

Introduction

Timothy Shary



These are profound times to study boyhood in cinema. Even though male characters have undoubtedly dominated cinema roles from the start, boys' stories have not been consistently produced or appreciated. Since the publication of *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth*, a collection edited by Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward in 2005, there has been increasing academic interest in boyhood representation through movies, as demonstrated by the chapters collected here. This interest follows the expansive concerns of pop psychology texts at the turn of the century that took up the political and emotional consequences of boys' behavior, such as those by Pollack (1999), Kindlon and Thompson (2000), and Sommers (2001). Their research joined the chorus of a prevailing *masculinity in crisis* theme that has permeated gender studies in recent years: boys have been troubled by the pressures of patriarchy, the demands of feminism, and the culture of capitalism, and thus are in need of rescue and protection from these influences.

This supposed crisis has nonetheless been much less worrisome on screen, where the diverse representations of boyhood concerns are considerably multidimensional. Some boys are clearly challenging gender expectations and confronting masculine roles, while others are trying to age into manhood with less forceful flair. The best example of this latter style was a film aptly titled simply *Boyhood* (2014), which primarily follows a single child through elementary school to high school graduation, tracing the subtle and even mundane development of a young man who arrives at adulthood with many of the same perplexing questions and embryonic (and still unfulfilled) ambitions he had as a six-year-old. The title may be a bit sweeping or assumptive—after all, it is the story of only one white, working-class, heterosexual, boy in Texas—but its method and message are universal. Boyhood is a process, not a product; it is amorphous and ambiguous despite being codified through schooling, psychology, and the law.

This book originated in a two-part journal series that I edited for *Boyhood Studies*, seeking a diversity of perspectives on the broad topic of boyhood in cinema that would reflect the ongoing questioning of how boys have been constructed by movies, particularly within an era that is fraught with confusions and concerns about just who boys are. I was enthused by the number of manuscripts that were proposed, which ranged across historical periods and national cinemas, and offered an exciting dialogue on the complex and multidisciplinary nature of boyhood studies. Some chapters did examine classical Hollywood texts, yet I also appreciated the global breadth that many chapters provided. Further, as I began the selection process, it became clear that many chapters offered potentially paradigm-shifting perspectives on the very definitions of boyhood itself, across time and across cultures.

Both theoretical and historical perspectives on boyhood are taken up by the essays here. In terms of the former, these authors move beyond the Butlerian (1990) thesis of gender as performance and such crisis narratives as those promoted by Faludi (1999) and Edwards (2006), taking on representations of boyhood in the now postfeminist context identified by Tasker and Negra (2007) and Hamad (2014). Boys in the films examined in these chapters confront their sexual desires and upheavals, question the prevailing politics of their milieu, and negotiate the policies of educational and medical systems that privilege not only heteronormativity and gender dogmatism, but often deny the variable and nascent nature of boyhood itself. The study of boys today has entered what is being thought of as the postnormal range, as recently illustrated by the work of Halberstam (2013), Spade (2015), and Reichert (2019), and as recognized by the chapters offered here.

In terms of historical perspectives, these authors consider the past century of cinema, from the silent era of the 1920s to the past decade. To be sure, enormous changes took place over those generations, within the film industry and for the global culture of boys. Just as the addition of sound to film expanded its mediumistic potential, the growth of movie theaters (and later television and home video) expanded the opportunities for audiences—particularly youth—to see representations of their cultures on screen. For boys, the further militarization of young men in the wake of increasingly global wars pressured them to restrain their emotions, while the rise of feminism attempted to educate them about their prejudice and privilege in terms of gender.

The arrangement of the essays thus corresponds to these theoretical and historical interests, first focusing primarily on gender and politics and then moving into cultural and national concerns. The opening chapter by Victoria



Cann and Erica Horton makes for a strong start by generating provocative questions about teenage boys' sexual torments in genre-bending Hollywood fare such as *Superbad* (2007). Katie Barnett then engages with broader existential issues about the very survival of boys in American features of the 1990s such as *My Girl* (1991) and *The Mighty* (1998). The subsequent appreciation of the contemporary Belgian classic *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997) by Gust Yep, Sage Russo, and Ryan Lescure casts that film in meaningful context as one of the first to address transgender identity among children. Hannah Mueller's analysis of two recent Brazilian films, *Do Começo ao Fim* (2009) and *Hoje Eu Quero Voltar Sozinho* (2014), is a more aggressively argumentative evaluation of gender politics among boys beyond the dominant Hollywood system.

Thereafter, Molly Lewis takes a somewhat auteuristic approach in her examination of Francis Ford Coppola's two teen films of 1983, both based on novels by S.E. Hinton—*The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish*—finding significance in the director's own boyhood experiences to explain his investment in these two unusual productions. In the next chapter, Andy Pope moves our focus to Britain in the 1980s in his examination of films of the 2000s that reflected on patriarchy at that time, particularly *This is England* (2006) and *Son of Rambow* (2007), in which adult authors and directors looked back at their own boyhoods during the turbulent Thatcher decade. Peter Lee's chapter considers the gendered evolution, as it were, of Jackie Coogan in the 1920s, bringing out many relevant historical tensions about how boyhood has been performed over the past century. Natasha Anand focuses on just one film in her chapter—*Taare Zameen Par*—an Indian production from 2007 that was released in the US as *Like Stars on Earth*. Through her sensitive study of protagonist Ishaan, an eight-year-old coping with a learning disability, she argues for many revisions in perceptions of boys' education and behavior. Daniel Smith-Rowsey then makes a concise case for the significant boyishness of an often-overlooked character in the 1980s pantheon of notable young men, Marty McFly from *Back to the Future* (1985), covering many of the well-known films that catered to boys in that venerated decade. Hollywood has continued to promote the pursuits of boys more than girls, as seen in popular productions such as *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *American Pie* (1999), *Friday Night Lights* (2004), *Superbad* (2007), *Hugo* (2011), *The Maze Runner* (2014), and *Good Boys* (2019).

Indeed, there is a prolific history of boys and boyhood in cinema. For example, after Jackie Coogan became such a dominant boy star of the 1920s, he was followed in the next decade by Jackie Cooper who, for his title role in *Skippy* (1931) when he was barely nine years old, became the first child

ever nominated for an Academy Award. He then went on to greater fame in *The Champ* (1931), *The Bowery* (1933), and *Treasure Island* (1934). Coogan and Cooper, alas, became sad paradigms of child stars whose notoriety would soon fade as they entered adolescence, a fate that befell the most famous child star of the 1930s, Shirley Temple, as well as successors such as Bobby Driscoll and Claude Jarman, Jr., who each won great acclaim in hit films of 1946, respectively, *Song of the South* and *The Yearling* (for which Jarman won a special Academy Award). All these boys were denied respectable adult roles later in life, and the industry continues to exhibit this implicit prejudice against boys' talent as they age into manhood. Witness the more modern fates of Macaulay Culkin, star of *Home Alone*, the biggest film of 1990, and Haley Joel Osment, who was Oscar-nominated for *The Sixth Sense* (1999), neither of whom had a prominent role after the age of 14. We must wonder if the same destiny awaits Jacob Tremblay, who earned an Oscar nomination at the age of nine for *Room* (2015) yet continues to be primarily cast in animated features and TV series that bring him little visibility.

Of course, other national cinemas beyond the United States have also developed in their depictions of boyhood. British cinema celebrated “angry young men” in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) and later *If...* (1968) and *Kes* (1969), while still exploring innocence in examples from *Oliver Twist* (1948) to *Hope and Glory* (1987), plus the eight *Harry Potter* films from 2001 to 2011. If we look more broadly at postwar European cinema, we cannot forget the film that helped to inaugurate the French New Wave—Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959)—as well as other French classics about boys such as *Murmur of the Heart* (1971), *Au Revoir Les Enfants* (1987), and *The Son of the Shark* (1993). In Italy, another film about boys inaugurated a movement just after the war—De Sica's neorealist *Shoeshine* (1946); in West Germany, *The Trapp Family* (1956) would inspire the American blockbuster *The Sound of Music* (1965); and Andrei Tarkovsky made his debut in the Soviet Union with *Ivan's Childhood* (1962). Boys continue to captivate in more recent European productions such as *El Bola* (Spain, 2000), *Libero* (Italy, 2006), *Grave Decisions* (Germany, 2006), *Flight of the Red Balloon* (France, 2007), *The Kid with a Bike* (Belgium, 2011), *Goodnight Mommy* (Austria, 2014), and *The Painted Bird* (Czech Republic, 2019).

International films outside European culture have given us many enchanting images of boys that may nonetheless be limited to their domestic markets without major film festival attention, such as the special Cannes award that helped propel a small Indian film into a canonical boyhood study, *Pather Panchali*, in 1955. Boys' experiences—and often suffering—



continued to be the subjects of films beyond the European market such as *Pixote* (Brazil, 1981), *Village of Dreams* (Japan, 1996), *Children of Heaven* (Iran, 1997), *Kamchatka* (Argentina, 2002), *Under the Same Moon* (Mexico, 2007), and the recent Oscar nominees *Theeb* (Jordan, 2015) and *Caper-naum* (Lebanon, 2018).

The cinematic roles of boys sampled here only begin to suggest the changing nature of boyhood representation in the past few decades. The shallow depiction of sex-starved hetero youths so dominant in the 1980s has long since been replaced by more nuanced depictions of (still often confused) boys who are trying to find their way to whatever manhood now means. We see this in recent American films such as *Whiplash* (2014), *Dope* (2015), *Moonlight* (2016), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Love, Simon* (2018), and *Honey Boy* (2019) as well as international fare such as *Mommy* (2014, Canada), *Trash* (2015, Brazil), *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (2016, New Zealand), *A Ciambra* (2017, Italy), *My Best Friend* (2018, Argentina), and *Storm Boy* (2019, Australia). We can still see where the boys are, but who they are continues to evolve with increasing curiosity and sensitivity.

Cinema remains a fertile ground for the evaluation and celebration of boyhood, while it is capacious enough to welcome more films about girls' experiences. The recent success of *The Edge of Seventeen* (2016), *Lady Bird* (2017), *Eighth Grade* (2018), and *Booksmart* (2019) indicates that serious stories about young female protagonists can appeal to a wide audience and avoid alienating the male cohort that drives so much of the market. Indeed, these films also rely on boys as key characters, and we will benefit from further films that portray boyhood with sensitivity and intensity while recognizing its ever-changing nature within a culture that enjoys a healthy questioning of gender.



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