‘Jesus! A Geriatric – That’s All I Need!’:
learning to come of age
with/in popular Australian film

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ABSTRACT Popular film texts are powerful means by which Western societies construct, maintain, protect and challenge concepts of childhood and youth-hood. As a context where audiences learn about the self, their culture, and their place within it, popular film is understood here as pedagogic, that is, as a space where key lessons about the formation of subjecthood might take place, and at what costs. This article takes into account scholarship on popular culture as pedagogy, challenging narrow notions of popular film as a simple transmission of knowledge. Focused on how pedagogies might be at work, this article explores the use of humour, repetition, otherness, becoming and sentimentality within a selection of Australian films, and how they orientate audiences towards knowing the youth subject in particular ways. Questions of generation and how it is constructed as a commonsense battle between ‘young’ and ‘old’ are considered through the coming-of-age films, The Rage in Placid Lake (2003), Hey Hey It’s Esther Blueburger (2008), Crackers (1998) and Spider & Rose (1994).

Introduction

Popular culture texts are powerful means by which western societies construct, maintain, protect and challenge concepts of childhood and youth-hood. Popular film is one such context where we engage and learn about how our society conceptualises child and youth subjectivities as normal and/or abnormal and desirable and/or undesirable. In this sense, popular film is pedagogic, a complex space where teaching and learning potentially occurs, and where meaning is made and remade. As a discursive, semiotic, aural and affective text, film incites key lessons about how the formation of subjecthood might take place, and at what cost. Popular film can then be understood as a mechanism of governmentality, powerfully geared towards the practices of subject-formation and (self-)regulation (Foucault, 1988; Butler, 1993). Such a hypothesis places emphasis not only on the pedagogic modes employed in the specific practices of signification, but also on ‘the structures within which we encourage [audiences] to engage in them’ (Simon, 1992, p. 39). This article has a double focus, then: how the child/youth subject comes to be constituted through popular culture; and how these constituting practices might be pedagogic, potentially inviting audiences to learn about these subjects as age-based.

Of interest here is the subject ‘coming of age’, the young person no-longer a child-but-not-yet-adult. Historically and discursively positioned as a time of disorder, youth-hood is synonymous
with incompleteness, a becoming personhood, while adulthood is equated with full, finished personhood (Kenway & Bullen, 2001; Lesko, 2001; Blatterer, 2007, 2010). While the term ‘adolescence’ grounds the youth subject in developmental discourses, and the term ‘teenager’ locates the youth subject in specific western markets of consumption, the term ‘youth’ signals a shift from an actor-centred analytic to one that is discourse centred; a shift from studying youth to studying youth-hood (Lesko, 2001). In terms of the films selected for analysis here, they are conceptualised as films about youth rather than for youth per se. The key question here, then, is not how young people engage or learn from these films, or even if they do, but how the ideas of youth envisaged in the films stem from, and enter into, the popular imaginary, making and remaking concepts of childhood and youth-hood. Specifically, questions of generation and how it is constructed as a commonsense battle between ‘young’ and ‘old’ are explored through analyses of a selection of Australian comedies about young people, including *The Rage in Placid Lake* (2003), *Hey Hey It’s Esther Blueburger* (2008), *Crackers* (1998) and *Spider & Rose* (1994). These films are deliberately selected and grouped together here for the way in which they constitute coming-of-age and passing-of-age categories of subjectification. The first two films were selected for their portrayal of their protagonists: a quirky young male (*The Rage in Placid Lake*) and a quirky young female (*Hey Hey It’s Esther Blueburger*) both coming of age. The latter two films were selected on the basis of their central focus on the relationship between the young protagonist and an old person. Each is a key film in this regard, their common production and reception techniques enabling a particular kind of critique. Unique and exemplary in this respect, they are also representative of the kinds of stories about youth that are well known and well rehearsed in contemporary popular Australian (film) culture.

A broadly conceived discourse analysis is employed in the analysis of these films, where discourse is understood in a Foucauldian way as always presenting simultaneous practices of ‘images, sound, text and talk’ (Simon, 1992, p. 41). Additionally, this discursive/semiotic analytic focuses on the a particular text or selection of texts and their specific practices and conventions, while also looking to the wider cultural discursive practices of subjectification which surround these texts (see Foucault, 1972; Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2000; Rose, 2007). Through post-structuralist theories of governmentally (Foucault, 1988; Butler, 1993), I explore various discursive/semiotic techniques within the films that work to enable and constrain meaning around youth subjecthood. Humour, repetition, otherness, becoming and sentimentality are understood as pedagogic techniques used in these films to orientate audiences towards knowing the youth subject. How teaching and learning might specifically occur through engagement with the text is often overlooked in work on popular (film) culture. As a result, how pedagogy works in a detailed and rigorous way through this selection of films is the key focus of this article. The intention here is to contribute to critiques of age-based subject formation with/in popular Australian (film) culture, situated within a broader analysis of the significance of film as a form of pedagogy, and to look at the implications of popular films about young people in the processes of subject formation around youth-hood and childhood.

**Popular Film as Pedagogy**

By now, particularly within the education-cultural studies field/s, there is a distinct body of literature in regard to popular culture as pedagogy (see e.g. Giroux, 1994a, 1997, 2000; Buckingham, 1998; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998; Daspit & Weaver, 1999; Hickey-Moody et al, 2010; Sandlin et al, 2010), popular film as pedagogy (Giroux, 2002a) and even youth film as pedagogy (Giroux, 1994b; 1998; 2002b). Henry Giroux has been most prolific in his work on popular films as ‘vehicles of public pedagogy’ (Giroux, 2002a, p. 13). The North American scholar argues that popular films are ‘powerful teaching machines’ (Giroux, 2002a, p. 3) that intentionally try to ‘influence the production of meaning, subject positions, identities and experience’ (Giroux, 2002a, p. 6). In his analyses, Giroux focuses on content (how youth is portrayed; how the film relies on ‘mindless’ violence, etc.) and on broad-sweeping politics (‘circuits of power in the political economy’ and ‘material and power-saturated relations’ [Giroux, 2002a, p. 11]). What is missing from these accounts, however, is a consideration of how pedagogy might be at work in a specific way with/in film. It is not enough to say that popular culture is pedagogic and thus it ‘teaches’ us
or is, in a broad way, ‘educative’. Nor is it adequate to simplify pedagogy to a ‘lesson delivered’, or to ‘some content that is conveyed’ (Hickey-Moody et al, 2010, p. 232). In this view of film as a ‘teaching machine’, pedagogy is all too often reduced to a simple transmission, a machine that delivers content, and always a corporate machine churning out racism, sexism and violence, etc. - a human-less machine whose meaning is far from context-dependent in specific, differentiated or relational terms.

This view severely underplays pedagogy as a dynamic theory of teaching and learning advocated by post-critical and post-structuralist educators (see e.g. Lusted, 1986; Ellsworth, 1989, 1997, 2005; Lather, 1991; Luke & Gore, 1992; Green, 1993; Luke, 1996; Buckingham, 1998). As Lusted (1986) and others have long noted, no matter how much credence is given to views that ‘pedagogy engages learners and teachers with content through process’ (Hickey-Moody et al, 2010, p. 233), if little attention is given to these differentiated processes or to how this pedagogy might work, such proclamations fall short. Rather, a much more nuanced sense of pedagogy is needed here, one where the practices of meaning-making are relational, contextual and indeterminate (see Lusted, 1986; Ellsworth, 1997, 2005). The claim that popular culture is pedagogic is about popular culture potentially inciting learning, but this is far from a predictable or quantifiable process. Popular culture does not cause learning; rather, it is the context in which learning may occur (Lusted, 1986; Ellsworth, 1997, 2005; Green, 1998):

Why is pedagogy important? It is important since, as a concept, it draws attention to the process through which knowledge is produced. Pedagogy addresses the ‘how’ questions involved not only in the transmission or reproduction of knowledge but also in its production. Indeed, it enables us to question the validity of separating these activities so easily by asking under what conditions and through what means we ‘come to know’. (Lusted, 1986, pp. 2-3, my emphasis)

Reconceptualising pedagogy in this way places emphasis not only on the modes or forms the film text/s takes, but also on the technologies employed in its operation, its particular practices of signification, and the structures within which audiences are encouraged to engage in them (Simon, 1992; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003). The ‘how questions’ are imperative here: how might pedagogy be at work? How are we mobilised by the text to learn? And how is the text designed in order to provoke learning? Far from simplistic concepts of teaching as delivery and learning as transmission, such a reconceptualisation sees pedagogy, contexts, relationships, subjectivities and texts as all inextricably bound, remaining in focus, and, crucially, unquantifiable (Ellsworth, 1997, 2005).

This post-critical or poststructuralist understanding of theories of teaching and learning that occur through engagements with popular culture defiantly refuses to reduce the film text to a single meaning or message. Instead, the film text is considered for its multiple meanings or ‘lessons’, and for the numerous incitements towards meaning-making that are potentially had. Knowing the youth subject is a complex and ambiguous practice which sometimes reinscribes social norms, sometimes challenges them, and often does both simultaneously. Popular film culture, then, as discursive and semiotic work, provides the spectacular context for what is possible and acceptable in terms of knowing and being in the world, predicated on markers such as ‘age’. How audiences might be incited towards particular knowledges, and not others, is the key question here.

Learning about Becoming Youth

Australian film comedies about youth (much like American teen film comedies) frequently reprise the trope of the young protagonist obsessed with fitting in, being ‘normal’, and belonging (see Dermody & Jacka, 1988; Moran, 2006; Speed, 2006; Gottschall, 2010). The coming-of-age narrative sees the youthful protagonist searching for a ‘valid and tenable identity’ and a place where they might be accepted and belong (Rayner, 2000, p. 25). As a rite-of-passage narrative, the coming-of-age comedy rhetorically makes the young protagonist’s adult development a light-hearted quest: something that must be worked on, played with, strived for and achieved. Vulnerable to the scathing and cruel judgements of society as portrayed in the film, the youthful character is marginalised. However, within the genre, they are almost always portrayed as ‘having the power to change their lives’ (Rustin, 2001, p. 133). Importantly, the adult society and individuals who
mock them are positioned as grotesque, narrow-minded and stereotypically repressive (Craven, 2001; Ferrier, 2001). In Australian film comedies in particular, being ‘other’ and defying adulthood, positioned as the norm, is ironically key to the young protagonist’s attainment of adulthood, albeit on their own terms. Similar in narrative structure, films within this milieu frequently question the established (adult) order, and show their general disillusionment with the social reality that maintains that order (Rayner, 2000; Verhoeven, 2000). Australian cinema post-1990 is synonymous with young (anti-)heroes/heroines who are soft and passive (sensitive, vulnerable, artistic, individual), and who succeed in spite of their difference, and marginalisation, from the adult world. Danny (The Big Steal, 1990), Scott (Strictly Ballroom, 1992), Muriel (Muriel’s Wedding, 1994), Josie (Looking for Alibrandi, 2000), Erica (Hating Alison Ashley, 2004) and others transcend their youthful ‘abnormalities’, whether they be physical, mental, social or cultural (O’Regan, 1996; Ferrier, 2001; Gillard, 2002). The comedic protagonists are stigmatised by their otherness, but it is this otherness that is important to their talents and their success (Ferrier, 2001; Hopwood, 2006), and importantly, key to their adult development. Shown comically and warm-heartedly succeeding in their quest, the protagonists decisively develop into forms of adulthood ‘which deviate in some way from the “restriction and entrapment” of the norm’ (Rustin, 2001, p. 133).

The conventions of this genre, including the repetition of the rite-of-passage narrative and the familiar characterisations that set up the youth in opposition to the adults around them, are pedagogic in this sense. Audiences potentially anticipate the kind of stories and characters envisaged here, and they are addressed as though they are experienced consumers of such, knowing what to expect. Particular work is done within the films around constructing and managing youth-hood in various ways. In particular, youth-hood is normalised as a time of transition, upheaval and becoming; as a liminal stage of development where crises arise; as a moment of uncertainty before adulthood is unproblematically and definitively obtained. For instance, in Hey Hey It’s Esther Blueburger, Esther’s conservative mother ignores Esther’s attempts to communicate her unhappiness and ‘true’ self, instead focusing on Esther’s ‘abnormalness’ (‘Esther! Why can’t you just close the door like a normal person!? and ‘Why are you being so odd?!’). Through techniques that use humour, becoming and otherness, pedagogies about generation are repeated and visualised as binaries between young versus old and rebellion versus convention. However, the pedagogy that occurs here is not simple or straightforward. Sometimes normative notions of childhood and youth-hood are maintained, while at other times, they are potentially challenged. Multiple meanings can be made by audiences as they engage with the film text - not limitless meanings, but multiple meanings nonetheless.

In several of the contemporary films of this genre in the Australian context (although not exclusively), ambivalence dominates the ways we can come to know the youth subject. So familiar is the coming-of-age trope, in fact, that such films frequently challenge the very construction of youth-hood they uphold. The Rage in Placid Lake and Hey Hey It’s Esther Blueburger are familiar yet deliberate caricatures of the quirky coming-of-age comedy in both their narrative and their characterisation. The eccentric Placid Lake (Ben Lee) and the odd Esther Blueburger (Danielle Catanzariti) are two young people outside of, but astutely connected to, the social world around them, firmly positioning themselves against the conventions of the adult world. They become our comic hero/ine rebels, fighting fakery, conformity and corruption as classic youthful outsiders. However, highlighting their use of caricature and parody, the film-makers wink at the audience as they revisit the story about the youngster becoming an adult, as if the audience is complicit in this ironic and parodic rupture (see Mallan, 2000).

Like other young people who struggle with self-absorbed parents in recent Australian films (and in American films from as far back as the 1950s [see Berry, 1999]), Placid is scathing of his suburban hippy parents whose ineffectual liberal mantras about calmness and forgiveness are masks for neuroses, selfishness and ‘bad parenting’. Playing with the audience, the filmmakers defy expectation by bending the conventional narrative. Placid, for instance, rebels against his parents as all youth are ‘meant’ to do. However, his rebellion is not a conventional one, in that what upsets his suburban hippy parents most is him getting a George Bush-style haircut, buying a suit and getting a conservative white-collar job. Another technique common to the films considered here is where the protagonist sometimes performs a self-reflexive youthfulness as if well aware of this role that they are meant to play in the narrative. While they do not address the screen directly, they play games, indulge in fantasies and various absurdities that problematise generational binaries and
throw their youthful subjectivities into question. Placid and Esther both stand at a critical distance from their worlds, able to astutely see through the façades, insecurities and social games of adults as well as their role in ‘the game’. Much like the scene where Placid and his best friend Gemma (Rose Byrne) mimic being a married couple, Esther and her twin brother Jacob (Christian Byers) play house when their parents go out to the opera and they are left alone:

[A long dining room table. The table is set. The lights are dimmed. Classic music plays. Jacob sits at one end of the table as Esther brings in their dinner. Esther puts a plate in front of Jacob and then puts her plate down at her end of the table. Esther sits and they both put their napkins on their laps. They pause, look at each other. Esther picks up her plate full of food and tips it over her head. Her brother copies her. They remain straight-faced.]

Esther: [reaching for the tomato sauce] How was the office love?
Jacob: Most productive ...

I stabbed Henry Duff through the hand with a compass.

Esther: How interesting ...

In their ‘youthful’ irreverent way, Esther and Jacob repeat the youth-versus-adult trope. Their parodic performance highlights clichéd gender roles, sexual stereotypes, suburban, middle-class married life, and these ways of being an adult. As they play, they perhaps encourage a critique of adulthood through some light-hearted, yet pretty dark and mean-spirited humour and ironic repartee. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways these games work to undermine adult attempts to control them, and in the Australian vernacular, they irreverently ‘take the piss’ out of authority figures (Mortimer, 2000).

How pedagogy might occur here is complex and contradictory. On one hand, these unconventional films bend the genre and show us different stories about coming of age through specific techniques. They also exhibit a kind of sensibility where the film, through its characters, exposes youth-hood as a construct, parodying its way of being as it celebrates and critiques it. Repetition of the binary between youth and adult, humour at the games played and their symbolic embodying of otherness are all pedagogic in this sense, (re)framing the relationship between the (young) individual and the (adult) world. Like the youth on-screen, audiences might begin to problematise the essentialist nature of youth-hood and adulthood. On the other hand, though, the films maintain a youth/adult divide as if it is natural and commonsensical, and as if it is the only way these stories could be told.

The protagonists’ sense of humour and witty social critique arguably make them likeable and perhaps more likeable than the protagonists’ adult-enemies. The choice to conform, then, or make a move to be more ‘adult’, is presented as an unwise and illogical choice, since the adults are so obviously corrupt and ugly. Being like them is shown to result in the loss of self as unique, gifted, authentic. Nonetheless, in this selection of films, as in so many others in this genre, as much as the young people are shown to ‘resist’ everything about adulthood, they develop towards adulthood, learn important lessons, and come of age, albeit on their own terms. A reading that is provoked is that in the end the world shifts slightly to make space for the youth transformed into young adult, and, importantly, the adults (largely positioned as being to blame for their children’s ‘problems’) eventually become allies and friends. For instance, Placid’s parents snap out of their passive neglect and put Placid’s needs first; and Esther’s mother loosens up and accepts Esther as an individual. In the end, in deliberate developmental terms, the protagonists learn about their selves, reach a kind of self-awareness, and reconcile with their parents. The subjectivity of the protagonist that sentimentally emerges at the end of the film as ‘individual’, ‘coherent’ and ‘happy’ can possibly be understood as a metaphor for reconciliation with the adult self and the adult world – a lesson the audience ideally learns along with the youth up on the screen.
Learning about the Coming and Passing of Age

In the coming-of-age comedies *Crackers* (1998) and *Spider & Rose* (1994), the familiar narrative of the young protagonist as outsider is revisited. Pedagogically, these popular films are texts that potentially work to legitimate the genre and thus legitimate this notion of crisis for the young person before their transition into adulthood. Positioned as reckless, superficial and ‘only interested in getting pissed and getting laid’, 22-year-old paramedic Spider (Simon Bossell) needs to ‘grow up’, according to his boss. He is recognised by his colleagues as uncommitted and immature, and they tell him on his last day of work, ‘We’re going to miss you Spider – like you would miss a malignant carcinoma!’ As a parting gift, Spider is given one last assignment: taxiing a ‘geriatric’ from Sydney to Coonabarabran in his ambulance. Like Spider, Joey (Daniel Kellie) in *Crackers* is also chronically misunderstood by all the adults in his life – his mother, her boyfriend, his grandparents and his aunty, finding more empathy from his grandfather’s dog. When Joey is expelled from another school for jumping off the roof, his mother (who swears she is going ‘bald and crazy’ and that she is at her wits’ end with Joey’s destructive behaviour) decides to take him to his grandparents’ place for the Christmas holidays – much to Joey’s dread. The adults in Joey’s life have no idea how to respond to Joey’s distress after the unexpected death of his father and the ‘weird’ behaviour that has resulted. Joey is locked in a constant generational battle with them all:

- **Joey’s Grandad Jack:** Is he still seeing that bloody quack?
- **Joey’s mum:** [sighs] Yes, yes he is.
- **Jack:** There’s the problem. I thought you were finished with all that bullshit.
- **Joey’s grandmother:** Maybe it’s all for the best?
- **Jack:** Rubbish ... there’s nothing a stiff kick up the arse wouldn’t solve! [he kicks Joey]
- **Joey:** Ow!

Like Spider, Joey is certainly out there on his own.

These familiar stories about young people coming into adulthood are indicative of other Australian films of this ilk, in many respects. However, they are also slightly different in that within the course of these two narratives, the youthful protagonist is quite randomly (yet conventionally) thrown together with an old person, and forced to relate to them. Rose (Ruth Cracknell) in *Spider & Rose* and Albert (Warren Mitchell) in *Crackers*, as the old subjects, are positioned as intrinsically different from the Spider and Joey respectively, and thus they clash head to head as the quintessential ‘odd couple’. As they stand eye to eye, locked in a battle of wills, a heated exchange between the ‘young’ subject and the ‘old’ subject ensues - for instance, when cantankerous Rose refuses to lie in the back of the ambulance:

- **Spider:** [patting the stretcher] Come on Gran, hop on! ...  
- **Rose:** Alright, but I sit in the front.  
- **Spider:** Sorry Gran, you’ll do as you’re told! Them’s the rules!  
- **Rose:** Them’s your rules! I am not going to spend the next four hours lying in the back like a cadaver in a hearse, it’s undignified.

Dismissing her and calling her ‘Gran’, all the while ‘youthfully’ chewing gum, Spider attempts to hold on to the authority his position supposedly gives him. But not one for backing down, and particularly not to this young ‘hooligan’, Rose demands to sit up the front. She doesn’t ask, or beg, she tells him. She may be old but she is not dead yet. Scenes such as these humorously revisit the plot of the youth versus the adult, where young and old are binary opposites and the generations are constituted as ‘naturally rivalrous’ (Gullette, 2001, p. 152; also see Gullette, 1997, 1999). Pedagogically, such scenes might legitimate such discursive regimes, and by using humour, repetition, otherness, etc, they perhaps orientate audiences towards such an interpretation. But the teaching and learning that can be had here is a complex proposition due to ambiguity.

Following this, in the course of each of the narratives, Albert and Rose are both shown to be by no means ‘normal’ adults, and they are constituted as incapable, mad and inadequate, these characteristics marking ‘old-age’ (Hockey & James, 1995). On one hand, this throws into question the category of ‘adult’. On another hand, adulthood is still held up as the norm, and the old-age subject is positioned as abnormal and therefore not adequately ‘adult’. Indeed, what the films
potentially show is that the old person is outside normative adulthood, demoted in status. Yet, this also gives the old-age subject licence to be mischievous, eccentric and ‘childish’, and in a sense, enter a ‘second childhood’ (Featherstone & Wernick, 1995; Hockey & James, 1995). And so the young and the old subject find themselves alone together and united in a kind of deep-seated intergenerational alienation from the adult world. Joining forces, they take off together on a rebellious adventure which marks their coming-of-age/passing-of-age subjectivities and their mutual defiance of convention, eventually coming to respect one another and become friends.

Spider and Rose have a rather wild adventure out on the open road, including singing, dancing, getting drunk, breaking and entering, stealing, hitch-hiking and a having spectacular crash in the ambulance. Joey and Albert get up to all sorts of mischief too, including stealing the family silver, hot-wiring Jack’s car, visiting a pawn shop to sell the silver to bet on the dog races, and starting a bar-room brawl with a bunch of crazed neo-Nazis. Gradually they demonstrate their capabilities and expose the corruption of the abject adult world. In comparison to the selfish, ugly and hateful adults in the films, our heroes/heroines remain ‘good’, honest and intelligent.

By the end of the films they each have learned important lessons from the other. As pedagogical texts, the films depict the old person as embodying ‘valuable’ lessons about life, enabling the young person to mature into adulthood. However, the encounter with the young person also enables the ‘development’ of the old person too. Their coming of age and passing of age are caricatured and embodied in the metaphorical journeys they take, and the ‘transitions’ they make. For Rose and Spider, as well as the actual journey, a road trip, it is also the marked changes in character that occur. Spider ‘grows up’ and learns to care for someone other than himself. Rose embraces a more ‘youthful’ and independent outlook, where illnesses like angina and arthritis are only states of mind. A particularly significant moment occurs when, after the ambulance hits a kangaroo, Rose gives Spider her walking stick to help him with his fractured leg, and she takes the wheel. Putting on Spider’s sunglasses and chewing his gum, driving fast now becomes the domain of the ‘old woman’, newly capable and energetic.

Jonathan Rayner (2000) notes that the opinions and experiences of one generation throw the assumptions and lifestyle of the other into perspective. In *Crackers*, Albert is the link to the past, an ‘old person’ who symbolically and pedagogically gives a sense of continuity, history, tradition, life and death (see Hugman, 1999). But Albert is also key to the future, particularly Joey’s future. Because of his relationship with Albert, Joey comes out of his alienated childhood; begins to deal with the grief and trauma of his father’s death; and finally stands up for himself against bullies – all of which are positioned as important milestones on the way to manhood. As Joey learns to accept death through Albert’s passing, the old man serves as a pedagogic device for the protagonist, and arguably also for the audience in this respect. For instance, the final scene of *Crackers* ideally incites audiences to sympathise with Joey’s experience through empathy and sentimentality. As Joey learns about who he is and his place in the world, the audience accompanies him as companions, seeing, experiencing and ideally feeling from his point of view:

> It is Christmas the following year. While Albert’s rooster sits near him, Joey plays Albert’s hurdy-gurdy at the church’s nativity play and in stark contrast to the previous year, smiles proudly. In the audience are his family, all smiling and happy (also in contrast to the previous year), and his mother holds her and her new partner’s baby. Ideally the audience is expected to understand that Joey is at peace with his family as a result of his new more mature outlook on life. Slapstick and mayhem ensue when the rooster takes flight and Joey tries to grab him, knocking over sets, family members and fellow performers. Rather than looking at Joey accusingly as they have done in the past – they all laugh. Joey is no longer an outsider. A ghostly Albert, complete with angel wings, looks over the scene from the roof, free of illness, making gags and cackling as usual. It is a happy and sentimental ending where the symbolism of Christmas, family, togetherness and a new bouncing baby work to potentially show a future of hope, happiness, love, growing up and growing wiser. Just as Joey is reconciled with himself and with his family, the audience ideally recognises a place where the past is reconciled and the ‘cycle of life’ continues.

Just as Spider and Rose and Albert and Joey are important for each other’s learning and ‘development’, so the young subject and the old subject provoke learning about what might be at stake in terms of embodying or not embodying a particular age-based subjectivity. While they are risky and at-risk subjects as outsiders to the normative adult position, ultimately the old and the young subjects work together to enable more conventional coming of and passing of ages in each
other, the ‘madness’ of their particular age merely temporary. In Spider & Rose and Crackers, pedagogy potentially occurs on several different levels. The old subject and the young subject might come to represent lessons that are learned from each other, and are thus vital to their respective transitions or becomeings. The old person and youth embody the meanings of generation as difference and conflict, inciting audiences towards regarding age-based subjectivities in the same way. So while these unconventional narratives are ambiguous in many respects, they also work to legitimate age-based subjectivity as normal, inevitable and transitional. Defying caricatures while embodying them, these age-based subjects potentially work as pedagogical objects orientating audiences towards a re-valuing of adulthood as central, normative, coherent and fully fledged. On the one hand, the behaviour of the ‘crazy old man’ or ‘grumpy old woman’ defies convention. On the other hand, their embodiment of such characters maintains social distances between the worlds of childhood and adulthood, and old age and adulthood, so that old and young are linked together in ways that leave the hegemony of adulthood unchallenged (Hockey & James, 1995; Lesko, 1996). It is significant, given that mainstream adulthood is positioned as abject and ugly, that our protagonists ultimately still embrace this subjectivity and transform into ‘socially sanctioned’ subjects in this light. What might be of interest for future research is an analysis of how the adults are constituted in these youth films. Much more could be said in regards to Esther’s mother in particular, as well as Placid’s parents and boss, Rose’s son and daughter-in-law and Joey’s mother, step-dad, grandfather, grandmother and great-aunt. How they embody expectations about ‘adulthood’, how adulthood is managed, maintained and challenged, and how they promote adulthood as ideal might enrich our understanding of youth-hood and subjecthood more broadly.

Conclusion

Films about ‘youth’ coming of age and leaving their childhood behind for an adult subjectivity are powerful contexts where our society constructs, maintains, protects and challenges discursive norms about young people. Film provides the context and provokes complex lessons about how forming the self as a subject might take place, and so in this sense can then be understood as a mechanism of governmentality (Foucault, 1988; Butler, 1993). These key Australian films, The Rage in Placid Lake, Hey Hey It’s Esther Blueburger, Crackers and Spider & Rose, can possibly be understood as socially sanctioned ways of performing the ‘outsider’, an outsider that eventually conforms in more or less socially sanctioned ways as the adult, recognised as the centre and the norm. Various techniques like humour, repetition, otherness, becoming and sentimentality frame the way we can know these age-based subjects. These narratives are arguably created in ways that pedagogically incite audiences to accept the formation of youthful subjectivities in opposition to adult subjectivities, and as a commonsensical battle between the ‘generations’. In this sense, such films seem to ‘express a desire for moral and ideological security’ (Speed, 1998, p. 25), not to mention for the subject to be viewed as stable and coherent. Yet, as shown, much ambiguity surrounds subjectification where being a particular age-based subject is held in tension as normal and/or abnormal and desirable and/or undesirable. Popular films, such as the ones considered here, revisit the trope of the genre, yet each repetition re-examines the way we know youth. Each re-examination can possibly expand on what is possible in powerful and resonating ways. What has also become clearer through this analysis, too, is that stories about young people’s problems, characteristics, needs, etc. are also central arenas for enabling and constraining social expectations about adulthood (Lesko, 1996). Simply put, popular films about young people are a rich resource for considering the ambiguity that frames not only childhood and youth-hood, but adult subjecthood as well. Knowing the subject ‘coming of age’, ‘passing of age’, and even supposedly ‘of age’ with/through popular film means knowing them through complex and ambiguous pedagogical cultural practices somewhere between a fiction about the way they are meant to be, the fantasy of who they are, the regulation of who they should be and the techniques that persuade us that they are so.
References


Learning to Come of Age with/in Popular Australian Film


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