

Beyond Clueless: a golden age of the American teen movie

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Ultra Culture founder Charlie Lyne talks about the passion for post-Clueless American teen movies that fuelled his new Kickstarter-funded documentary tribute.

A child of the 90s, critic-turned-filmmaker Charlie Lyne grew up in that era of teen movie fecundity between 1995's *Clueless* and 2004's *Mean Girls*. For his Kickstarter-funded debut feature, he trawled through over 300 teen movies from this period to compile a roving visual essay celebrating and deconstructing the tropes of his favourite genre.

Originally known as a film critic, Lyne is the founder of irreverent movie blog Ultra Culture, writes for the Guardian Guide and occasionally appears on shows like the BBC's Film Programme.

We spoke to him about rewatching hundreds of teen movies, his favourites, and the importance of nostalgia.

Why did you decide to make a documentary about teen movies?

I started rewatching all the teen movies that I grew up with, partly from a nostalgic angle but also because I'd seen a few and suddenly realised the wealth of stuff that was buried within them that I'd never noticed when I was an adolescent watching them. I became fascinated and fixated with this idea of going over them and searching for things that I'd never seen originally.

It became almost a bit like therapy because it would start to say something big about me, the fact that I'd missed these very big, weighty elements of these films while I was growing up. I just completely absorbed them into myself without questioning them in any way. It just seemed like a really natural thing to explore; this genre which hits everyone at a very impressionable age when often they're not equipped to analyse what they're taking on board.

So you found the whole process nostalgic then? Putting it all together, revisiting your adolescence a little bit at a time...

Yes, totally. It was always important to us not to write off the importance of that nostalgia because it is one of the defining characteristics of rewatching these films. It's almost why I find analysing these films and thinking about them in depth so interesting because it's always coming in tandem with this overwhelming feeling of nostalgia. Hopefully the film itself elicits as much nostalgia itself as it does intrigue.

Some older viewers may be surprised that you left out the 80s teen movies for example. Why did you decide to do this?

We knew we needed to zero in to some extent because we were trying to create an immersive world. If you have James Dean movies cutting across John Hughes movies, there's something very jarring about that and it would pull you outside of the universe. We knew we wanted to focus on a specific era and naturally for me that was the one I felt like I had the closest connection to.

Also, in the 90s and 00s there was such a wide range of teen movies being produced. As an era it wasn't defined by a few big titans of the genre, it was defined by all the small movies. That was very interesting because you could look at these very idiosyncratic films that were built for this body of work.

There are some movies you feature which many would not automatically identify as teen movies. What are the elements that you think make up a teen movie?

Our one criterion really was that a film needed to tackle in some way the idea of adolescence: the passage from childhood to adulthood. Beyond that we played a bit fast and loose with technicalities because it just seemed pointless to come up with a strict set of rules. It's more about whether it captured that feeling of 'teenage-ness'.

In some cases, like *American Beauty* (1999), it wouldn't even be the whole film but maybe just a subplot in the film. It's similar with something like *Storytelling* (2001), the Todd Solondz movie that's in there, half of which is an absolute bonafide teen movie. People always have their own specific definitions but for us it was just important that everything we used spoke to adolescents.

Why did you choose to focus on the more obscure titles rather than the canonical teen movies of your generation?

It was by no means an intentional decision. It just happened over time because we would find that when you start looking at any of the classic teen movies often they're the ones that know themselves the best. They're very self-assured, they know what they're saying and so actually there's less to discover beneath the surface.

Whereas I always find the slightly smaller, slightly more forgotten movies are often the ones that have all this weird subtext buried under there which maybe people didn't really notice on original release. I find that they're the ones that are really interesting to deconstruct.

Also, I think with the teen genre, the movies that are often closest to people's hearts are often not those big box-office classics; they're the one movie that that one person had on VHS and watched 100 times or the one movie that for some reason struck them at that

particularly impressionable age. After we had screenings, people would come out and say “ah I’m so glad you included that” and they were always talking about *Idle Hands* (1999) or *The Rage: Carrie 2* (1999), not *Mean Girls* and all those kinds of films.

Most of the movies you draw upon are American. Would you say there’s something about the teen movie that’s specifically American?

I think there’s certainly something about the kind of teen movie we’re covering which is the American model that is exported around the world. The one that has almost become a sort of way of teaching teenagers the way they should be – the mass-produced, mass-exported American teen movie.

People have asked me: why aren’t you including all the teen movies from other countries? I’m sure plenty of countries have equally healthy teen movie industries as America, but the difference is they’re not farmed out to the rest of the world. Growing up for me was kind of growing up through the prism of American teen movies even though they actually had so little relation to my actual adolescent experience. That’s a common feeling I think; that you’re living your life simultaneously through the world you exist in as a teenager and the one you’re almost aspiring to in the Hollywood teen movie.

Do you think these films are successful because they provide an accurate depiction of the real lives of teenagers? Or do you think they provide a distinct set of generic tropes that appeal to us at that age?

I think it’s a bit of both – almost a vicious circle. However accurate they began life as, teen life began to imitate teen cinema as much as teen cinema was imitating teen life. Slowly they may have got closer but it’s hard to say which initiated that process.

I’ve got a sister who grew up in American high school and she says there are plenty of similarities between *Mean Girls* and *Clueless* and her actual experience. But she doesn’t know whether that’s actually because they’ve all seen *Mean Girls* and they’ve learnt to imitate that. The teen movie has an incredible cannibalistic power to teach teenagers how they should act, how they should be and how they should view the world. It’s almost become too absorbed into pop culture to work out how much influence it’s having.

One thing I noticed in the film, which is not mentioned in the narration, is the proximity of the teen movie to the horror movie. Why do you think this is?

Another thing that people forget about the teen genre is that it’s barely a genre really. It’s more of a setting. The only thing the teen genre has in common with all the films across it is that they take place in the same environment and they have graduations, prom nights and those sorts of iconic things. But tonally they completely run the gamut. You have teen horror movies, comedies, dramas, sci-fi – every imaginable genre really.

Horror crops up a lot because symbolically it's an incredibly powerful tool for representing the disorientating experience of adolescence and the feeling of losing control. I think it's no wonder that together with comedy it provides the most teen action on screen.

What do you make of the current state of the teen movie? Do you think the teen movie in its classical form is over?

I think so, but I think that's a good thing. Teen movies always seem to come in waves. Off the back of the period that's in the film there was about a five- or 10-year lull period. Now I think it's starting to come back and I think one of the ways you can tell it's coming back is that the teen movies that are coming out now are not appealing to my generation and not appealing to adults – they're actually upsetting adults.

When *Project X* (2012) came out I wasn't that much of a fan of it, but I saw how angry and upset adults were about it and how teenagers were going and seeing it and I thought "oh, the teen movie is doing what it's supposed to do". It's hitting teens exactly on their level and it's angering and confusing everyone else. Which is exactly what it should do; it happened with *Kids* (1995), it happened with *The Breakfast Club* (1985), it happened with *Rebel without a Cause* (1955).

On the other end of the scale you've got something like *The Way Way Back* (2013), which came out recently. Loads of adults loved it, it won awards, went to Sundance, did all that stuff – and teenagers don't give a shit. It's a ridiculous retrograde 1980s vision of teenage life with almost no relation to modern adolescence. I think whenever I'm angry and confused about a teen movie I think it's a good sign that the genre is in rude health.

You draw on 300-odd teen movies in your film. But what are you favourites?

My favourites are always the ones that are not necessarily the biggest but really struck a chord with me. The big one for me was always *EuroTrip* (2004). I saw it when I was 14 and it had a very striking impact on me for all the reasons that a 14 year-old would like that film. Then I saw it again at about 17 and this slight creeping sense of unease set in; and then again at 20 and that was the initial spark that made me want to explore the ideas in *Beyond Clueless*. There is something really self-analytical about rewatching films you loved as a teenager and wondering what the hell you were thinking.

Which films from the BFI season would you pick out?

There are a few films from our film in there, in fact – *Kids*, *Thirteen* and *Nowhere* – and I think all of them capture what I was just talking about. They were all greeted with incredible backlash from adult audiences at the time and yet were devoured hungrily by teenagers – *Kids* especially. Those are the ones I find most exciting to look back on. To see how they feel now and how much of that sense of anger and rebellion they still hold. Because I think

inevitably these films do date, they're never quite what they were when you were 15 and they don't mean quite the same thing to today's teenagers. It's a strange evolution that they have.

Do you fancy making your own teen movie fiction film one day?

I'd love to. But then I'd always worry that I'd become too lost in the ones that already exist at this point. I feel like I'd struggle to find anything original because I'd be in a state of just endless tropes, which hopefully is reflected in Beyond Clueless. Maybe that's as close as I'm ever going to get to a teen movie. Maybe I'm burnt out now.