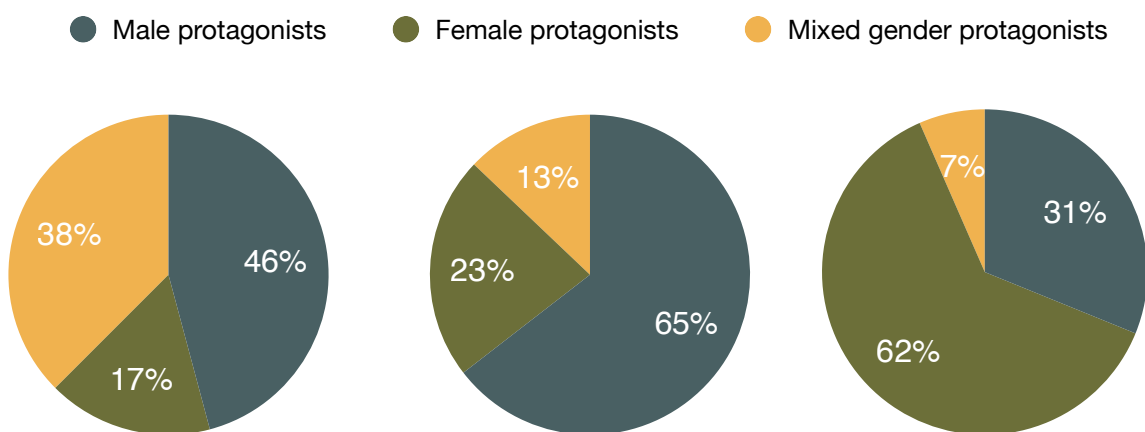
Fig. 2. Gender of
emerging adult
protagonists in the
1990s

Fig. 3. Gender of
emerging adult
protagonists in the
2000s

Fig. 4. Gender of
emerging adult
protagonists in the 2010s
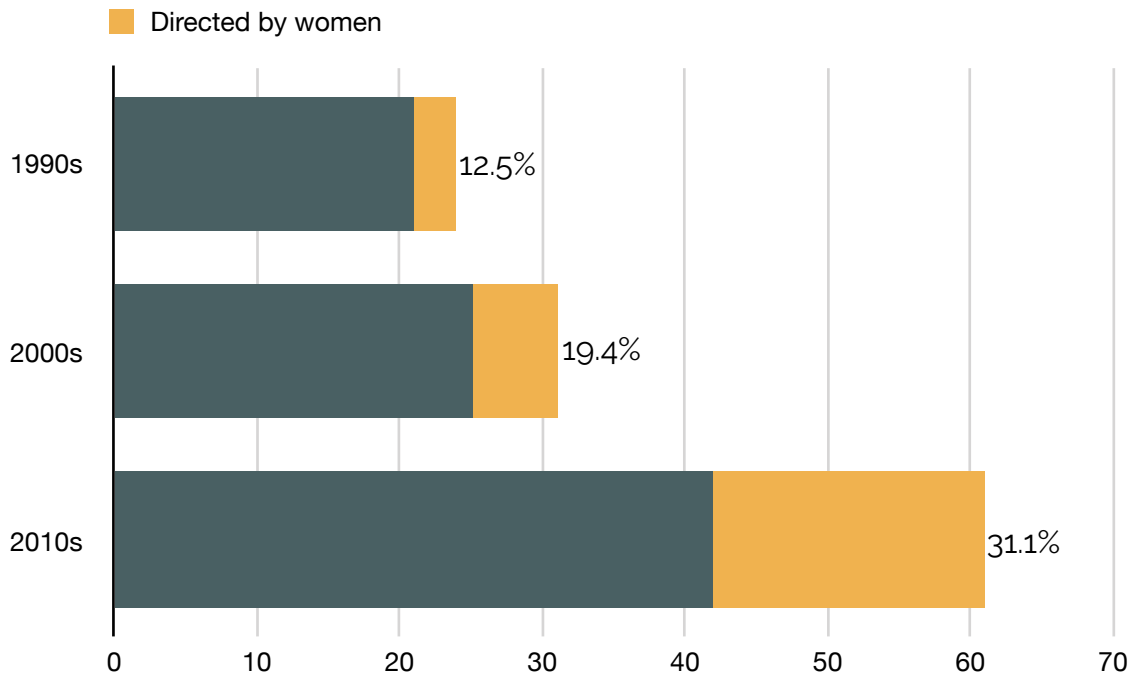
Fig. 5. Percentage of emerging adult films directed by women
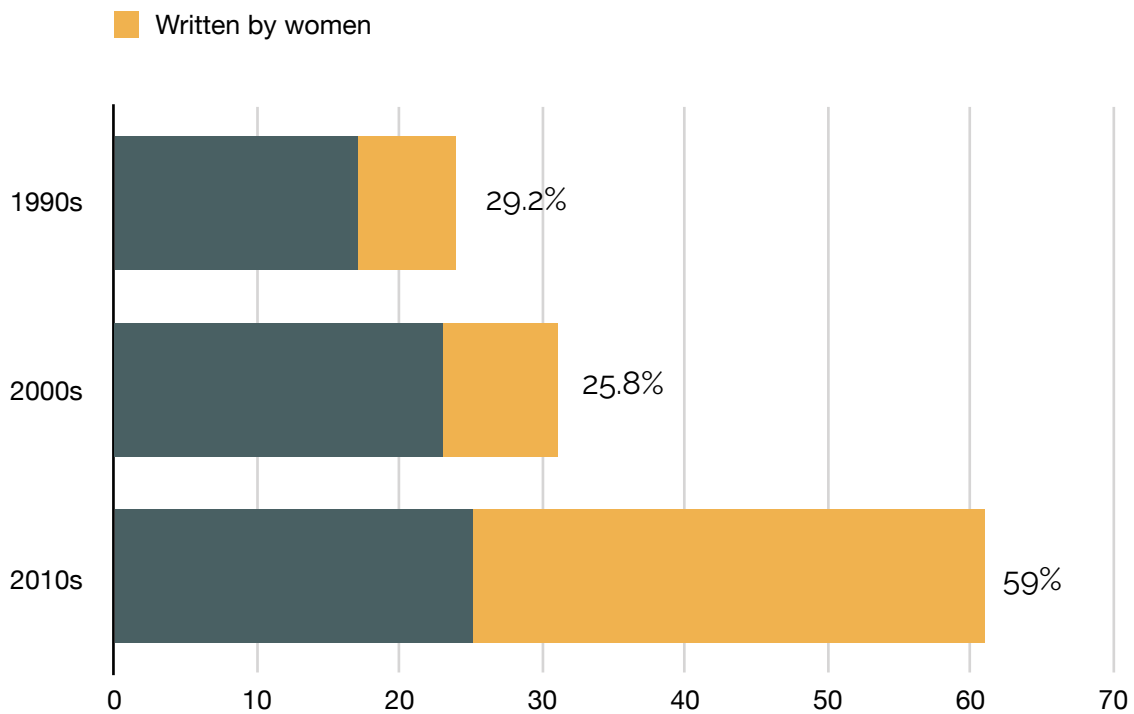
Fig. 6. Percentage of emerging adult films in which a woman has a writing credit
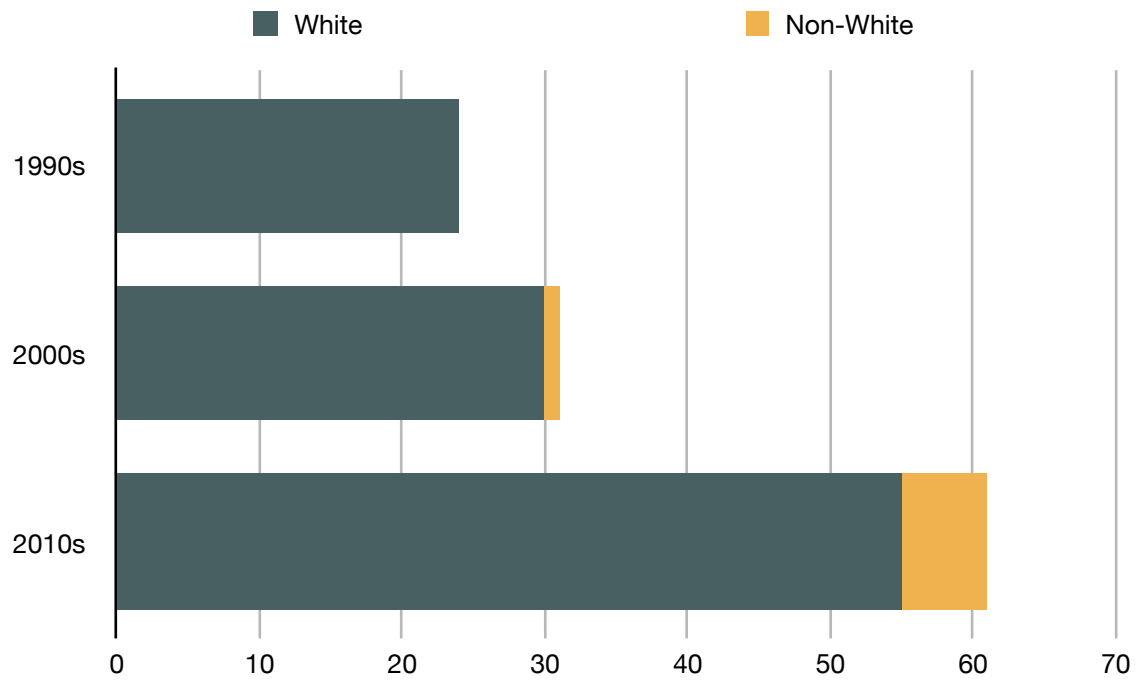
Fig. 7. Ethnicity of emerging adult film protagonists across decades
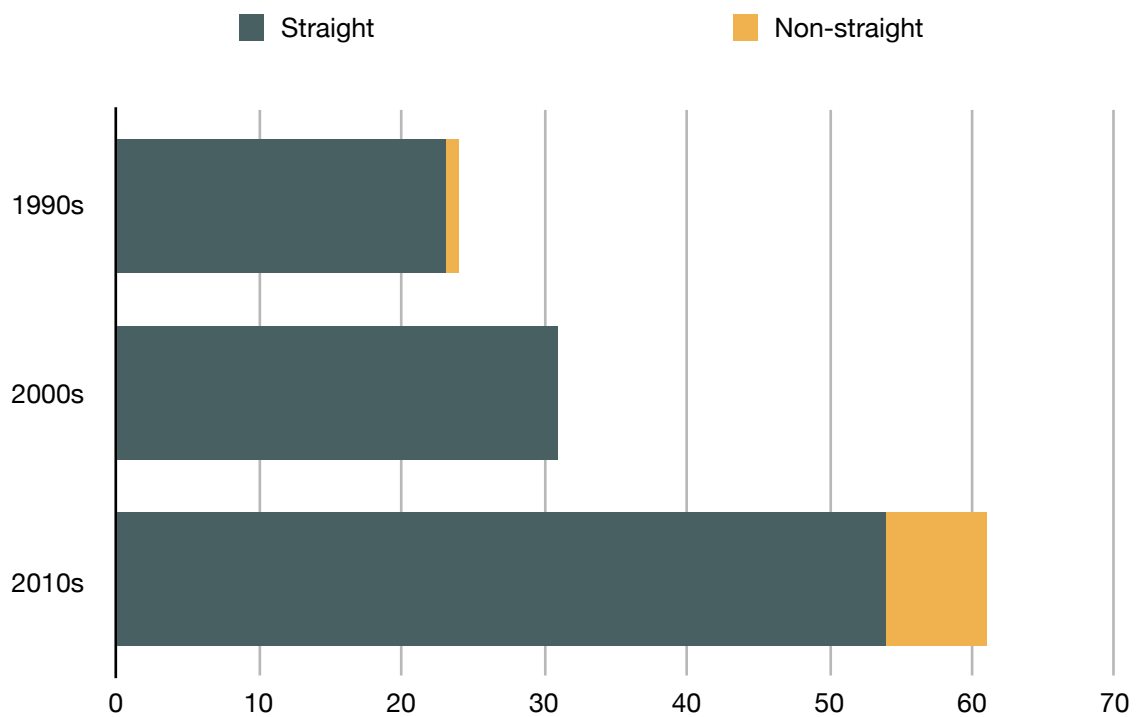
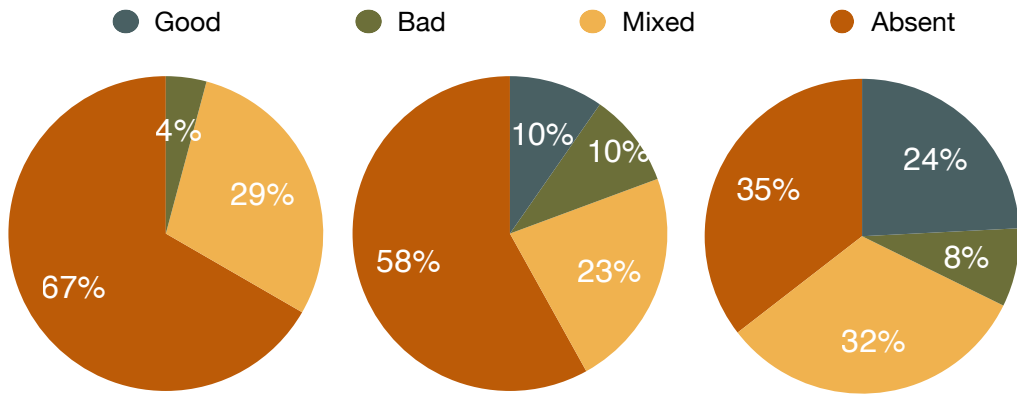Fig. 8. Sexual orientation of emerging adult film protagonists across decades

Fig. 9. Protagonists' relationship with their parents in 1990s films

Fig. 10. Protagonists' relationship with their parents in 2000s films

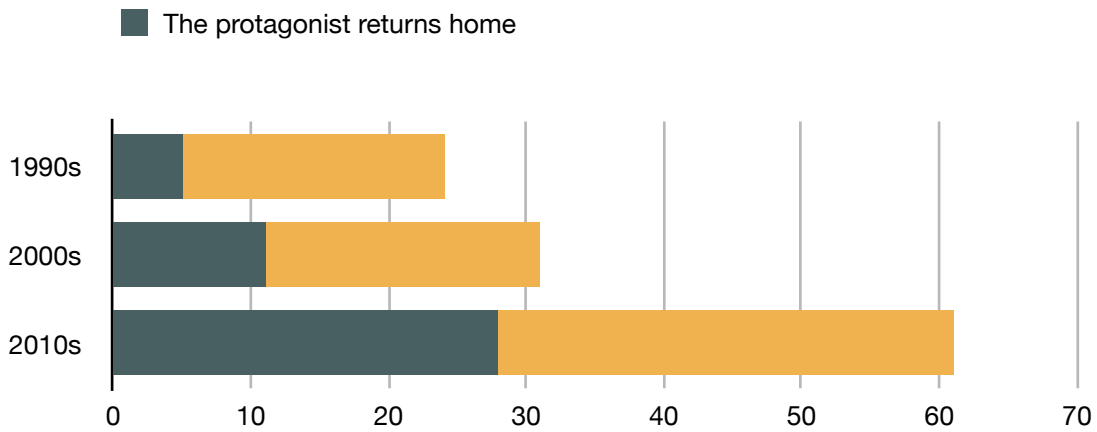Fig. 11. Protagonists' relationship with their parents in 2010s films

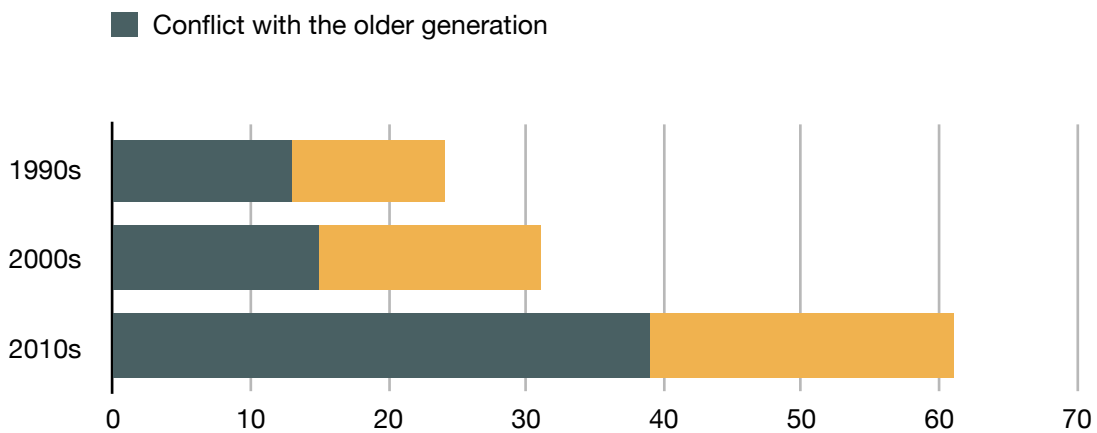Fig. 12. Conflict with the older generation across decades

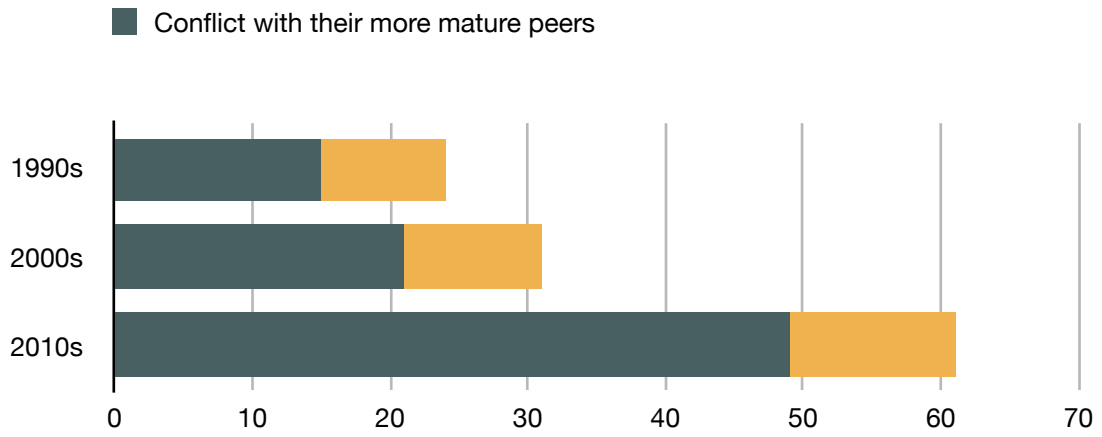Fig. 12. Conflict with the older generation across decades

■ Conflict with their more mature peers

Fig. 13. Conflict with characters who belong to the same generation but are
further along in the path to adulthood

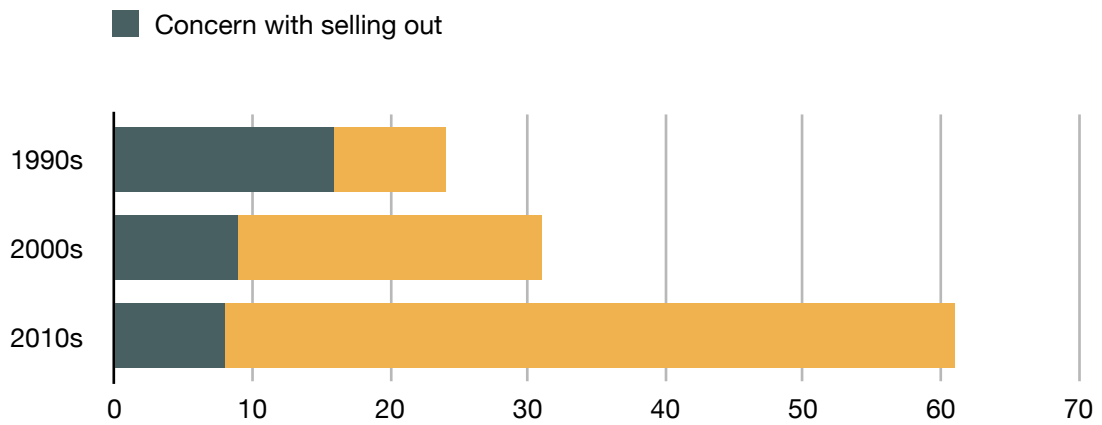■ Concern with selling out

Fig. 14. Protagonists' concern with selling out and authenticity

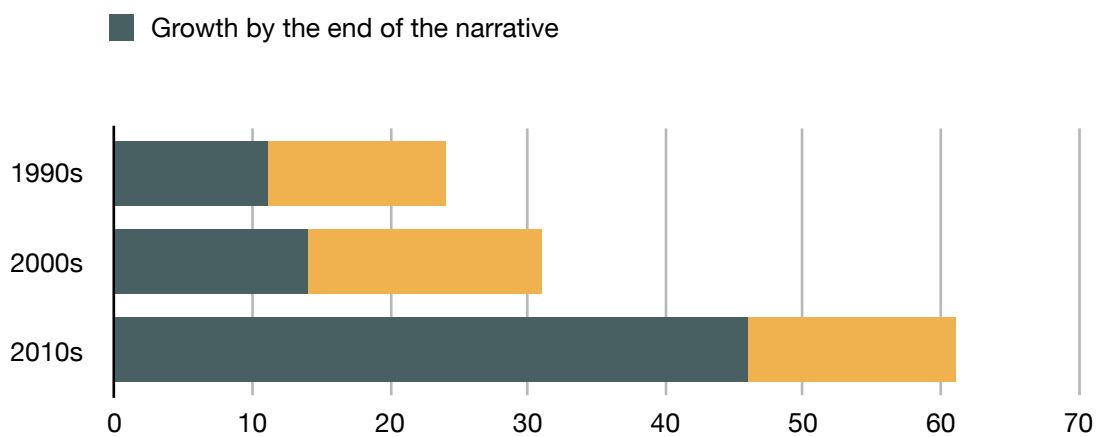■ Growth by the end of the narrative

Fig. 15. Protagonists' personal growth by the end of the narrative

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