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# From On-Air Rebelliousness to the Cult of Positivity: Mediated Identities and Technological Change in *Pump Up the Volume* (1990) and *Eighth Grade* (2018)

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**Abstract:**
Thanks to technological change, the negotiation of adolescent identities largely takes part in virtual spaces. Mostly lacking parental supervision, virtual spaces become one of the few arenas where teenagers have unrestricted freedom to perform and construct their identities. Teenage films have depicted the possibilities and dangers of adolescents using technology since personal computers became commonplace in the 1980s. This paper analyses the representation of the relationship between networked virtual spaces and teenage identities in *Pump Up the Volume* (Allan Moyle, 1990) and *Eighth Grade* (Bo Burnham, 2018), two teen films in which the use of technology and virtual spaces as a means for self-expression becomes key in the protagonists' process of identity formation. The generational distance between the two films provides insight not only into technological change, but also into shifting social expectations. While *Eighth Grade* shows a world in which social media use is commonplace and having a social media profile is expected, *Pump Up the Volume* depicts a pre-internet world in which social media—in this case amateur radio—is produced and consumed by those whose voices and views are not typically represented or heard. As a consequence, although both films reflect on the relationship between adolescent identities and their performances on social media, they place an emphasis on different aspects of social networks that are specific to each film's socio-historical context. While *Pump Up the Volume* presents social media as a tool for rebellion, connection and potential systemic change, *Eighth Grade* reflects an individualised world in which conformity to neoliberal values—and, more specifically, neoliberal girlhood—replaces rebellion.

**Keywords:** teen film, adolescence, social media, virtual spaces, youth film, *Pump Up the Volume*, Eighth Grade

## 1. Introduction

With the rise of social media, virtual spaces have become another arena in which identities are negotiated and performed (Cover 2014, 2016). The social media boom that took place in the 2010s as the use of smartphones became widespread is only the tip of the iceberg. Before mobile-based apps like TikTok (2016) and Instagram (2010), there were desktop social networks like Facebook (2004) and MySpace (2003), photo-sharing websites like Fotolog (2002), online diaries like Open Diary (1998) and message boards, all of which encouraged self-expression and connection among like-minded individuals. Some websites for teenagers, like Bolt and Gurl (both created in 1996), included message boards, chat rooms and web hosting services where users could build their own websites for free. Before then, there were e-mail lists and, before almost every home had internet access, there was amateur radio, which has also been described as a form of "digital social media" (Mason 2014, 4). This essay explores the representation of networked virtual spaces as sites of teenage identity performance in two teen films: *Pump Up the Volume* (Allan Moyle, 1990), and *Eighth Grade* (Bo Burnham, 2018), which feature a controversial but popular amateur radio DJ and an unsuccessful YouTuber, respectively. This paper focuses on how these two films represent the relationship between teenage identities and social media performance, reflecting on how the specific socio-cultural moments in which each film was made provide an enlightening look at the changing relationship between youth and technology, the rise of neoliberal subjectivities, and the different generational consciousness of the two protagonists.

The extraordinary development of the internet, the ubiquitousness of the smartphone and the popularisation of social media have turned online spaces from the domain of the few to an inescapable part of life. This meteoric rise is signalled by the fact that, entering the third decade of the twenty-first century, the majority of the world population are internet users (World Bank Group n.d.). In the United States, 93% of adults used the internet in 2021, while only 52% did at the turn of the twenty-first century, when there was a steeper generational divide that signalled the appeal of the internet to young people, who tend to be early adopters of technology (Madden et al. 2013, Valor and Sieber 2003, PEW Research Center 2024). Teenagers, whose everyday lives are regimented and overseen by adults, possess few spaces that they can shape and construct as their own. This lack of personal space increases the appeal of virtual spaces,

which offer young people a blank canvas upon which they can give free rein to their individuality, exerting a degree of creative control that is denied to them in other domains.

Teen films reflect the relationship between young people and technology, highlighting both its potentials and limitations. In *Generation Multiplex* Timothy Shary describes a youth film category called "youth and science" that includes films whose plots are focused around the protagonists' interactions with technology, computers and games. Writing in 2002, Shary notes that interest in narratives centred around the interaction between teenagers and computers waned in the late 1980s despite the rise in computer use. In the revised version of this monograph, however, Shary omits the category "youth and science," noting that science tends to appear within fantasy settings and that "most realistic stories quite conspicuously minimize the presence of technology in teens' daily lives" (2014, 9). It could be argued that the pervasiveness of technology has stripped it of its novelty or that filmmakers steer away from technology in order not to make realistic films seem dated in the face of rapid technological change. Frances Smith (2017) has also noted the genre's recent focus on the posthuman, a turn which is sometimes represented by the transformational possibilities of superhero characters, by supernatural beings or, as in the case of *Chronicle* (Josh Trank, 2012) by the interaction between humans and technology. Even if technology is, as Shary says, often minimised, it seeps into narratives that do not place technology at its centre. Sometimes, virtual spaces—like the school's intranet in *Pretty in Pink* (Howard Deutch, 1986), a school blog and e-mail in *Love, Simon* (Greg Berlanti, 2018) and instant messaging services in *Sierra Burgess is a Lose*r (Ian Samuels, 2018)—bring together characters who would not have interacted in person, allowing them to cross the borders of the high school hierarchy. In contrast, in other films—for instance, *Booksmart* (Olivia Wilde, 2019) and *The Duff* (Ari Sandel, 2015)—virtual spaces reproduce the exclusionary social dynamics of the high school. *American Pie* (Paul Weitz and Chris Weitz, 1999) makes light of privacy and consent issues when a live stream turns Nadia's (Shannon Elizabeth) body into an object to be consumed without her consent. The dangers of social media and the cult of popularity are explicitly addressed in *Scream 4* (Wes Craven, 2011), while *Hard Candy* (David Slade, 2005) and *Cyberbully* (Ben Chanan, 2015) tackle the dangers that stem from online anonymity. Teenagers use technology to outsmart adults, underscoring their status as technological pioneers. But these illicit pursuits often come with great danger, in some cases—like in *Hackers* (Iain Softley, 1995)—to themselves, and in others—most notably in *WarGames* (John Badham, 1983)—to humanity. When expressing themselves through virtual spaces, teenage characters find the room to dispel myths and show themselves as they really are, as they do in *Easy A* (Will Gluck, 2010). As this brief overview shows, in virtual spaces

the potential for self-definition and self-transformation coexists with the threat of unwanted exposure and the dangers of anonymity. As we will see in the following sections, the protagonists in *Pump Up the Volume* and *Eighth Grade* use virtual spaces as a site of self-expression, self-definition and identity performance to varying degrees of success. The two films simultaneously question the authenticity of the protagonists' virtual personas, which are at odds with their behaviour in the spaces that they inhabit physically and, while positioning the performance of that persona as a key element in the protagonists' self-development.

## 2. Generational Rebellion Through Networked Spaces

### *2.1. On-air Identity vs Real Life*

In *Pump Up the Volume,* an introverted, isolated teenager becomes the unlikely voice of a generation when his amateur radio program becomes a hit among his classmates. At night, Mark (Christian Slater), who is invisible to his peers during the day, becomes Hard Harry or Happy Harry Hard-on, a vociferous and provocative DJ who is not afraid to shed light on the hopelessness of teenage life in suburbia and on the hypocrisy and greed of the older generation. Happy Harry Hard-on, whose moniker borrows the initials of his high school, reaches his peers with his reflections on the ennui that arises living in a place where there is nothing to do, in a time when, as he says, "all the great themes have been used up and turned into theme parks" or attending a school where reputation and financial gain prevail over education. The outspokenness and sexually charged antics of his on-air persona contrast with Mark's demeanour at school. When he is off-air, Mark tries to go unnoticed. He slouches, barely makes eye contact with anybody, is reluctant to speak to both classmates and teachers and nothing about his appearance would suggest any sort of subcultural affiliation. His plain clothes, round spectacles, academic excellence, social ostracism and inability to talk to girls make him come across as a nerd, but the film positions him, first and foremost, as a rebel through the elements of his personality that he reveals through the virtual space of his radio show. At the same time, Mark's two personas correspond to two different versions of masculinity. While his rebellious DJ persona possesses qualities that are positively perceived as masculine, such as sexual prowess, toughness and aggression, nerds are traditionally seen as antithetical to hegemonic masculinity due to their lack of social skills, disinterest in athletics and meagre love and sex lives (Stanley 2015, 3-4). Whereas school Mark comes across as a nerd, on-air Mark seems to be a hyper-masculine individual, none of which correspond to Mark's real self. Mark oscillates between two poles of masculinity, yet his true self lies somewhere in the middle.

This duality between the protagonist's on and off-air personas is revealed thirteen minutes into the film. At this point, Mark has already been defined by his association with alternative culture and his disdain towards the older generation and the institutions that they manage. By the time the spectator sees Mark nervously trying to shrink into his seat while his English teacher reads a poem he has written, we already know that this awkwardness only tells part of the story. The contrast between Mark's in-person and on-air identities resembles the dichotomy between online and offline life that existed in the 1990s and 2000s. As Rob Cover argues, back then one could conceive their online identity as a construction separate from their *real*—offline—self, an approach that he sees as "reductive and oversimplified" (2014, 56) given that in the present day "identity is always online" (2016, x). The film exemplifies the difficulty to separate both personas by positioning each of them as aspects that are core to Mark's identity. While sensitivity sometimes seeps into his on-air persona, Happy Harry Hard-on's outspokenness and rebelliousness also manifest themselves off-air and have real-world consequences.

### *2.2. Interconnectedness and Technology*

Even though *Pump Up the Volume* takes place when the internet had not reached its current ubiquitousness, Mark's on-air identity can be read as a precursor of online identities. As Andrew Mason argues, the role of amateur radio as a social media network is often overlooked. Amateur radio is social media in that it is a "user-generated social medium" that, despite being over a century old, "is electronic and digital" (2014, 8). The fact that anybody can start their own radio show—just like anybody can start a blog or a YouTube channel—sets amateur radio in opposition with the mass media, where a hierarchical relationship is established between media outlet and consumer. In traditional media, communication is one-sided and vertical. That is, it travels downwards from top to bottom. In contrast, social media bypasses these power structures. The relationship between consumer and creator is reciprocal and anybody can become a creator (Castells et al. 2004, DeVito 2016). Keeping this in mind, amateur radio can be argued to represent the beginning of this "shift from traditional mass media to a system of horizontal communication networks" (Castells 2010, xviii).

*Pump Up the Volume* captures a moment in which analogue and digital technologies coexist but internet access remains scarce. Although Mark owns a computer, at the time of filming, the World Wide Web had not opened to the public (Ring 2023), which makes his computer nothing more than an accessory in his room that lets us know his family is wealthy enough to afford one. Yet, despite the lack of internet technology, the film underscores the increased

connectivity that results from technological advances. FM Radio technology allows Mark to start a pirate radio station, thus becoming what is now known as a content creator and sharing his message. At the same time, the availability of compact cassette tapes and dual cassette tapes decks meant that anybody could record sounds off the radio or another source, rearrange them into a new cultural product and, crucially, make copies to distribute, therefore becoming creators themselves. High-quality car stereos, boomboxes and the rise of the *Walkman* allowed individuals to take their music—or their radio—with them everywhere they went and made it easy to share musical moments with others. Even though this is far removed from carrying a minicomputer in our pockets or wearing it around our wrists, these developments mark the beginning of a period in which media consumption lost its attachment to place and identities became increasingly mediated. The relationship between the use of technology and the creation of social networks is conveyed both through the film's narrative structure and visually.

*Pump Up the Volume* begins with the voiceover narration of the protagonist's radio show as an aerial shot moves through a suburban neighbourhood, firmly setting the narrative within a specific space and suggesting that the voice we can hear is reaching each and every one of those houses. The protagonist's politics, as well as his age, are well-established from the very beginning, as he complains about corruption and pollution and expresses his exasperation with high school life. His sarcastic tone and a cynical outlook that is highly critical of the older generation, positions him as the spokesperson for a generation that had yet to be named[1]. The opening credits show the ease with which media messages can be disseminated as cassette tape recordings of Hard Harry's programme change hands while people talk about him and wonder who he is. When he is on-air, shots of the protagonist speaking are cross-cut with shots of his audience as they listen to him, emphasising the intimate bond between speaker and listener. Some of them are on the phone to each other speculating about his identity, others drive their car to a spot that is rumoured to have the best reception, one holds up the telephone to her boombox so that somebody else can listen and many listen alone in the privacy of their bedrooms. The variety of listeners, of spaces and of modes of listening underscores the universality of his message within the demographic of his audience, which is made up of his peers. High school works as a regulated and regulatory space where teenage life is surveilled both by adults and by other teenagers, which

1 Although the term Generation X dates back to the 1950s, it began to be used to designate the cohort born between the mid-1960s and early 1980s after the publication of Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* in 1991 (Ulrich 2003).

sometimes makes it "a locus of oppression'" (Shary 2002, 27). When the film's characters are at school, we see them in terms of the space they occupy within the high school's social hierarchy: as jocks, rebels, nerds, etc. However, when they are in their bedrooms their identity no longer depends on the group. Ironically, it is where they are alone that they come together as a group. Their media consumption and their fascination with the DJ's message unites teenage listeners as a generation whose politics, attitude and ideals differ from those of the adults around them. It is through engagement with an alternative form of media created by someone like them—rather than by a corporation—that interconnectedness is created. Teenagers are shown as trapped in the roles that their parents and teachers have assigned to them, which finds a parallel in the spaces they inhabit, which are within adult-controlled institutions like the family or the high school and therefore never really their own. The only site that seems *truly* their own, an outlet and respite from the adult-regulated spaces that they navigate, is the virtual space that Mark has created.

### *2.3.Vulnerability and the Forging of Generational Consciousness*

*Pump Up the Volume* is not alone in its depiction of apparently different teenagers united by a communal sense of alienation and mistrust of adult institutions. Teen films often end with the protagonists transcending high school rules, most of the time through a romantic union that sees the protagonist dating outside their clique (Speed 1998, Shary 2002). In some instances, teenagers unite against the older generation and their values. For instance, in *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985) the five protagonists begin to relate to one another upon finding out that they face similar issues despite their different social status. However, the film leaves the spectator, like the characters themselves, wondering whether this union will last into Monday morning, implying that this change may be temporary. *Heathers* (Michael Lehmann, 1988) takes the destruction of high school stereotypes one step further and ends with rebel JD (also played by Christian Slater) blowing up the high school building. But this literal collapse of the institution that embodies both adult authority and the teenage social order is unlikely to last despite Veronica's (Winona Rider) claim that "there's a new sheriff in town." The building will be fixed and, even if the social hierarchy is upended for the time being, it is likely to revert to normal once a new generation of high school students comes along. *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004) reflects the fleeting nature of change in the teenage social order by showing a group of younger girls walking past the protagonist and her friends as they cast a judgemental look at them, suggesting that mean girls are far from over despite the fall of Regina George (Rachel McAdams) and the plastics.

Where *Pump Up the Volume* differs from these depictions of teenage unity and rebellion against the status quo is in its depiction of political change that goes beyond the limits of the high school, as well as in the implication that the consequences of Mark's rebellion will be lasting despite the protagonist's arrest. As Timothy Shary argues, Mark has become "a model" for teenage "liberation" thanks to his "technologically sophisticated means and psychological simplicity" (2002, 58). Owing to the fact that Mark's father (Scott Pauling) works for the school district, Mark has found out that underachieving students are being expelled by the school's corrupt principal in order to maintain a higher average in their SAT scores. The importance of the unveiling of systemic corruption is underscored from the beginning of the film, which begins with the protagonist asking his listeners if they "ever get that feeling that everything in America is completely fucked up," complaining that everything, including "the environment, the government, the schools" is polluted and thus raising local teenagers' awareness of socio-political issues.

The scene that plays over the opening credits shows school staff intercepting some students before they even get off the school bus in order to send them to the principal's office to get expelled. After the first student—a Latin American boy—is stopped, the camera shifts its attention to focus on a student who arrives in a Mercedes. Immediately after her arrival, another student comments on her intelligence. This juxtaposition underscores class and identity issues by showing wealthy students as academically successful while those from less affluent and ethnic backgrounds are the ones getting expelled on account of their bad average. The film, then, suggests that academic achievement is tightly linked to social class, thus refuting the myth of meritocracy. To Mark, success comes at the expense of one's ideals. He explicitly accuses his parents of selling out, unleashing a critique of baby boomers that was common at the time. In the film, parents and other adults—with the exception of the English teacher, whose different outlook costs her her job—are depicted as corrupt, ineffectual, materialistic and oblivious to their surroundings. This is most obviously seen in the figure of the school's principal, who has no qualms about damaging the future prospects of her students in favour of material gain, and in Mark's parents, especially his father, a former sixties radical whose ambition makes him move his family to a suburb in Arizona that lacks anything to offer for his wife and son. Adult-controlled media described Xers as a "lost generation" populated by apathetic, entitled slackers who watched too much television (Barringer 1990, Strauss and Howe 1991). Accounts written by young people, however, state that their "*apparent* [emphasis mine] oft-condemned apathy is actually a carefully modulated distancing from the cues and signals of the boomer's consumer culture" (Rushkoff 1994, 5). A 1992 essay by Frank and White echoes this sentiment, describing their

generation as "hopelessly estranged" from the "cult of 'professionalism'" (133) that characterises boomers and positioning Generation X as "a generation that finally says NO to your favourite institutions" (134). In what sounds like a line from Hard Harry's radio show, the authors remind the reader that "beneath the order of lawns and malls and home entertainment system lay a world of despair, of unimaginable sufferings, of fantastic injustices" (132).

It is this overarching despair that brings high schoolers together as a generation. Mark's radio show makes teenagers realise that they are not alone in their alienation, planting the seed of generational consciousness. This happens in moments when Mark allows his sensitivity and vulnerability to come through his blunt, provocative on-air persona. As was mentioned before, the anonymity of the early internet allowed individuals to fabricate an online personality that differed from their in-person one, a duality that, as Rob Cover argues, ended when the internet took over and online and offline converged (2014, 2016). Cover applies Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) theories on performative identity and concludes that our online behaviour is not merely a reflection of identity or an adoption of an alternate one but, rather, a "space for the continued, ongoing construction of subjectivity" (2014, 55). As Mark's on-air performance begins to have real life consequences, he is no longer able to maintain his on-air and in-person identities separate. The vulnerability and loneliness of his daily life begin to infiltrate his on-air persona, whereas the rebelliousness of Hard Harry becomes Mark's when he reveals his identity at the end of the film. At this point, his on-air and in-person looks merge: the glasses that he wears at school but never on-air are combined with a leather jacket, an enduring icon of teenage rebelliousness. It is now that he speaks to an audience without voice distortion for the first time, emphasising that Harry's voice is Mark's and that they are one. His on-air performance was not simply a game or an attempt to embody hegemonic masculinity but, rather, a process through which part of his subjectivity was shaped.

When Mark is at his most vulnerable, no longer able to hide in the anonymity of the airwaves and at the mercy of the authorities, his message is at its most powerful. Ironically, the mass media's interest in his story has only amplified Mark's message. Mark's final message to "keep the air alive" was not only delivered to teenagers in his suburb, but across state lines, influencing many to raise their voices in solidarity. What began as a past-time talking into the void resulted in the emergence of a "horizontal communication network" (Castells 2010, xviii) that foreshadows the emergence of "mass self-communication," which Castells defines as "a new form of socialized communication" that "reaches a potentially global audience (…) allows the reformatting of almost any content in almost any form" and is "self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many" (2007,

248). Although technology in 1990 did not allow for Mark's message to spread as quickly and globally as it would today, the nature of his radio show and its consequences fulfil the rest of Castells' points. Additionally, the political message behind Mark's broadcasts underscores the potential of mass self-communication as a catalyst for social change (Castells 2007, 249). The establishment of a communication network of like-minded teenagers is emphasised in the film's final scene, in which images of Mark and his now accomplice Nora (Samantha Mathis) being driven away by the authorities are accompanied by a voice-over narration of teenagers across the nation following his example and starting their own radio shows. Castells explains that "a network has no center, just nodes" and, when one of those nodes fails, "networks tend to reconfigure themselves" (2004, 3). Upon Mark's arrest the apparent centre of the network disappears, but the network's reconfiguration is signalled by the overlap of the different voices of teenagers speaking in their pirate radio shows. This overlap emphasises the multiplicity of new nodes in the network, serving as a reminder that Mark's job is not done and that teenage rebellion lives on.

## 3. Fitting in or Resisting Neoliberal Girlhood

While in *Pump Up the Volume* virtual spaces are represented as sites where teenagers resist and rebel against the rules imposed by adults, in *Eighth Grade*, set in the age of the smartphone, virtual spaces have become extensions of the outside world where one is expected to fit in and fulfil gendered expectations. *Eighth Grade* is concerned with the transition from childhood to adolescence and how this transition is mediated in online spaces. Kayla (Elsie Fisher) uses the internet not only as a social tool to communicate with her peers, but also as a guidebook on how to be a woman and, most importantly, as a parent-free space where she can perform identity work, express herself and try on new roles as she moves forward in her process of self-discovery. The film is set in 2017, when smartphones had already become ubiquitous in the U.S. (Pew Research Center 2024). A 2018 study reports that 45% of U.S. teenagers were online "almost constantly," whereas in 2014-2015 only 24% of the respondents spent the majority of their day online (Anderson and Jiang 2018). The ubiquitousness of mobile phones is shown not only through the protagonist's media use, but also by showing other teenagers on their phones through their daily activities: on the way to school, in class, during school shooting drills and as they wait in line for their graduation. Teenagers inhabit online spaces as they move through physical ones, underscoring the growing difficulty in differentiating between an individual's online and in-person identity, given that both happen simultaneously and at all times (Cover 2016).

### *3.1. Bedroom Connections*

Of course, the conflation of the virtual and the physical does not necessarily mean that the physical is accurately depicted online. Kayla's interactions and posts on social media show a change in her identity performances that is context-dependent. Writing about the spaces of girlhood, Bettis and Adams argue that girls modified their identities depending on "the spaces they inhabited and how they used these spaces" (2005, 4). Kayla's interactions on social media are cheerful and light-hearted, which contrasts with her isolation—both at school, where she barely talks to anybody, and at home—and her quiet nature. Considering the prevalence of social media in the lives of teenagers, Kayla's participation in social media can be read as an attempt to fit in and reproduce an ideal of normative girlhood that is out of reach. The participants in Rosalind Gill's study on young women's perceptions of social media were afraid that withdrawing from social media would exclude them socially despite the fact that they saw these platforms as promoting forms of "femininity that are exclusionary, unrealistic, unattainable, and that contribute to a pervasive sense of never being good enough" (2022). Ironically, in *Eighth Grade* these social interactions mostly happen in private spaces, more specifically in the intimate sphere of the protagonist's bedroom, either at her desk or sitting on her bed.

The study of girls' bedrooms has been pivotal in the field of girlhood studies. In the mid-1970s, Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber noted the tendency for subcultural studies to focus exclusively on the lives of young men and challenged this one-sidedness by turning their attention to girls. Their 1976 essay, *Girls and Subcultures*, argues that girls' cultural practices take place within the confines of the home, where girls develop a "culture of the bedroom." According to McRobbie and Garber, girls used the space of their bedrooms to consume media, chat to their friends and try on new looks (2003, 213). More recently, Mary Celeste Kearney has critiqued and expanded on this theory, arguing that even though girls, especially preteen girls, continue to use their bedrooms in this manner, the availability of user-friendly technology has turned girls' bedrooms into sites of media production, which challenges the distinction between public and private spaces and holds "the potential to substantially alter girls' relationships to the public sphere" (2007, 137). *Eighth Grade* shows Kayla's bedroom as a site of both media consumption and media production. Interestingly, there are two differentiated spaces within her bedroom, which roughly correspond to each of these activities. Kayla consumes media mostly on her bed, but she produces it at her desk, which emphasises the fact that media production—as well as the identity production that goes along with it—is a form of labour. When she uses her phone to consume media outside her bedroom, she uses headphones, which grants her a sense of privacy akin to that of

her personal space and establishes a boundary between her and her father (Josh Hamilton). As Siân Lincoln explains, bedrooms have been described as safe spaces where girls are free from the surveillance of their parents and peers. However, they are not entirely private spaces. Bedrooms reflect “power relations in the home” (2014, 270), with parents having both access to them and regulatory influence over them. At the same time, public space enters teenage bedrooms through media and technology.

Kayla’s media consumption reflects the interaction between public and private spaces. Even though it happens in the most intimate place of all, her bed, it brings to light public discourses regarding women’s beauty, agency and sexuality. In a montage sequence, Kayla sits on her bed in complete darkness, her face illuminated by the glare of her computer screen and, later, her phone. The protagonist browses a series of websites, beginning with content related to pop culture. The reflection of her face on the screen suggests not only how engrossing this process is for her, but also the role it plays in shaping her identity. It underscores the fact that her identity is mediated and what she watches largely defines and shapes who she is. As time goes on, distances get shorter and the type of content she is watching begins to focus on depictions of normative femininity. Kayla’s face is superimposed on images of idealised beauty and overwhelming happiness, emphasising everything that she is not. Unlike the girls on her screen, Kayla does not have perfect skin, professional-looking make-up or perfectly coiffed hair, and her serious look contrasts with their cheerfulness. When she shifts from her laptop to her mobile phone she lies down on the bed, which restricts her reflection to her eyes. She is intently focused on social media now, watching inaudible videos in which teenage girls speak into the camera with what looks like confidence. Her eyes almost merge with the eyes of the girls she is watching, suggesting both her psychological investment in the activity and her desire to be like the girls on her screen. At the same time, Enya’s “Orinoco Flow” plays non-diegetically, its lyrics highlighting her desire to be different, to “sail away” and be carried on to new lands. Dissolves highlight the passing of time and Kayla’s attention turns to her own YouTube channel, her glance revealing that the videos that she is so invested in receive zero views. After this, she decides to take a selfie on Snapchat, using a filter and pulling faces that change her expression considerably. This moment of attempted change in which she is able to see herself through a different lens is interrupted by an Instagram notification that sees public life interfering with a private moment. Kennedy (Catherine Oliviere), a popular girl whose mother wants her to invite Kayla to her pool party, sends her a half-hearted invite, emphasising the fact that her mother made her do it. Kennedy’s Instagram feed looks like all the images of idealised female adolescence that Kayla had been consuming, her perfect skin, apparent

confidence and model-like posing contrast with Kayla's acne and awkwardness. If that was not enough, the boy that Kayla has a crush on likes Kennedy's pictures. Looking at the boy's Instagram, Kayla practises kissing on her hand, a personal moment of sexual exploration that is prompted by her (social) media consumption and abruptly interrupted by her father, at which point the music stops, and with it, so do the protagonist's dreams of change and exploration.

### *3.2. Imperfection as a Form of Resistance*

Through her YouTube channel, which claims to offer "life tips for people like me," Kayla attempts to untangle the complicated net of contemporary girlhood. As Bettis and Adams (2005) argue, the parameters of ideal girlhood have changed, with some traditionally feminine traits like "passivity, quietness and acquiescence" being discarded in favour of "self-determination" (26), "assertiveness and independence" (27). These changes in the conception of girlhood go hand in hand with the spread of neoliberal values to every area of life and the rise of "neoliberal feminism" (Rottenberg 2014) and "popular feminism" (Banet-Weiser 2018), which focuses on "the individual empowered woman" (17). For Banet-Weiser, self-confidence is "the new mandate of our time" (73) for girls and women, who are urged to work on themselves and attain self-confidence as the (individual) answer to their (often systemic) problems. Rosalind Gill applies this to beauty ideals, arguing that the urge to love our bodies and to have self-esteem also result from "a neoliberal sensibility" that "shapes contemporary beauty culture," encouraging girls and women to be "self-optimising subjects who work on their appearance and on their character and dispositions to cultivate a beautiful body and an appealing, positive mental attitude" (2021, 15-16). Similarly, Angela McRobbie argues that women are increasingly pressured to be perfect, meaning "a heightened form of self-regulation based on an aspiration to some idea of the 'good life'" that is based "on calculation and self-assessment against some elevated and rarely described benchmarks" (2015, 9). This echoes McGee's concept of the "belabored self," a self that is always at work on itself in an attempt to seek individual solutions to systemic problems (2005).

Throughout the course of the film, Kayla records five videos for her YouTube channel. She also watches a video she made for her future self when she started middle school and records a video for her future self to be watched when she finishes high school. These recordings follow the evolution of the protagonist's relationship with social media and her road to self-determination as her desire to fit in morphs into a resistance to comply with the rules of neoliberal girlhood. Her desire to strive for perfection is reflected by the *post-it* notes that adorn her bathroom mirror, where she has posted self-encouraging messages of the kind

that appear across media—especially media directed at women—calling for self-work as a means to reach happiness. In them, she exhorts herself to "be sexy," "practice small talk," "use more colour," "don't stop believing" and "make today a better day," among other messages. The evolution of her videos reflects her gradual rejection of this disposition as she embraces who she is and accepts imperfection as a part of life, thus resisting a culture that urges her to work on herself and aim for perfection.

This evolution is conveyed both through the content of her videos and through the way the film shows them. At the beginning, we see Kayla mediated through a screen, looking straight into the camera as she struggles to explain the importance of being oneself. Even though the image is meant to be coming from her laptop, the camera slowly pulls away as her self-narrative becomes an attempt to reflect a personality that is not her own, with distance emphasising her dishonesty. In the next three recordings her voice plays over scenes that have taught her the lessons she is trying to teach her subscribers. The connection between her narration and specific life events reveals her videos as an attempt to work through the emotions that these events have generated. As she evolves, so does the way in which her videos are shown. When she is being dishonest her image is mediated through the screen, which highlights the fact that the message is not a faithful representation of real life but a construction. When she begins to feel pleased with herself, we see her watching her own video and smiling in approval immediately before taking filterless selfies for the first time, the first signs of self-acceptance. In her fourth video, Kayla's image is not mediated through a screen, suggesting that she might be giving a more honest depiction of her feelings. This culminates in her fifth and final video, which she records after she is a victim of sexual assault. In this video, the protagonist comes clean about her insecurities and anxieties and announces that her channel will be closing. This time, instead of seeing her through the screen we see her from above as she speaks into her laptop, whose presence is marked by a purple line at the bottom of the screen. We are therefore reminded that this is still a media product intended for public consumption, but the fact that Kayla's face is shown as separate from the computer screen for the first time suggests that her subjectivity now exists outside the rules she was trying to fulfil. The video she makes for her future self reflects the protagonist's psychological change and resistance to the ethos of positivity and self-improvement that pervades contemporary culture. She tells her future self that it is okay if high school failed to meet her expectations and that it is okay to feel sad, assuring her that life moves on and new opportunities will arise in the future. Tellingly, this is the first time her bedroom is shown in broad daylight, which indicates the shift towards a more open and honest disposition that requires an identity built free from the influence of social media.

## 4. Conclusion

At first sight, *Pump Up the Volume* and *Eighth Grade* appear to be radically different in their media use, a difference that is symptomatic of the different socio-historical moments in which the films were made. *Pump Up the Volume*, which was made at a time when the internet was yet to take over and self-expression through technology was not ubiquitous, tells a tale of rebellion against authority, more specifically against the values of the baby boomer generation. In contrast, *Eighth Grade*, made in the middle of the smartphone era when participation in social media had already become widespread, is concerned with fulfilling societal norms, particularly those that regulate self-presentation and self-determination. In other words, one seems to be about standing out and the other about fitting in. However, a closer reading of *Eighth Grade* reveals that it explicitly rejects neoliberal notions of female empowerment and self-optimisation. Kayla, like Mark, deviates from the established route to success, resisting and challenging prevailing cultural narratives through her media production. In her case, through her decision to quit producing a certain type of content that conforms to the norms of neoliberal femininity.

A key difference between the two texts is the reach of the protagonists' rejection of convention. While Mark's actions lead to social change—the principal's arrest—and inspire others to follow suit, Kayla's change only affects her and will possibly be noticed by nobody, given that her channel seems to have no subscribers. While *Pump Up the Volume* emphasises collective action against a corrupt system, in Eighth Grade Kayla understands her feelings of inadequacy and anxiety as individual problems that she can overcome through self-work. Her eventual refusal to comply with the rules of popularity and coolness and the rejection of neoliberal girlhood is an individual one, but the problem is systemic. Kayla's difficulty to see her problems as stemming from anything other than her immediate environment reflects the increasing emphasis placed on the individual, who is increasingly urged to seek individual solutions to systemic problems (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, McGee 2005). This attitude, together with an interest in an online performance of idealised forms of selfhood, sets *Eighth Grade* apart from *Pump Up the Volume*, reflecting the socio-cultural changes that have taken place in the years between their release as well as the different generational consciousness of Generation X and Z. Together, the two films provide an enlightening look at the relationship between youth identities and technology.

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