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From the Teen Film to the Emerging Adult Film: The Road to Adulthood in *Say Anything* (1989) and *High Fidelity* (2000)

Abstract: In the past decades, the transition to adulthood in post-industrial countries has become longer, giving rise to emerging adulthood, a new life stage between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett and Taber 1994, Arnett 2000, 2004). Cinema has reflected this change, with a growing number of narratives exploring the challenges of this life stage. Through a comparative analysis of *Say Anything* (Cameron Crowe, 1989) and *High Fidelity* (Stephen Frears, 2000), this article seeks to establish the emerging adult film as a youth film subgenre of its own by outlining some of the generic conventions that make it different from teenage films.

Keywords: film studies, film genre, teen film, adolescence, youth, emerging adulthood, emerging adult film

1. Introduction

The past three decades have witnessed a growing concern with the rate at which young people complete their transition to adulthood. In 1990, Richard Linklater's first feature film *Slacker* popularized the term "slacker" to refer to overeducated, underemployed youths. According to the filmmaker, the term was a nickname used in Austin for those young people who lived a "quasi-collegiate existence" despite not being students (Holden 84). A few months after the film's release, the British newspaper *The Observer* defined "slacker" as "US slang for twentysomethings" (Reynolds 58), which indicates that this view of young people as underachievers had come to be applied to an entire cohort: Generation X. In the following two decades, the focus shifted to millennials who, like their older siblings, were deemed lazy, entitled, selfish and dumb (Strauss and Howe, 319; Stein; Petersen xviii).

Both Generation X and millennials have been called a "lost generation" (Barringer; Lowrey) but what their strikingly similar media treatment suggests is that what has actually been lost in the past decades is a straightforward route towards adulthood.

At the same time, a certain type of character became ubiquitous in popular culture: young(ish) people, usually overeducated and underemployed, who seem in no rush to grow up. Instead of taking the straightforward route to adulthood, these characters tend to drift from job to job and from relationship to relationship as they attempt to figure out who they want to become. These twentysomething – and, sometimes, thirtysomething – characters find themselves at the latter end of the coming-of-age process. They are what psychologist Jeffrey Arnett calls emerging adults: individuals who are no longer teenagers but have not completed their transition to adulthood, having attained some markers of adulthood but not others (2000, 2004). This article argues that the emergence of a new life stage between adolescence and adulthood has stretched out the boundaries of the coming-of-age film, giving rise to a new trend within the genre that is concerned with the final stages of the transition to adulthood. I seek out to explore the features that differentiate emerging adult films from those films depicting the preceding stage of the coming-of-age process – teenage films – through a comparative analysis of *Say Anything* (dir. Cameron Crowe, 1989) and *High Fidelity* (dir. Stephen Frears, 2000), two romantic comedies starring John Cusack that are concerned with different aspects of the transition to adulthood.

While *Say Anything* is a teenage film that begins with high school graduation and thus depicts the protagonist's first steps into emerging adulthood, *High Fidelity* features a protagonist who has overstayed his welcome in emerging adulthood, remaining stuck in this liminal stage between adolescence and adult commitment despite being in his mid-thirties. A concern with romantic love and commitment, together with John Cusack's star persona as a romantic anti-hero, brings the two films closer together, emphasizing their different outlooks and making a comparative analysis a useful tool from which to begin exploring the differences between teenage films and emerging adult films. At the same time, the wide age gap between the two protagonists – the protagonist in *High Fidelity* is twice the age as the protagonist in *Say Anything* – underscores the differences between their life stages and, consequently, between teen films and emerging adult films.

2. The Rise of a Filmic Genre

Jeffrey Arnett pinpoints the 1990s as the time when going through emerging adulthood became more the norm than the exception in post-industrial societies, which coincides both with a growing media concern with slackers and with the rise of representations of emerging adulthood in popular culture. He argues that the characteristics ascribed to Generation X are not generational but, rather, features

of emerging adulthood, which he defines as characterized by self-focus, identity exploration, instability, in-betweenness and a feeling of possibility (2000; 2004, 4–8). Even though some filmic representations of emerging adulthood, like *The Graduate* (dir. Mike Nichols, 1967), *Girlfriends* (dir. Claudia Weill, 1978) and *St Elmo's Fire* (dir. Joel Schumacher, 1985), predate Arnett's definition, it is during the 1990s that the number of films depicting emerging adulthood became numerous enough to talk about the emerging adult film. Films like *Singles* (dir. Cameron Crowe, 1992), *Reality Bites* (dir. Ben Stiller, 1994), *Clerks* (dir. Kevin Smith, 1994), *Kicking and Screaming* (dir. Noah Baumbach, 1995) and *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* (dir. David Mirkin, 1997) engage with Generation X's winding path to adulthood. As the decades passed, the number of films that put the trials and tribulations of emerging adulthood at the center of their narrative increased substantially, reflecting both the larger size of the millennial generation and a growing concern with the challenges that the transition to adulthood poses in contemporary society, especially after the Great Recession.

The number of emerging adult narratives increased significantly in the 2010s as the majority of millennials entered their third decade and struggled to find their way in the world. Although these films mostly refuse to engage explicitly with the economic context that provided the backdrop for the transition to adulthood of the millennial generation, the rising age of their protagonists and the focus on women's transitions to adulthood suggest that adulthood is more out of reach than ever. While earlier decades placed an emphasis on young men in their early twenties, the 2010s saw a gender-shift and a turn towards older protagonists. For instance, the protagonists in *Frances Ha* (dir. Noah Baumbach, 2012), *Laggies* (dir. Lynn Shelton, 2014) and *Obvious Child* (dir. Gillian Robespierre, 2014) are 28-year-old women, while those in *Lola Versus* (dir. Daryl Wein, 2012), *The Lifeguard* (dir. Liz W Garcia, 2013), *Ass Backwards* (dir. Chris Nelson, 2013), *Life Partners* (dir. Susanna Fogel, 2014), *Social Animals* (dir. Theresa Bennett, 2018) and *Someone Great* (dir. Jennifer Kaytin Robinson, 2019) are about to turn 30. Some films, like *Young Adult* (dir. Jason Reitman, 2011), *Girl Most Likely* (dir. Shari Springer Bergman and Robert Pulcini, 2012) and *Saint Frances* (dir. Alex Thompson, 2019) feature protagonists well into their thirties who remain stuck between adolescence and adulthood. As of 2022, the emerging adult film remains alive and well, with some films like *Promising Young Woman* (dir. Emerald Fennell, 2020) and *The Worst Person in the World* (dir. Joachim Trier, 2021) receiving critical acclaim and recognition in the award circuit.

As Celestino Deleyto argues, film genres belong to a "complex system" that is in constant motion, their boundaries constantly shifting under the influence of "the films themselves and other discourses, both internal and external to the industry" (2008, 9). Following Jacques Derrida's *The Law of Genre*, which speaks about "participation without belonging – a taking part in without being part of" (1980, 206), Deleyto sees films as "meeting points" for genres, further arguing that the

way in which films combine generic conventions is "historically and culturally spe-
cific" (12). Keeping this in mind, it can be argued that the socio-historical changes
that have given rise to longer transitions to adulthood have had an impact on the
workings of the coming-of-age genre, giving rise to a new kind of coming-of-age
film that focuses its attention in the last stages of the transition to adulthood. This
expansion of the boundaries of the youth film is then representative of a specific
point in history during which the transition to adulthood became a particularly
fraught process.

Despite the growing visibility of emerging adulthood in film and television,
film studies scholars have paid little attention to onscreen representations of this
life stage. When filmic depictions of emerging adult life are included in analyses of
youth film, they are often analyzed together with teenage films (Martin 1994, 66;
[1998] 2012; Hentges 87–101; Tropiano 205–206; Driscoll 2011, 55–56; Colling
2019, 4–5). In these cases, film scholars adopt a broad definition of adolescence
or youth that goes beyond the age boundaries of the protagonists' teenage years
and stretches out to include characters of college-age and even beyond. Catherine
Driscoll justifies this point of view by arguing that teen films place their focus on
"the process of becoming a recognizable adult subject" (2014, 304), which unites
both teenagers and twentysomethings as non-adults. While it is undeniable that the
process of becoming is central to youth identities and that the gradual attainment
of adult roles plays a central role in filmic representations of youth, regardless of
the protagonists' age, the differences between adolescence and emerging adulthood
give way to new themes, characters types, plots and narrative structures. Further-
more, the sheer number of emerging adult narratives reflect a growing concern
with the latter stages of the coming-of-age process, which I believe warrants their
consideration as a separate object of analysis.

3. New Stage, New Challenges, New Attitudes

Writing about the narrative conventions of teenage films, Driscoll mentions the
following: "the youthfulness of central characters; content usually centred on young
heterosexuality […]; intense age-based peer relationships and conflict either within
those relationships or with the older generation; the institutional management of
adolescence […] and coming-of-age plots" (2011, 2). Most of these narrative con-
ventions appear in emerging adult films too, albeit from a different point of view.
Like teen films, emerging adult films are partly defined by the age of their pro-
tagonists and by an opposition between their youthful behavior and the mores of
adulthood. However, whereas in teenage films youthfulness sets all teenage charac-
ters in opposition with the older generations, in emerging adult films the characters
that embody adulthood may be the same age as the protagonists and, sometimes,
younger. The protagonists' youthfulness is then marked by their attitude, behavior

and values, which contrast with those of their more mature peers. Intra-generational conflict in emerging adult films is therefore structured around the degree of maturity that different characters have attained. While teenage characters often clash with those who belong to different high school cliques, emerging adult characters experience conflict with characters who have made a swifter transition to adulthood. It could be argued that in emerging adult films the teenage scale of popularity is replaced by the scale of adulthood, where those who have completed their transition to adulthood at the top, those who are on their way there in the middle and those who remain unhealthily attached to their youth and refuse to grow up at the bottom.

However, the attitude towards those at the top of the pyramid is different in emerging adult films. In teen films popular kids are often depicted as antagonists, but popularity is a currency that characters belonging to different social groups crave. In contrast, in emerging adult films the protagonists overtly reject a standardized transition to adulthood, which they consider as a giving up one's ideals and identity. The challenge that emerging adult protagonists face, then, is how to take steps towards greater commitment without losing oneself in the process. In emerging adult films the institutions that regulate the lives of teenagers, like educational institutions or the family, lose their narrative weight. Occasionally, they may be replaced by the world of work, where rules inhibit the protagonists' behavior and managers are often depicted as ineffectual and unprincipled, which mirrors the representation of adults as inadequate in teen films until the 2000s (Shary 2014, 36). Finally, the fact that emerging adult films are concerned with the latter stages of the coming-of-age process means that the rites of passage and romantic and sexual firsts that appear throughout teenage films are replaced by different sort of coming-of-age moments in which the emphasis shifts towards the process of settling down. That is, the protagonists' attempts to figure out what kind of adult they want to become and who they would like to share their lives with.

The opening scene of *Say Anything* fulfils all the narrative conventions outlined above. The sound of somebody playing electric guitar and a conversation between Corey (Lili Taylor) and D.C. (Amy Brooks) can be heard over the opening credits and an establishing shot that locates the action in suburban Seattle. Corey is talking about graduation and her feelings (or lack thereof) towards it and criticizing one of her teachers for writing what she considers to be a phony dedication on her yearbook. Even before the spectator is allowed to see the film's characters, they are already being defined in opposition to the adult world, which they perceive as inauthentic. Furthermore, Corey's claim that she has no feelings regarding her graduation emphasizes her reluctance to join the ranks of adulthood while downplaying the importance of graduation as a rite of passage. The characters' youthfulness is also marked by the sound of the electric guitar, which has long been associated with youthful rebelliousness. In teenage films, costume, setting and props provide insight into the characters' status within the high school caste system. Once the spectator is allowed into Corey's room, the music paraphernalia scattered around

the room, along with their outfits, places the teenagers as members of the alternative crowd. The film's protagonist, Lloyd Dobler (John Cusack), remains silent during the conversation until he changes the subject by saying she wants to take Diane Court (Ione Skye) on a date. This first intervention, in which Lloyd gives more importance to a potential date with somebody he barely knows than to a supposedly life-changing event like high school graduation, underscores the heightened nature of teenage emotions. At the same time, his willingness to date outside his clique despite his friends' opinion that "brains stay with brains" marks him as an optimistic individual who believes his feelings are stronger than the restrictions imposed on teenagers by the social hierarchy.

The optimism and tolerance shown by Lloyd are nowhere to be seen in Rob Gordon (John Cusack), the protagonist of *High Fidelity*. While *Say Anything* begins with the protagonist at the brink of a life change exclaiming that he wants to get hurt, *High Fidelity* starts with the protagonist's pain while going through a break-up which was partly motivated by his inability to change. Whereas Lloyd is eager to date someone who is very different from himself, Rob's problems with Laura (Iben Hjejle) partly stem from the fact that she has changed and he has remained the same. Laura and Rob first met at a club night where he was the DJ, and their first ever conversation was about his music taste. Music is part of every aspect of the protagonist's life: he owns a record store, his friends are obsessive music fans, he spends his free time listening to music or seeing live music, he meets prospective partners through music and he communicates through music. Although Laura was initially part of his world, as the years went by, Laura's affiliation with the music scene faded: she toned down her subcultural look, began to dress more conservatively and started a career. That is to say, she grew up and evolved while Rob remained frozen in his twenties.

The link between Rob's relationship with music, which represents his inability to move on, and the end of his relationship is made evident in the film's opening scene. *High Fidelity* begins with detail shots of a vinyl record and a hi-fi system. The camera follows the headphone cables that link the object with the listener, thus providing a physical connection between the protagonist and music that mirrors his emotional attachment to it. Once Rob has been established as a die-hard music fan with a special relationship to music, a close-up shows him looking straight into the camera, breaking the fourth wall as he wonders "what came first? The music or the misery?" out loud. It is only then that the spectator is made aware that there is another character in the room. Laura, who is getting ready to go, disconnects Rob's headphones, which hints towards the fact that his love of music has had something to do with their break-up and can be read as her pulling the plug on their relationship. As she does this, the song that had been playing stops, which makes the spectator realize that the music playing through the scene was in fact playing diegetically and coming from the protagonist's headphones. The use of music, together with the protagonist's narration and breaking of the fourth wall, gives the

scene a confessional tone, encouraging identification with the protagonist from the very first moment. Rob is letting us in, sharing both his innermost feelings and the song that he believes describes them best. Once Laura leaves, Rob continues to address the spectator and begins to tell the story of his top-5 break-ups, which are shown through flashbacks that visually connect the protagonist with his adolescent and twentysomething self, all while underscoring how little he has evolved.

4. From First to Last: Depictions of Romantic Love

Emerging adult films and teenage films differ in their representation of romantic love. Teenage films focus on firsts, on the protagonist's first love, first kiss and the loss of virginity, while emerging adult films, especially those that deal with the latter stages of the transition to adulthood, are concerned with the protagonists lasts, with the process wherein emerging adults figure out whether they want to settle down and what kind of person they want to settle down with. Like *High Fidelity*'s Rob, emerging adult protagonists have a romantic and sexual history, which gives them a different outlook on love and relationships. Emerging adult films tend to underscore the difficulty to settle down in a world that is in constant change, the temporariness and lack of rules that characterize contemporary relationships and the commodification of sexuality and relationships (Bauman 2001, 2003; Illouz 2019). As in *High Fidelity*, there is often an emphasis on what Eva Illouz calls "unloving" and defines as "the unmaking of bonds" (3), which includes avoiding relationships, breaking relationships and hopping from one relationship to the next. Consequently, each type of film displays views of love that are at odds with each other. As Timothy Shary explains, teen film protagonists rarely hold any doubts regarding their love: they do not question whether they are ready to be in a relationship or whether their romantic partner is right for them. Instead, the obstacles standing between the couple are always external, such as their different status within the high school hierarchy (which is often linked to different social class) or familial opposition to the union (2002, 214–215). In contrast, emerging adult characters display a more pessimistic attitude: they constantly scrutinize their feelings, pondering whether their partner is right for them, worrying that somebody better might come along and even questioning their ability to love and to be loved.

These opposing views of love can be seen in both of the films analyzed. In *Say Anything* the obstacle between Lloyd and Diane is her father, who expects his daughter to date somebody more successful than Lloyd, who lacks aspirations and plans for the future. In contrast, in *High Fidelity* what is standing between Rob and Laura is Rob himself, his selfishness and his fear of commitment. Lloyd's optimistic, carefree attitude and his unwavering adoration for Diane contrast with Rob's disillusioned cynicism and his lack of consideration towards his long-term partner. The contrast is not only expressed in narrative terms, but also visually. In

Say Anything, romantic moments are punctuated with music and shot in a way that underscores their emotional significance for the protagonist. After the couple's first on-screen kiss, a montage shows them kissing in two different locations, both of which highlight the moment's romanticism. First, Lloyd and Diane are shot from a long distance, standing in the middle of a garden framed by luscious vegetation. The garden, like their love, is blossoming, and a song can be heard in place of their dialogue, allowing the spectator to imagine what was said and to project our own expectations of romance onto the couple. Next, they are shot from a medium distance, which, together with their more passionate kiss, suggests that their emotional connection is getting stronger. The fact that they are standing in the middle of the rain, soaking wet, indicates that their need to be together has grown to be more important than other needs, such as seeking shelter. Additionally, the rain gives the scene a soft-focus that adds to its romanticism. Finally, they are shown in Lloyd's car, which is parked next to the ocean as the couple take their relationship one step further and lose their virginity together. In this scene, the emphasis is not placed on the physical act of intercourse, but, rather, in the emotional connection between the two. Two-shot close-ups keep the couple together in the frame at all times while Peter Gabriel's "In Your Eyes" plays in the background and Lloyd says that he must be shaking because he is happy. The same song plays later on when Lloyd attempts to win back Diane's affections by standing outside her window with a boombox in a scene that has become a symbol of romantic longing and remains an integral part of John Cusack's star persona as a romantic anti-hero over thirty years after the film's release.

    In *Say Anything*, grand romantic gestures work. Diane notices Lloyd's gentle acts of care and kindness, such as driving for hours until he finds the home of a drunk classmate who cannot remember his address or making sure that Diane does not step on broken glass, and whenever Lloyd's actions fail to yield the expected results, his perseverance and romanticism eventually pay off. In contrast, *High Fidelity* rejects a romanticized view of love, an approach which is common across emerging adult films. Emerging adult intimacy is shown through companionship rather than through idealized romantic moments like the ones described in the previous paragraph. Rob and Laura are never shown kissing under a soft light while a romantic ballad plays. Instead, they are shown sharing activities such as reading in bed, picking up records at a market or enjoying a musical performance. In emerging adult love, the focus is on the mundane, on the everyday experiences that bring a couple together. It could be argued that *High Fidelity* actively undermines idealized portrayals of romantic love through a romanticized depiction of non-romantic moments and a non-romanticized depiction of moments that should be romantic. This refusal to comply with the conventions of romantic love happens both narratively and aesthetically. At a narrative level, the flashbacks into Rob's most memorable break-ups reveal that moments that he had believed to be romantically significant were not so, which reflects the lack of rules that characterize

contemporary relationships (Illouz). For instance, when he calls his first girlfriend, he is shocked to find out that she married her first boyfriend. In this case, a lack of consensus over what a romantic act such as kissing meant, led Rob to make false assumptions about the nature of this relationship, which led to a sort of romantic idealization that was completely one-sided: while he took this break-up as one of his romantic failures, the other person involved did not even see it as a break-up.

Visually, *High Fidelity* refuses to depict romantic love in an idealized manner, and it saves the idealized depiction of a romantic moment for an act that is decidedly unromantic. One of the flashbacks to the protagonist's break-ups shows him entering what Anthony Giddens calls a "pure relationship," a relationship that is entered for its own sake without a real purpose and that will last for as long as both parties are satisfied enough (58). The protagonist explains that his relationship with Sarah (Lili Taylor) is a transactional one that they both entered simply because they did not want to be alone. The marked lack of romanticism of his narration contrasts with the idealized images that accompany it, which show the couple kissing for the first time by Lake Michigan. The scene's setting by the lake, with the waves crashing against the shore and Chicago's skyline in the background, together with the warm glow of twilight, grants the scene a romantic feel that the situation did not really have, undermining idealized depictions of romance. Rob's atypical marriage proposal to Laura stands in marked contrast to the representation of Rob and Sarah's kiss. The magnitude of a potentially life-changing moment is undermined by the rejection of the conventions surrounding marriage proposals: Rob does not go down on one knee or give Laura a ring, the proposal takes place in a bar rather than in a romantic setting, and when asked why he proposed he retorts that he is "sick of thinking about it all the time," which is not exactly a great declaration of love. Moreover, Laura's refusal to marry Rob points towards the obsolescence of the institution of marriage and, by extension, of rites of passage that used to mark an individual's transition into adulthood.

5. Growing Up Without Giving Up

Rob's inability to move on into adulthood stems partly from idealization both of his past relationships and of the music world and those involved in it. It can be argued, then, that the film's rejection of idealized romantic moments serves as a reminder that, in order to grow up, one must learn not to sugarcoat things and see love, work and individuals as multifaceted and complex instead. Rob's investment in the music scene has made him see life in hierarchical terms, with those who share his music taste at the top and everybody else at the bottom. This view, which is characteristic of somebody much younger than himself, is reminiscent of the social stratification of teenage life, where individuals are neatly categorized into cliques that determine their position within the high school caste system. Ironically,

teenage Lloyd Dobler is less concerned with this pigeonholing of identities than thirtysomething Rob Gordon.

The depiction of high school cliques in *Say Anything* is not as relevant to the narrative as it is in other teen films of its time, such as *The Breakfast Club* (dir. John Hughes, 1985), *Pretty in Pink* (dir. Howard Deutch, 1986) or *Heathers* (dir. Michael Lehmann, 1989). Diane is not coded as a nerd despite her intellectual prowess (Shary 2002, 33). She is conventionally attractive and comes from an affluent background, and although intellectual achievements have come at the expense of her social life, she is not deemed an outcast. Similarly, although Lloyd falls within the rebellious type, his rebellion is inconspicuous and does not affect those around him. For instance, he wears punk rock band t-shirts, he is involved in alternative martial arts and he refuses to see his career counsellor or to think about his future. All of these can be considered rebellious acts, but they are directed inwards rather than outwards. When he is with his classmates his behavior is affable and considerate, which defies the stereotypical depiction of teenage rebelliousness. The importance of the high school caste system as a regulatory agent in the personal lives of teenagers is made explicit at the beginning of the film. When Lloyd expresses his desire to date Diane, he is told that she does not date boys like him. Later on, when he takes Diane to the graduation party, his classmates express shock that they came together, and when one of them asks him "what" he is, the protagonist replies "I'm Lloyd," emphasizing his refusal to play by the rules of popularity. However, after their first date the high school hierarchy loses its importance, giving way to the real threatening force to their union: familial expectations.

In *High Fidelity*, the protagonist and his two friends and employees, Dick (Todd Louiso) and Barry (Jack Black), have carried on the drive to classify people according to their music taste into their thirties. The record store functions like a safe space where the three music snobs reign supreme, free to criticize and humiliate those whose taste they perceive as more commercial or uncool. In order to move on, Rob must leave this attitude behind and learn to appreciate people as individuals instead of judging them on superficial grounds. The fact that this attitude is preventing the protagonist from moving on is underscored by mise-en-scène and framing when he is at the shop. The first time Rob arrives at the shop, he is framed behind bars, suggesting that his business and, by extension, the music world, has become imprisoning. Additionally, he does not always support Barry's antics and complains that he is driving customers away, which reflects his changing point of view of the shop from an identity-defining site to a place of work. Consequently, the space Rob occupies within the shop physically isolates him from his friends and their immature ways, which highlights his growing disconnect from their immature attitude. Instead of sharing a space with them, Rob is often in his office, a place from which he can observe his friends without partaking in their behavior. The shop's office serves to mark Rob as different from his friends, but it also marks him as different from Laura. When they speak on the phone, editing highlights the

differences between Rob and his ex. Laura's office is tidy and it looks professional, just like her outfit and hair. In contrast, Rob's looks like an extension of his living room, and his oversize knit is far from what could be considered a professional outfit. Additionally, Laura's office is in a high-rise building, whereas Rob's is at street level but with a window that is positioned so high it makes the office look underground, which emphasizes their different positions on the road to adulthood as well as her higher socioeconomic status.

Both *Say Anything* and *High Fidelity* feature conflict with adults. In the former, the absence of Lloyd's parents and the corruption and materialism of Diane's father position adulthood as a time when one is ready to compromise one's values for profit. Lloyd's older sister Constance, played by John Cusack's real-life sister Joan, represents a different view of adulthood that is closer to the one displayed in *High Fidelity*. Lloyd believes adulthood has made his sister boring and jaded, and he laments this loss of fun and lightness, which can be seen when he reminds her that she used to be "warped, twisted and hilarious" and asks her "how hard is it is to decide to be in a good mood and then be in a good mood?" In *High Fidelity*, adulthood is equated with conformity and a loss of individuality, which is embodied by Laura's change of attitude and look when she began to focus on her career. When Rob openly holds this against her she tells him that the reason why she is not happy is because she has changed and he has remained the same, not changing "so much as a pair of socks" since they met years ago. To Rob, Laura's changes are a sign of conformity and surrender to the rules of adulthood. In order to grow up, Rob needs to let go of the superficiality and music snobbery that has characterized his youth. In fact, it is through music that his growth is signaled at the end of the film. Rob uses mixtapes to express himself and to communicate his feelings towards someone, using other people's words to speak for himself in a way reminiscent of adolescent inarticulateness and emotional immaturity. Through the making of a compilation take, which Rob considers an art, the protagonist expresses his feelings while increasing his subcultural capital, making sure the object of his affection knows that he knows a wide variety of music and adopting the role of tastemaker, which puts him above the tape's recipient. In the last scene, the tide has turned and Rob is making a tape full of songs that he knows Laura will like. Instead of showing off his coolness and authenticity, he wants to make Laura happy. This emotional development is marked by the diegetic use of the song "I Believe (When I Fall in Love)" by Stevie Wonder, an artist that his Barry mercilessly criticized in the store. This action shows a move away from selfishness and superficiality while highlighting the protagonist's readiness to make a lifelong commitment to Laura.

Say Anything ends with Lloyd and Diane on a plane to England, where Diane is going to study, and her father in prison for taking money off the elderly. Lloyd has stayed true to his intention of making dating Diane his main occupation and the couple have overcome the main obstacle standing between them: Diane's father,

his materialism and his lack of morals. The ending, although happy for the couple, is bittersweet for Diane, whose father's endeavors were hugely disappointing to her. When it comes to their relationship, neither the narration nor the characters express any doubts that their moving to England together is the right thing to do. However, the spectator is aware both of the transient nature of teenage love and of the fact that major life changes make people evolve and change in different ways, which lends the ending a doubtful tinge. In *High Fidelity*, the ending is also happy, but not overly celebratory. When Rob proposes to Laura, she declines and tells him that he has not been the most trustworthy person. Even though Rob has shown a willingness to change and the first steps towards emotional maturity, whether he follows through with them remains to be seen. While Lloyd makes a major life change by following Diane to England, Rob's moves towards adulthood are smaller. As is typical in emerging adult films, the focus is not on rites of passage that lead to lifelong commitment but, rather, on small, gradual changes. That is, the film places an emphasis on the process whereby adult roles are negotiated, highlighting the fact that the attainment of contemporary adulthood is not marked by rites of passage but by internal changes that take place gradually and depend largely on the individual (Arnett and Taber 533–534).

Both films present a rejection of adulthood to some extent. In *Say Anything*, adulthood is criminalized in what can be read as a critique of the materialistic values of the 1980s. While *High Fidelity* does not go as far, it portrays conventional transitions into adulthood as the giving up of one's authenticity. Emerging adult films often end with the protagonist's evolution towards some sort of greater maturity, but their evolution never implies a complete surrender of their identity. Instead, emerging adult characters like Rob have to figure out how to move on without losing themselves in the process. Often, as in *High Fidelity*, the protagonist's evolution consists in finding new uses for skills they already possess or in seeing those around them (and, by extension, adulthood) in a new light. Rob uses his musical know-how to launch a small record label and learns to accept the fact that Laura has changed. The obstacle standing between Rob and Laura is not the fact that she has changed but, rather, his emotional immaturity, which involves an unwillingness to settle down lest something better comes along and the idealization and rejection of people based on superficial aspects like their clothes or their music taste. In contrast, in *Say Anything*, as in most teenage films, the obstacle standing between Lloyd and Diane is external, in this case Diane's father. While Lloyd and Diane never doubt whether they are ready to be in a relationship or whether moving to England together is a good idea, Rob constantly doubts himself, questioning his skills as a lover and whether he is "doomed to be rejected." This difference results in opposing depictions of romantic love: while in *Say Anything* the romanticism of key relationship moments is emphasized through the *mise-en-scène*, framing and the use of music, *High Fidelity* undermines the idealization of romantic love and emphasizes companionship as a key element in relationships.

6. Conclusion

As has been shown through the analysis of *Say Anything* and *High Fidelity*, teenage films and emerging adult films share a number of common elements, such as an opposition between youth and adulthood, conflict between the protagonists and their peers, a focus on heterosexual romance and coming-of-age plots. As we have seen, the youthfulness that the two films analyzed display is different in nature: while in *Say Anything* youthfulness is generational and it creates conflict between teenagers and the older generation, in *High Fidelity* youthfulness is represented by an attitude and an outlook on life. In emerging adult films, conflict between the protagonist and adulthood does not necessarily imply conflict with the older generation. Instead, as in *High Fidelity*, the main source of conflict is often a character who is the same age as the protagonist but has crossed the threshold into adulthood. In emerging adult films, then, the scale of adulthood replaces high school cliques, and a characters' status is marked by their clothes, their behavior and the spaces they inhabit. Intra-generational conflict is central to emerging adult films just like it is to teenage films, but the nature of the conflict varies in that it is no longer related to popularity but to maturity. Finally, emerging adult films represent a more cynical view of love, often choosing not to idealize overly romantic moments and emphasizing everyday moments of shared intimacy or activities rather than grand romantic gestures. This shift may come from the fact that emerging adult protagonists, unlike teenage protagonists, are almost always sexually and romantically experienced. As a consequence, emerging adult films focus on serial monogamy and on the process of finding the right person to settle down with, while teenage films underscore the momentousness of the protagonist's first romantic and sexual experiences. The differences between both films therefore reflect the trials and tribulations of the life stage of their protagonists, each one of which possesses unique challenges that lead to different onscreen depictions of youth.

Despite the large age gap between the two protagonists, both *Say Anything* and *High Fidelity* are, at their core, films about becoming an adult. The fact that two films about growing up can have such a wide age difference between the two protagonists is symptomatic of the lengthening of the transition to adulthood in the past decades. The boundaries of youth have elongated at both ends, which in turn has widened the scope of the coming-of-age film. The narrative conflicts, themes and character types that predominate in tween films, aimed at the pre-teen demographic, are different from those that feature in teenage films, which in turn differ from those that abound in emerging adult films. Although the films discussed in this article depict the adolescence and emerging adulthood of a generation that is now firmly in middle age, the conflicts that the protagonists navigate remain relevant. Teenagers today still experience first loves and have complicated relationships with their peers and parents, while emerging adults today still wonder whether their partner is the one and struggle to make a

living doing something they love. If anything, the transition to adulthood today is even more fraught with uncertainty than it was at the turn of the millennium. Economic downturns have hit millennials at key points in their transition to adulthood: the Great Recession had a great impact on the oldest millennials as they were entering the workplace, while the COVID-19 pandemic and the recession may have affected those who were beginning to settle into adulthood. The emerging adult film is about to go through a generational takeover as the core of Gen Z enter their third decade, which they are doing against the backdrop of a health crisis, an economic recession, political polarization and social unrest, all of which will undoubtedly affect their transition to adulthood and its subsequent cinematic representations. Recent emerging adult films, like *The King of Staten Island* (Judd Apatow, 2020) and *Spree* (Eugene Kotlyarenko, 2020), feature protagonists who are yet to leave the parental home, whereas others, like *Buffaloed* (Tanya Wexler, 2019) explicitly address the difficulty of lower-class individuals to access an increasingly elitist higher education system. These characters have had fewer opportunities than *High Fidelity*'s Rob and, as a consequence, their emerging adulthood is much more unstable and less independent than his. While Rob remains immature and refuses to let go of his youth, his immaturity is a choice. In contrast, the protagonist in *Buffaloed* resorts to criminality to fund her college education, while the protagonist in *Spree* drives for a ride share app while he dreams of internet fame. Whether these films indicate a turn towards depictions of more precarious and treacherous roads to adulthood remains to be seen, but what has been made clear by three decades of emerging adulthood is that coming-of-age now refers to a wider range of experiences than ever before, which the coming-of-age film duly reflects.

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Filmography

High Fidelity. 2000. Dir. Stephen Frears. Prod. Touchstone Pictures.
Say Anything. 1998. Dir. Cameron Crowe. Prod. Gracie Films.

Music

"I Believe (When I Fall in Love It Will Be Forever)." 1972. *Spotify*, track 10 on
    Stevie Wonder, *Talking Book*, Motown Records.
"In Your Eyes." 1986. *Spotif*y, track 9 on Peter Gabriel, *So*, Charisma Records.

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