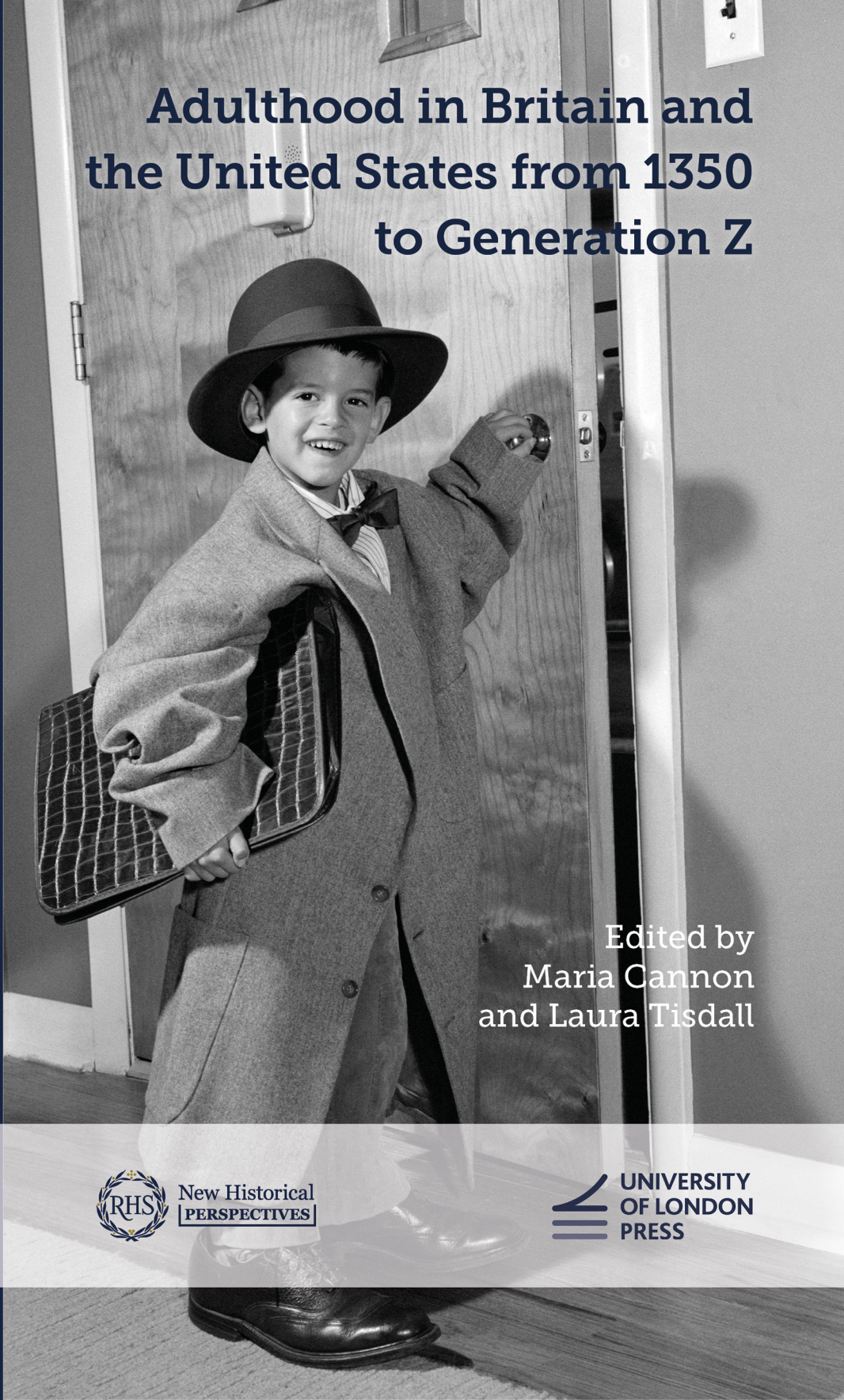
Adulthood in Britain and the United States from 1350 to Generation Z



Edited by
Maria Cannon
and Laura Tisdall

RHS New Historical PERSPECTIVES

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON PRESS

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UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON
PRESS

Available to purchase in print or download
for free at https://uolpress.co.uk

First published 2024 by
University of London Press
Senate House, Malet St, London WC1E 7HU

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from The British Library.

ISBN 978-1-908590-82-4 (hardback)
ISBN 978-1-908590-83-1 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-908590-85-5 (.epub)
ISBN 978-1-908590-84-8 (.pdf)
ISBN 978-1-915249-84-5 (.html)

DOI https://doi.org/10.14296/vjit1721

Cover image: Boy dressed in father's clothes holding attaché.
Photo by Camerique/Mary Evans

Cover design for University of London Press by Nicky Borowiec.
Series design by Nicky Borowiec.
Book design by Nigel French.
Text set by Westchester Publishing Services UK in Meta Serif and Meta, designed by Erik Spiekermann.

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Chapter 11

A road of one's own: The rejection of standard adulthood in US emerging adult films[1]

Andrea Sofía Regueira Martín

Two decades separate the slackers of 1990s cinema from the 'Messy Millennial Woman' that populates contemporary cinema and television, but both character types are symptomatic of the same phenomenon: the changes that the transition to adulthood – and adulthood itself – have undergone in the last thirty years.[2] Pop culture holds up a mirror to society, reflecting and shaping its values and expectations as well as tracking its changes. Shifts and trends in popular culture are thus a useful tool through which one can study societal change. At the time, films about slackers and Generation X might have seemed like a passing fad, but some of the characteristics embodied by slackers came to stay. In other words, the protagonists changed, but films about drifting twentysomethings hovering between adolescence and adulthood as they try to figure out who they want to be not only remained, but also grew in number as the millennial generation entered their third decade.[3] The rise of these films coincides chronologically with the moment that Jeffrey Arnett pinpoints as the time when emerging adulthood became commonplace.[4] Arnett defines emerging adulthood as a life stage between adolescence and adulthood during which one has attained some markers of adulthood but is yet to reach others, naming a shift in young people's perception of adulthood as a key element of the prevalence of emerging adulthood. As he explains, most emerging adults reject what he calls 'traditional conceptions of adulthood' – and others refer to as 'standard adulthood' – including adult milestones such as 'marriage, home, and children', which

are now seen 'not as achievements to be pursued but as perils to be avoided'.[5]

Even though the concept of emerging adulthood has been questioned by those who believe that it reflects a privileged point of view, ignoring larger socio-economic factors behind the lengthening of the transition to adulthood and the shifting nature of adulthood itself, the term remains useful to designate those films that focus on the latter stages of the coming-of-age process and depict the protagonists' struggle, refusal and reluctance to settle down. Conflict between preconceived ideas of what adulthood should look like and the protagonists' desires permeates these films, independently of whether the protagonists strive to achieve that ideal or reject it. This chapter examines filmic representations of this tension between the conception of standard adulthood that emerged in the US in the mid-twentieth century and emerging adulthood in order to discuss what these films tell us about the changing nature of contemporary adulthood.[6] After a brief outline of emerging adulthood and the challenges faced by emerging adults today, this chapter will focus on onscreen depictions of the conflict between standard adulthood and emerging adulthood, dividing the analysis into three parts that correspond to the character types that most commonly embody standard adulthood: romantic partners, best friends and former classmates and relatives.

Becoming an adult today

In the United States, concern with the lengthening of youth and the consequent postponement of adulthood began in the early 1970s. Since then, there have been several attempts to define a life stage bridging adolescence and adulthood. Before Arnett's emerging adulthood took hold, there was Kenneth Keniston's 'youth', Daniel J. Levinson's 'novice phase' and Susan Littwin's 'postponed generation', all of which are reminiscent of Erikson's 'psychosocial moratorium', a 'sanctioned postponement of definitive commitment' that he initially associated with adolescence but later expanded to include college-age individuals.[7] Arnett and Taber criticised Keniston's conception of 'youth' for being too closely linked to the counterculture and not as mass-scale as he claimed, but Keniston's writings show that some of the societal shifts that led to the postponement of adult commitment had already begun in the late 1960s.[8]

Writing from a US perspective, Keniston directly links longer transitions to adulthood to postwar affluence and the increase of the number of students enrolled in tertiary education to meet 'the enormously high educational demands of a postindustrial society'.[9] The correlation between

higher education and a later entry to the workplace is clear and acknowledged by many, but there is more to it than university enrolment. Some authors have connected this educational trend with another factor that led to the lengthening of the transition to adulthood: a delay in the age at which people get married and become parents.[10] This shift is also directly related to feminist advances that made women's life patterns more akin to men's as they began to pursue higher education and enter the workplace in greater numbers. At the same time, the changes in interpersonal relationships brought about by the sexual revolution provided women with more sexual and reproductive agency.[11] Although sexist stereotypes regarding women's roles are by no means eradicated, these advances granted women more freedom and opportunities as far as their transition to adulthood is concerned.[12]

While it is true that today's young adults have more freedom to choose an individualised route to adulthood, the uncertainty and precarity under which this transition takes place must not be ignored. As Jennifer Silva explains in her study of US working-class adulthood, deferring adulthood might be a lifestyle choice for privileged individuals who have the economic and familial support to carry out the soul-searching that characterises emerging adulthood, but that is not the case for everybody.[13] For those with less privilege, adulthood is out of reach and a precarious existence with contingent jobs and relationships is the norm. In these cases, individuals are *forced* to explore, to change roles and identities as their financial circumstances do. Although Silva's work focuses on working-class young adults, some of the insecurity and uncertainty that characterise these transitions has seeped into other social classes. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim explain in their theory of individualisation, the abundance of choices that characterises contemporary life make each person's biography unique, but this 'do-it-yourself biography' does not come without risks.[14] This freedom to explore is a two-sided coin, as it coexists with increased possibilities of failure, especially given that contemporary society is increasingly characterised by uncertainty and unpredictability.[15] When applied to the workplace, this flexibility encourages what Bauman calls a 'short-term mentality' that leaves no space for meaningful, long-lasting connections or involvement in long-term projects, both of which are essential to adulthood as we know it.[16]

Short-term arrangements feature in Arnett's conceptualisation of emerging adulthood, albeit in a more positive light. Arnett calls emerging adulthood a time of in-betweenness, instability, identity exploration, focus on oneself and possibilities.[17] Although Arnett names a rejection of adult values as one of the factors involved in the rise of emerging adulthood, his theory implies that one will eventually leave these traits behind

and attain some sort of standardised adulthood that will involve stability, focus on others, the end of self-searching and knowledge of one's place in the world. In contrast, some have argued that such an end is not actually in sight and that what has changed is not the transition to adulthood but adulthood itself. This 'new adulthood' is characterised by 'the uncertainty, unpredictability and instability that once characterised "youth"'.[18] Similarly, Blatterer argues that what once were features of youth now belong to contemporary adulthood, which he sees as 'perpetually liminal' and without a 'definite destination'.[19] Keeping in mind this context, one can argue that the clash between standard adulthood and emerging adulthood that appears in emerging adult films represents a snapshot of a culture grappling with the redefinition of what it means to be an adult.

When you grow up your heart dies: onscreen rejections of standard adulthood

In films, wherever there is an emerging adult protagonist there is usually someone their own age who has moved on from youthful experimentation and into adult commitment. Eighty-five out of the one hundred and sixteen US emerging adult films included in the corpus of my doctoral dissertation featured narrative tension between emerging adulthood and standard adulthood. Looking at the prevalence of this trope across the three decades that I analysed reveals that its prominence grew as time went on. In the 1990s it appeared in 62.5 per cent of the films, rising to 67 per cent in the 2000s and to 80 per cent in the 2010s.[20] It could be argued, then, that onscreen representations of emerging adulthood reveal a growing concern with a form of adulthood that, as was explained in the previous section, some consider to be outdated, undesirable and unreachable for the majority of young people.[21] The fact that representations of this conflict have increased through the decades can be read as a reflection of the ever-growing struggles faced by the millennial generation in their transition to adulthood. Millennials have been described as entitled and immature, but when writing about this generation one must not forget that they have also been described as 'the unluckiest generation in U.S. history', that their coming-of-age process has been tainted by two recessions – the Great Recession affected older millennials and the COVID-19 recession younger ones – and that they fare poorly as far as intergenerational wealth is concerned.[22]

Through this narrative tension, emerging adult films highlight the fact that the markers of standard adulthood have become *demodé* for some and unattainable for others. As we will see in the analyses that follow,

the characters who embody standard adulthood are depicted as antagonists. While the protagonists chase their dreams and struggle to give up what they believe to be the core elements of their personality, adulthood is portrayed as a loss of authenticity, which makes the protagonists view their more grown-up partners, friends and family members as corporate drones who have given up and whose essence is gone, which inevitably poses challenges to their relationship.

Emerging adult protagonists often struggle when their romantic interest has a more adult outlook than themselves. This can be seen from the earliest iterations of emerging adult films. While in some instances the distance between the two characters prevents a relationship from even beginning, in other cases the protagonists find themselves in a relationship with someone who represents standard adulthood and both parties have to compromise parts of themselves in order for the relationship to succeed. Compromise and willingness to change are necessary for the protagonists of *Always Be My Maybe* (Nahnatchka Khan, 2019), a film that represents the differences between emerging adulthood and standard adulthood visually as well as narratively.[23] When two childhood best friends who lost touch after losing their virginity to each other find each other again, their lifestyles could not be any more different. Sasha (Ali Wong) is a successful celebrity chef, but Marcus's (Randall Park) life seems to have been on pause since he was a teenager. Not only has Marcus never left his hometown of San Francisco, he still lives in his childhood bedroom and plays in his high school band. After a montage sequence showing photo booth pictures of the protagonists through childhood and adolescence, a flashback shows the nature of their friendship and the moment when it ended. This is immediately followed by two scenes that introduce the two ex-friends' lives in the present day, presenting them as opposites. The differences between the two are marked not only by the narrative but also by the mise-en-scène, particularly their clothes and the spaces that they occupy. We see Sasha in her successful LA restaurant – where accolades and framed magazine covers adorn the walls – and at a charity gala, wearing a chic red gown and accompanied by her restaurant developer fiancé. The luxury and glamour of her life contrast starkly with the ordinariness of Marcus's, whom we first meet when he is dancing and smoking weed in front of a mirror in his childhood bedroom in San Francisco. His scruffy clothes – tracksuit bottoms, an unbuttoned shirt with a vest underneath and no shoes – and the mess in his room hint towards a lack of discipline in his life, while the decor on his walls and shelves suggests that he has evolved very little since adolescence.

Yet, these two juxtaposed scenes reveal other telling details about the protagonists' personal lives. Sasha's relationships are strained and her

priorities are wrong. Her tight schedule does not leave her time to be there for her pregnant friend and assistant but she does have time for her fiancé, whose smiles turn into iciness the very moment camera lenses are not pointed at them. After an event, the couple is shown driving back home while sitting at opposite sides of the car. Their position within the frame reflects his emotional detachment, which is also highlighted by his monosyllabic responses and lack of interest in Sasha. In contrast, the relationship between Marcus and his father is warm and affectionate, which is shown by their actions, as in the previous scene, by framing. Marcus is sitting very close to his father while giving him an injection. As he does this, the camera moves closer until they are both shot from the chest up in a medium close-up, emphasising their bond as well as the very personal nature of both their actions – looking after one another – and their conversation about their gentrifying neighbourhood.

These two scenes contain several elements that appear recurrently in emerging adult narratives. Even though Sasha's adulthood is not exactly standard, the differences between her and Marcus are represented through the same visual elements commonly used to highlight tension between emerging adulthood and standard adulthood: mise-en-scène – particularly costume and setting – and framing. In addition, these scenes provide a good example of the critical lens through which accomplished or successful adulthoods are usually seen in these films. In this film, as in many others, success does not necessarily bring fulfilment. Sasha is rich, famous and glamorous, but her boyfriend does not even look at her when she asks a question and she has no time to devote to those who do care about her. Work has taken over her life and, in the process, she seems to have forgotten who she was and where she came from. This is exactly the outcome that most emerging adult protagonists are trying to avoid when they reject standard adulthood. They often linger as they try to figure out a way to move on in life while remaining true to themselves, which sometimes proves impossible and sometimes requires a readjustment of their expectations. When it comes to their relationship with their past selves, those characters who are too attached to their past need to learn to let go of it, while the ones who have grown up to be completely detached from it need to revisit and reconsider their lives in light of who they were. As mentioned, the two characters reach a compromise by the end of the film: Marcus accepts Sasha's choices and takes a step towards leaving home and improving his life, while Sasha gets back in touch with her origins and rejects *haute cuisine* in favour of the traditional cooking that she learnt from Marcus's mother when she was a child.

But not all films show the protagonists and their more adult-like lovers finding common ground. In some instances, one partner's step into

adulthood signals an end for the couple. For example, *For a Good Time Call …* (Jamie Travis, 2012) begins with one of the protagonists (Lauren Miller Rogen) being dumped when her boyfriend is given the chance to move to Milan for work. The opposite occurs in *Someone Great* (Jennifer Kaytin Robinson, 2019), a film in which the protagonist (Gina Rodriguez) is dumped by her boyfriend after she gets her dream job and has to move across the country. These examples show how the 'short-term mentality' mentioned earlier is depicted as an element that affects the professional and personal lives of the protagonists. Whether the root of the break-up is a reluctance to commit, a fear of closing one's options or mere selfishness, it all boils down to an individualised approach to contemporary life that leaves little room for lifelong commitment.[24]

As we have seen, when romantic narratives end on a positive – or, at least, potentially positive – note, the protagonists and their partners need to show self-reflection, growth and mutual understanding, with compromise and letting go of parts of their lifestyle as key elements that allow their union. In these cases, the couple is not united by fate or chance, but by a conscious effort to change to be able to remain compatible, an approach that underscores the fact that interpersonal relationships are the result of hard work and mutual understanding and that they require sacrifices on both sides. In the case of emerging adult films, these sacrifices require the protagonist to take some steps towards maturity and the more 'mature' character to make changes in their lifestyle that bring them closer to who they once were. This does not necessarily mean that they have to become more immature but, rather, that they have to remember who they used to be. In the case of Sasha, this implied using the knowledge she acquired as a child in her new business venture, a more authentic version of success that is not as influenced by preconceived ideas regarding culinary excellence. Emerging adult films therefore see growing up as a process during which one is at risk of losing one's identity, with adult success found not in the rejection of one's past but in the careful calibration of one's personal history and present life.

Even though emerging adults may no longer live with their parents, most of them are still far from becoming completely independent. Many emerging adult films reflect this state of semi-dependence through the relationship of the protagonist with their friends who, in the absence of parental figures, often take on a caretaking role, providing the protagonist with emotional and sometimes even financial support. Living with friends – a common arrangement that reflects the dire financial reality of emerging adults – does not seem to pose a problem as long as all of them are on the same page as far as maturity is concerned. For instance, *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* (David Mirkin, 1997) focuses on two

friends who live together and whose living arrangements cause no drama between them due to their similar status regarding the transition to adulthood. In other cases, people who once disliked one another are forced into friendship when the difficulty to find affordable housing in big cities forces them to share an apartment. For instance, in *For a Good Time Call ...* , precarity forces former college frenemies into an unwanted flatshare that becomes a close friendship.

The relationship between friends becomes more complicated when there is a clear imbalance between the protagonist's position and that of their friend's; that is, when one of the two friends has grown up and the other one is struggling to do so. In some cases, the liminal position of the emerging adult protagonist is depicted through the space they occupy at their friend's house. In *Social Animals* (Theresa Bennett, 2018), the protagonist lives in a camper van parked in her friend's garden, an arrangement that emphasises their different status through a clash between the temporary nature of the protagonist's arrangements and the solidity of home ownership. Another protagonist who is almost a squatter at his friend's place is Dewey (Jack Black) in *School of Rock* (Richard Linklater, 2003). What Dewey calls his 'room' is actually a part of his friend Ned's (Mike White) living room separated by a curtain. Both *School of Rock* and *Social Animals* show a friendship in which the protagonists' friends take on an almost parental role by giving the protagonists shelter, however precarious or temporary their situation may seem.

The settings of these films also emphasise the impossibility of carrying on with a bohemian hipster lifestyle into adulthood. Both feature hipster enclaves where the protagonists' lifestyle cannot continue. In *Social Animals*, Zoe (Noël Wells) cannot afford to live in gentrified Austin, while in *School of Rock* Dewey is kicked out of his band after a show in Williamsburg in which his stage antics hinder the band's performance. Both characters seem to be out of sync with these spaces, which – like their friends – are evolving faster than they are. In gentrified Austin, Zoe's waxing business cannot compete with a laser competitor, while Dewey's penchant for overly long guitar solos and stage diving seems to belong to a different decade and is out of place in Williamsburg, the home of the 2000s hipster.[25] This inability to keep up with the passing of time and evolve, then, sees the protagonists out of sync with spaces that symbolise cultural change as well as with the spaces that their friends occupy, which stand for their personal development and maturity.

In Dewey's case, this incompatibility extends to his relationship with his friend Ned, who embodies standard adulthood and provides a counterpoint to Dewey's recklessness and refusal to move on. What might have seemed like a fun idea to Ned when he let Dewey move in later

becomes a major hurdle in his road towards adult commitment. While both friends used to share dreams of becoming rock stars, Ned has acknowledged the fact that rock stardom is out of his reach and has chosen to become a teacher instead. Now, he is studying to become a full-time teacher and he lives with his girlfriend, who is growing increasingly irritated by the intrusiveness of Dewey's living arrangements and the fact that he does not pay any rent. Dewey's corner of the living room is chockfull of music records and other memorabilia that covers most of the walls and windows, which makes his living space look like a teenage bedroom, further accentuating his immaturity and reluctance to step into adulthood. The clash between the two spaces – Dewey's corner and the rest of Ned's flat – is highlighted by the presence of the curtain that separates them and constitutes a physical – but makeshift – boundary between the two friends, whose distance is also emphasised by framing choices that position a pillar or other obstacles standing between them.

As in the examples analysed in the previous section, in *School of Rock* both the emerging adult protagonist and the more mature one need to change to find fulfilment by the end of the film. Through impersonating Ned as a substitute teacher, Dewey finds meaning in teaching music and creativity to the younger generation, adopting a caretaking role himself that signals a substantial step into adulthood.[26] At the same time, Dewey's freer, more anarchic approach to education has an impact on Ned, who quits school teaching and opens an after-school rock music school for kids in his apartment. The closing credits show both friends teaching children, having found a way to reconcile their shared history as rock music fans and performers with a profitable venture that allows them to find adult stability. The same space that was previously divided between Dewey's arrested development and Ned's organised, rule-abiding living has now become an open space where both friends are united by a passion for rock music and for creative approaches to music education. Both characters have had to make adjustments in order for their relationship to flourish, which underscores the fact that in emerging adult films friendships often play a role that is as important as – if not more important than – that of romance, which is often rejected in favour of self-development.

Romantic relationships play a more prominent role in narratives about female friendship. In films like *Walking and Talking* (Nicole Holofcener, 1996), *Frances Ha* (Noah Baumbach, 2012) and *Life Partners* (Susanna Fogel, 2014), the relationship between the protagonists and their best friends is strained after their best friend gets involved in a serious relationship and begins to consider marriage. In these films, the protagonist's best friend's commitment to somebody else results in tension between

them that might even separate the two friends for some time, a friendship break-up that resembles a romantic one. In these films, the protagonists feel abandoned and let down by their best friend, whose constant presence they can no longer demand now that they are in serious relationships and their lifestyle has changed. This provokes feelings of loss and anger as they mistakenly believe that their friendship is no longer needed. What all these films share is a marked focus on the depiction of the apparently blissful life of the protagonist and their best friend. While *School of Rock* begins with the protagonist at odds with his friend and the viewer never sees the positive aspects of Dewey and Ned's friendship, films about female friendship take their time to romanticise the relationship between the two friends and to carefully explore both the moments in which the cracks begin to appear on the surface and the clash between the two friends, resulting in a more dramatic friendship break-up that underscores the protagonists' dejection.

These films also share a concern with the institution of marriage, a marker of standard adulthood that the protagonists reject and that affects their relationship with their best friends. The importance of these rites of passage into adulthood is undermined by the narrative, which leaves the door open to other versions of womanhood besides heterosexual couplings, marriage and motherhood. For instance, in *Frances Ha* the apparently idyllic life that follows long-term commitment is not so. *Frances Ha* features a protagonist (Greta Gerwig) who envies the apparently easy life of her best friend Sophie (Mickey Sumner) as she gets engaged to someone with money and moves to a better neighbourhood in Manhattan and, later, to Japan. But the idealised life that Sophie shares on her blog is not real. After some time apart, Sophie drunkenly reveals the truth: she is not happy and she got pregnant by accident. Sophie wanted to have an abortion, but she had a miscarriage before she could arrange the procedure, which caused her a great deal of pain. Sophie's problems deal with life, death and commitment, which makes Frances's problems seem trivial in comparison. This bout of honesty reunites the two friends, who realise that they both have problems of their own regardless of their status and, therefore, they both need their friend by their side.

Through the opposition of friends who are closer to crossing the border into standard adulthood and others who are hovering in emerging adulthood, films position neither of the options as a completely desirable one. Some of the films reaffirm what we saw in the previous section by showing the two friends learning from one another, which results in the emerging adult protagonist gaining some sort of purpose or new responsibility while their more mature friend remembers the importance of staying true to their roots, which are embodied by their longtime friendships and

by the hobbies they used to share. In other words, growing up does not necessarily involve letting go of their meaningful relationships or of their passions, both of which should continue to provide joy in adulthood. Adulthood is therefore not seen as a clean break with one's previous self but, rather, as an evolution. Films about female friendship introduce another element into the equation and place the focus on an exploration of the options available to women, questioning the validity of marriage and motherhood as a road to self-fulfilment and positioning alternative paths as equally valid options.

Homecoming narratives are recurrent in emerging adult films, and they have grown in number through the decades, reflecting millennials' tendency to boomerang back home after the Great Recession.[27] In emerging adult films that focus on a return home, the entire narrative structure tends to be organised around a trip during which the protagonist revisits their youth by physically returning to the site of their childhood and adolescence and by reuniting with those people who knew them back then. In some cases, the return or reunion is motivated by a rite of passage like a wedding, a high school reunion or a funeral, but the protagonist's most likely reason for return is personal, more specifically a personal crisis motivated by a failure to live as an independent adult. These crises often result from unemployment, the break-up of a romantic relationship and mental health issues, sometimes from a combination of the three. Most often, breaking up with a partner renders the protagonist unable to support themselves in the big city, which forces them to return home and reassess their situation.[28] These returns force the protagonist to compare their journey into adulthood to that of the people they knew growing up, which is often very different from their own.

High school reunion films place a special emphasis on the connection between one's teenage and adult identity, typically showing how individuals from different high school cliques have fared in the ten years after leaving high school. At twenty-eight, some of them fit the mould of standard adulthood, but the protagonists are still on their way there. The prospect of having to face others who might be more successful generates feelings of anxiety in the protagonists, who sometimes try to embellish the truth about their lives. For instance, in *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* the protagonists buy an outfit that they believe will make them look professional and make up their own success story claiming that they invented Post-it notes. However, their plan fails to make them fit in when they find that all the former popular girls are defined by marriage and motherhood rather than professional success. Their black power-suits and chic up-dos contrast with the shimmery pastel colours worn by the other girls, as well as with their voluminous hairstyles.

In *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* (Kevin Smith, 2008), the opposite occurs. Zack (Seth Rogen), who is only going to the reunion to repay a favour to his best friend Miri (Elizabeth Banks), is not concerned with performing adulthood at all, to the point that he is the only person at the reunion wearing casual clothes, his flannel shirt and jeans contrasting with everybody else's suits and smart shirts. This film also highlights the contrast between some people's high school persona and their adult selves. Miri's motivation to go to the reunion stems from the unlikely possibility of seducing a former popular boy who, much to her dismay, turns out to be gay. In teen films, those students who fulfil normative conceptions of femininity and masculinity are at the top of the high school hierarchy, but a look at them ten years later often reveals high school popularity to be a façade that neither reflects who an individual really is nor necessarily implies greater chances to succeed as an adult.[29] In the case of *Zack and Miri Make a Porno*, the popular guy's homosexuality confirms that the performance of heteronormativity involved in high school popularity – especially at prom – is a sham.

Additionally, other films show former outcasts as the most successful adults and popular types as stuck in their high school persona, reverting the hierarchical structure of the high school. For instance, in both *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* and *Grosse Pointe Blank* (George Armitage, 1997), former nerds succeed as adults thanks to the same interest in technology that made them outcasts as teenagers. Despite this commentary on adult success, these films also question what exactly constitutes a successful transition to adulthood. Jobs in sales, insurance and advertising are consistently positioned as undesirable, chosen only by those who are unable to think outside the box. Staying in one's hometown is also depicted as negative. For instance, *Adult Beginners* (Ross Katz, 2014) pokes fun at the life of those who have chosen to stay in their hometown and pursue small managerial roles in local companies, while the protagonist in *The Lifeguard* (Liz W. García, 2013) fails to see her friend's job as assistant principal at their old high school in a positive light.

A temporary move back home forces the protagonists to confront their family. In these cases, both parents and siblings serve as a counterpoint to the protagonist's arrested development. While parents have to deal with their child's failure to fulfil their expectations, siblings – both older and younger – often have to adopt a caretaking role or show greater maturity than the protagonists. *Standing Up, Falling Down* (Matt Ratner, 2019) is a rare example in which the protagonist's younger sibling is in an even worse position regarding the transition to adulthood. While

thirty-four-year-old Scott (Ben Schwartz) at least moved to LA and tried to make it as a comedian, his thirty-year-old sister does not seem to have left the parental home. In this film, standard adulthood is embodied by the protagonist's parents, ex-girlfriend and high school friend, who now considers 9 p.m. a late time to be out. Scott's father believes it is time for his son to give up 'this fantasy land bullshit' and get a real job, and he is bitter that he did not manage to get Scott involved in the family business. In other instances, as in *Unicorn Store* (Brie Larson, 2017), parents try to pressure their boomerang child into behaving like someone that they consider an adult role model. In this film parents feel exasperation at their child's return, which often happens in homecoming narratives. Some of them, like *The Lifeguard* and *Unicorn Store*, feature parents who were happy to have a spare room to dedicate to their hobbies and see their plans interrupted by their children's return.

A return home upsets the balance of the household as different family members need to revert into roles that they had already left behind or adapt into new roles. The stagnancy of the emerging adult protagonists' road to adulthood is often underscored by their younger siblings showing greater maturity than them. For instance, in *Tiny Furniture* (Lena Dunham, 2010), Aura (Lena Dunham) returns home after graduation and finds her younger sister Nadine (Cyrus Dunham) ready to take on the world, while Aura is depleted and lost after leaving college. Framing conveys the distance between the two sisters as well as their different outlooks. They are often physically separated by a dividing line or sitting at different levels, with Nadine sitting higher up than Aura. In one occasion, Aura can be seen on the sofa while Nadine runs on a treadmill, a visual metaphor for their respective outlooks on life. While Aura is not ready for adulthood, Nadine cannot wait to get there.

As in the other instances, balance needs to be redrawn for the relationships between family members and old friends to recover from the strain that the protagonists' arrested development causes. More often than not, the protagonists' return home involves the sowing of the seeds of change. That is to say, while the films rarely end with the protagonist's full transition to adulthood, they often end with the beginning of a change in outlook that will help them make progress towards a type of adulthood that works for them while remaining tolerant of those who chose more conventional paths. In any case, the kind of standard adulthood embodied by old classmates and parents remains something to avoid rather than a goal, which once again reflects changing attitudes towards contemporary adulthood as well as changes in the nature of adulthood itself.

Conclusion

As we have seen, filmic representations of the transition to adulthood engage with the same issues as the scholarship on the subject. Through characters who represent standard adulthood, films ultimately reject it, portraying it as too rigid and characterless. This sets the emerging adult protagonists in opposition with standard adulthood and in search of something else. Even though most films do not depict traditional markers of adulthood as completely out of reach, they do position them as undesirable, which in turn forces the protagonists to figure out different ways to grow up. One of the main dilemmas faced by the protagonists in all these films is how to be able to live independently as adults without losing their identity – and their youthfulness – in the process. That is, emerging adult film protagonists are in search of new ways to be an adult that will differentiate them from the previous generations and from those following a standard route. Through this snapshot of the contrast between standard adulthood and emerging adulthood, contemporary film can be argued to support theories of a 'new adulthood' in which adulthood is more fluid than in the past decades and retains certain features that were hitherto associated with youth.[30] The mere existence and prominence of this new type of coming-of-age film that engages with alternative ways to become an adult suggests that the end-point of the coming-of-age process is shifting, and that the entrenched view of adulthood that took hold in the mid-twentieth century no longer constitutes a valid model.

Notes

1. The writing of this chapter was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation under grant PID2021-123836NB-I00 and the Aragonese Regional Government (DGA) under grant H23_20R.

2. Rachel Aroesti, 'How Messy Millennial Woman Became TV's Most Tedious Trope', *The Guardian*, 9 June 2022, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/jun/09/messy-millennial-woman-tv-trope-everything-i-know-about-love-this-way-up, accessed 31 July 2024. Even though Aroesti's article focuses exclusively on television narratives, this character type also became ubiquitous in films from the early 2010s on. Some of these changes began to crystallise – and make their way into American cinema – in the late 1960s, but it was not until the 1990s that longer transitions to adulthood became the norm (Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Long and Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)) and narratives about emerging adulthood became more numerous (Andrea Sofía Regueira Martín, 'Growing Up Is Hard to Do: The Emerging Adult Film' (PhD thesis, University of Zaragoza, 2022)).

3. Regueira Martín, 'Growing Up Is Hard to Do'.

4. Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*.

5. Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 6. Following Harry Blatterer (*Coming of Age in Times of Uncertainty* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007)) and Nick Lee (*Childhood and Society: Growing Up in an Age of Uncertainty* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001)), I use the term 'standard adulthood' to refer to the particular mode of adulthood that became prevalent in the United States in the decades in the mid-twentieth century. Arnett (*Emerging Adulthood*) refers to this model as 'traditional conceptions of adulthood' (208).

6. Even though Arnett (*Emerging Adulthood*) writes about individuals in their twenties, I have not set a specific chronological end-boundary in the films I analyse, allowing the films themselves to guide my classification. Films often engage with the last stages of the transition to adulthood. As a result, although most of the emerging adult protagonists in the films discussed are in their late twenties, a small number of them may be in their thirties. Allusions to the protagonists' age will be made when considered relevant.

7. Kenneth Keniston, 'Youth: A "New" Stage of Life', *The American Scholar* 39, no. 4 (1970): 631–54; Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Knopf, 1978); Susan Littwin, *The Postponed Generation: Why American Youth Are Growing Up Later* (New York: Morrow, 1986); Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1959); Erik H. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed*, extended version (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982), 75.

8. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and Susan Taber, 'Adolescence Terminable and Interminable: When Does Adolescence End?', *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 23, no. 5 (1994): 515–37.

9. Kenneth Keniston, *Youth and Dissent: The Rise of a New Opposition* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 5.

10. John Modell, *Into One's Own: From Youth to Adulthood in the United States 1920–1975* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989); Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*.

11. Modell, *Into One's Own*; Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*.

12. Even though all the authors cited in this section focus on the United States, similar trends can be observed in other post-industrialised countries. For instance, in the case of Spain these changes can be observed but they took place later than in the United States due to a number of political and socio-economic factors related to the Francoist dictatorship (Joice Melo Vieira and Pau Miret Gamundi, 'Transición a la Vida Adulta en España: Una Comparación en el Tiempo y en el Territorio Utilizando el Análisis de la Entropía', *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas* 131 (2010): 75–107).

13. Jennifer M. Silva, *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

14. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences* (London: Sage, 2002).

15. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: Sage, 1992); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

16. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 147.

17. Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*.

18. Johanna Wyn, Helen Cahill, Dan Woodman, Hernán Cuervo, Carmen Leccardi and Jenny Chesters, eds. *Youth and the New Adulthood: Generations of Change. Perspectives on Children and Young People* (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2020).

19. Blatterer, *Coming of Age in Times of Uncertainty*, 114.

20. Regueira Martín, 'Growing Up Is Hard to Do'.

21. Blatterer, *Coming of Age in Times of Uncertainty*; Silva, *Coming Up Short*.

22. Andrew Van Dam, 'The Unluckiest Generation in U.S. History', *The Washington Post*, 5 June 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/27/millennial-recession-covid, accessed 31 July 2024; Kristen Bialik and Richard Fry, 'Millennial Life: How Young Adulthood Today Compares with Prior Generations', Pew Research Center, 2019, www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/02/14/millennial-life-how-young-adulthood-today-compares-with-prior-generations-2, accessed 31 July 2024.

23. Despite the fact that two of the examples mentioned in this section feature non-white protagonists, emerging adult films are overwhelmingly white and fail to represent the racial diversity of the United States. More diverse characters began to appear in these narratives in the late 2010s, but protagonists of colour appear in only 10 per cent of the sixty-one films from the 2010s that made up the corpus of my PhD thesis (Regueira Martín, 'Growing Up Is Hard to Do').

24. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

25. Mark Greif, 'What Was the Hipster?', *New York Magazine*, 22 October 2010, https://nymag.com/news/features/69129, accessed 31 July 2024.

26. Even though this may come across as a breaking of gender barriers due to the longstanding association of women and emotional labour, it is worth noting that Dewey's approach uses rock music – a field traditionally dominated by men – to further the self-development of his students. Hints of change may be indicated in the fact that students of all genders are equally empowered by his approach.

27. D. Nicole Farris, *Boomerang Kids: The Demography of Previously Launched Adults* (New York: Springer, 2016); Carl Pickhardt, *Boomerang Kids: A Revealing Look at Why So Many of Our Children Are Failing on Their Own and How Parents Can Help* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2011).

28. Regueira Martín, 'Growing Up Is Hard to Do'.

29. Frances Smith, *Rethinking the Hollywood Teen Movie: Gender, Genre and Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 72.

30. Blatterer, *Coming of Age in Times of Uncertainty*; Wyn et al., *Youth and the New Adulthood*.

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