

book review

**Film For and About Adolescents**  
**Unfolding the Complexity of the Issue**

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Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction*

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In her latest book, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction*, Catherine Driscoll uses a similar approach to that of her previous book, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*,<sup>1</sup> to address the question of what adolescence is and, in particular, what teen film is. Instead of giving a firm answer to the question she has been posing in these two books, she is keen to unfold the complexity and uncertainty of the subject. The subject matter in *Teen Film* is twofold: the meaning of teen film and the idea of adolescence. The central question Driscoll tries to explore throughout the book is whether the idea of adolescence in teen film is especially American 'by referring to films that in every way seem to be teen films but are made in Australia, Canada, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, the United Kingdom (UK), or elsewhere'. She goes on to claim the more significant question is 'whether the idea of adolescence on which I argue teen film is based is an intrinsically American one exported to these other contexts'. (4)

In order for Driscoll to unpack the question of how teen film is American (or not), the book is divided into three distinctive but interrelated parts, resulting in the following argument in the final chapter:

Focus on the liminality of teen film should set aside mimetic claims about the representation of adolescence and consider not only its organization around thresholds and transitions but also its organization around the processes of constructing, crossing (and recrossing) and interrogating these thresholds. (162)

The first part is about histories in which Driscoll pays special effort to problematise the various approaches used to think about what adolescence meant in cinema in three periods: before the 1950s, 1950s and 1980s. The second part 'considers how the conventions of teen film signify adolescence', (65) based on the discussion of rites of passage, repetition and structure of address. The last part is more speculative, asking whether it is possible to define what teen film is as it is not only 'a system of classification produced by transnational dialogues over maturity and citizenship', but also 'one component of an transnational field of youth culture adapted to varied economic structures and cultural expectations' and 'as itself manifesting the internationalization of adolescence' (149).

The first half of the book focuses on what makes teen film address a youthful audience for stories about adolescence. (3) Driscoll tries to illustrate how the discourse on adolescence in teen film (as a genre) is constructed in various cinemas. I therefore argue that by highlighting how the ideas about adolescence are represented in various cinemas, Driscoll successfully explains to readers why teen film is not especially American. As she discussed in the first part (from chapters one to three) of the book, the gap between institutional expectations and the real life of adolescents in those institutions belongs to many teen film genres in 1920s. A feasible way to dissociate teen film and Americanness, as Driscoll suggests in chapter one, is to look into the interactions between social and cultural theory, public debate, popular culture and so on, where the idea of adolescence has been produced and discussed. In chapter two, she further argues that the discourse has shifted from one around the problem of shaping youth as in cinema of the 1920s to a question form in the 1950s—where instead of producing adolescence as social crisis, as in the 1920s, the association of the idea of adolescence and the issue of

delinquency, for instance, becomes a question. As a result, it changes the meaning of teen film and the ideas about adolescence: "Teen film itself is a crucial factor in the newly coherent forms of youth culture and teenage life in the 1950s" (28) because the teen years were becoming 'a transitory phenomenon to be enjoyed and celebrated' instead of a social problem to be understood and solved'. (38) However, as she argues in Chapter 3, teen film in the 1980s is more 'sophisticated and self-conscious' (45) because of the ambiguous audiences that teen film is addressed to, thus makes the meaning of teen film even more difficult to define. Although the meaning of teen film and ideas about adolescence seems distinctive in each period, they are not mutually exclusive.

In the second part of the book (from Chapters 4 to 6), Driscoll considers 'how the conventions of teen film (as a genre) signify adolescence'. (65) As she argues in Chapter 4, maturity is still 'a question and a problem within teen film rather than a certain set of values'. (66) As a result, the focus of Chapter 4 is to discuss how 'teen film is less about growing up than about the expectation, difficulty, and social organization of growing up' (66) in the form of 'rite of passage' (or coming of age). However, symbolising coming of age with a formal ritual has nothing to do with a passage to adulthood. The complexity of the issue could be exemplified through the discussion of virginity. As Driscoll argues, virginity is a question of cross-cultural knowledge of conventions for marking out the experience of adolescence rather than a physical transformation. Driscoll further argues in chapters 5 and 6 respectively that the stereotypes of adolescence, such as the conventions of 'youth as problem, the teenage institution, and youth as party', (66) have been reinforced because teen film itself is taking an active role in creating the stereotypes through 'repetition' in terms of form, style and content, as well as through its 'structure of address' that invokes an audience to understand adolescence in particular way. However, it is also an open dialogue: 'teen film is consistently interested in asking about whether teen film can really represent adolescence, whose adolescence, and for whom'. (117) As a result, it always leaves the ideas about adolescence uncertain.

For Driscoll, teen describes an historical extension of, and limit on, a period of social dependence after puberty. (2) This period of social dependence of teen nonetheless seems to be a barrier for teen (as individuals) to be treated

independently and thus contributes to and reconsolidates a contradiction between maturity and immaturity that teen (as a concept) is represented on teen film. The conflict between maturity and immaturity has further been spelled out in Chapter 7 when discussing the issue of film censorship and classification, in which Driscoll argues that the film classification systems in different countries serve a more or less similar purpose of restricting the idea of adolescence to a scale of increasing maturity (the framework of citizenship) which is supported by 'a very varying set of social expectations' (124) under 'parental guidance' in particular. (130) As a result, it always leaves the designation of maturity and of adulthood, as well as the relationships between children and maturity represented in teen film, uncertain to audiences. This uncertainty also leads to the variation in the definition of teen film but at the same time contributes to its liminal nature as a genre and maintains ideas about adolescence. Since there is no definitive style of teen film, Driscoll argues in Chapter 8 that the liminality of teen film is due to its openness to adaptation of stories from other fields and genres: 'this liminal sphere of adaptation and translation is continually producing new meanings for adolescence available to a wide range of audiences'. (162)

Driscoll argues that teen film has consisted of four necessary conditions: (1) the modern idea of adolescence as personal and social crisis (which it has framed); (2) the incorporation of that idea into film regulation; (3) the emergence of targeted film marketing; and (4) the translation of modern adolescence into institutions for the representation, analysis and management of adolescence. (12–13) These could be seen as a broadly shared terrain on which young people negotiated social transitions: (1) 'Engaging with teen film as a genre means thinking about the certainties and questions concerning adolescence represented in these conventions'; (2) The characteristics for teen film mentioned in the book could easily be identified in the description of adolescents in teen film in the Hong Kong cinema, even though Driscoll does not use examples of 'teen film' in Hong Kong cinema for illustration in the book. I mentioned this point because the popularity of teen film as a genre, in terms of box office takings, has been low in Hong Kong cinema as the discussion about teen film has been restricted to the meaning of teen film as a genre—as film for and about adolescents—but not about how the concept of modern adolescence has been represented. For instance, the discussion on the representation of

adolescents on screen is always associated as a problem to society in 1960s' Hong Kong film criticism and this practice has not changed much nowadays.<sup>2</sup> I therefore argue Driscoll's book would be useful and might serve as a good reference point for the possible ways to discuss teen film in Hong Kong in future, to which we have to think critically whether the two aspects—film for adolescents (which represents teenage life and concerns), and film about adolescents (which faces the criticism of failing to represent teenagers accurately)—are sufficient for the discussion of what teen film is, particularly when film is assumed to have a social role to play. In fact, Driscoll has reminded us subtly or unsubtly, at least throughout the second half of her book, we have to be very speculative to unfold the meaning of teen film and pay attention to the trick of the style of teen film—where what is categorised as teen film indeed is not teen film and what is not categorised as teen film indeed is teen film.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Hao Wu (ed.), *The Alternative Cult Films*, Joint Publishing (HK) Co. Ltd, Hong Kong, 2005, p. 33.