

Dissertation Proposal

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This dissertation proposal aims to show the necessity of rebellion against oppression and authority in coming-of-age cinema. Coming-of-age and rite-of-passage stories have been around since the existence of storytelling and are arguably one of the most fundamentally universal and important types of stories that can be told. The creation of cinema and rise of its popularity over the last century has made these stories more accessible than ever and the possibility of a wide scope of distribution as well as the creation of the internet has only made these narratives become more available for audiences. I will be looking at the prevalence of themes of rebellion in coming-of-age tales and its effect on youth culture through the ages. This will show through psychological and sociological research that a prevalent theme in coming-of-age stories is the need to rebel against forces that are seen as authoritative and oppressive. The focus on cinema will reflect the medium's popularity in youth culture and the impact it has in stories involving rites of passage and the journey from youth into adulthood. I will analyse both literature and film to show the emerging use of defiance against authority in order to convey a protagonist's ascent into adulthood. Through the study of psychology this will demonstrate a pattern in society that openly regards rebellion as a necessary part of a person's journey in life, whether it be rebellion against a parent or even rebellion against the self. While the word "rebellion" is mostly associated with political movements and acts of defiance, I will show that it is an essential and healthy part of developmental behaviour and motion pictures have been arguably the greatest platform for depicting this upward struggle to youth culture over the past one hundred years.

Oppression is a heavy word, but a relevant one. It brings to mind ideas of injustice, struggle, misunderstanding and strife. This idea of consistently being the underdog has a lasting effect on youth and for certain situations that feeling can carry into adulthood. Charles Dickens, through the voice of Pip, states in *Great Expectations* "In the little world in which children

have their existence whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt, as injustice” (Dickens, 1996, p. 63). For centuries the very ethos that has driven all young people is one of “eventual independence”. The vast majority of youth are born into a system where they are obedient and compliant to their parents, however these children look up to their parents as a model of the eventual independence they will one day receive. Chapter 4 of John Yorke’s *Into the Woods* is titled “The Importance of Change”, in it he states “Change is the bedrock of life and consequently the bedrock of narrative” (Yorke, 2014, p. 46). While addressing character and structural design Yorke goes on to state:

Post-midpoint the protagonist has to learn how to integrate the now dominant new self with the old one. It’s not enough for them to assume an entirely new personality – they have to learn how to merge the good from the new with the good from the old. Then, as the journey nears its end, the two sides are brought into balance. It’s dialectics – it’s thesis and antithesis, seeking synthesis once again.

(Yorke, 2014, p. 137)

In these stories that follow the journey through adolescence it is the young person that seeks out this balance through a lens of oppression. The idea that youth are constantly in a state of being oppressed, no matter how happy the childhood, creates both an external and internal antagonist. It is an antagonist that is not a necessarily aggressive force against the protagonist, but rather one that is essential in order to allow the protagonist to fight against it in order to achieve enlightenment from within. In *The Kings of Summer* (Vogt-Roberts, 2013), a film about three boys finding independence and freedom after running away to a house they’ve built in the woods, the character Patrick does not have a particularly harsh or overtly oppressive homelife. The type of persecution he feels is largely internal due to a lack of being able to

associate with his overbearing parents. *American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973) follows several teenage boys over the course of one night after they finish high school. Unsure about leaving his hometown the character Curt ultimately decides to go forward with this major step in his adult life and accept the challenge of freedom and liberation while his best friend Steve changes his mind and decides to stay in his hometown. An on-screen epilogue reveals that Curt is a writer and living in Canada while Steve remained in his hometown and became an insurance agent. The oppressive force in Curt's young life was nothing aggressive or darkly foreboding, but rather the complacency he had in his hometown. It was Curt's decision to reject this contentment that allowed him to grow as an individual and achieve an adult level of freedom, which is clearly shown as he says goodbye to his family and friends and also when we learn of his future location and profession in the epilogue.

In *The Art of Dramatic Writing* Lajos Egri states "Every character a dramatist presents must have within it the seeds of its future development" (Egri, 2004, p. 68). It is the passively and/or aggressively oppressive force that plants these seeds within the character in a coming-of-age narrative. The obstacle put between them and their growth is not merely that which they must overcome in order to achieve a heightened level of understanding, it is also the inspiration that motivates them to find the strength within themselves to develop. Alfred Hitchcock (1966, quoted in Yorke, 2014, p. 8) once said "The more successful the villain, the more successful the picture" and in that sense the oppression experienced by youth in coming-of-age cinema is the most successful antagonist of all.

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines the intransitive verb 'rebel' as "to oppose or disobey one in authority or control" (Dictionary by Merriam-Webster, 2020a). The entry goes on to state:

Plenty of teenagers *rebel* against their parents in all kinds of ways. But a rebellion usually involves a group... Rebellion, armed or otherwise, has often alerted those in power that those they control are very unhappy.

One synonym for the word ‘rebellion’ is ‘uprising’, and according to the Online Etymology Dictionary the early definition of uprising meant “act of rising from death or the grave, resurrection” (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2020a) as used in the mid-thirteenth century. It was not until the 1580’s that the word was then used to describe insurrection or popular revolt. I believe it is wholly appropriate that the early usage of ‘uprising’ is one relating to a life after death or spiritual rebirth. In the coming-of-age narrative it is the force of rebellion that gives the story’s protagonist a sense of rebirth or reawakening, bringing them to a higher level of consciousness and helping them achieve a goal that had not yet been realized until that moment. As Yorke states:

A character seeks what they want and in doing so realizes instead their need...
Characters then should not always get what they want, but should – if they deserve it – get what they need.

(Yorke, 2014, p. 12)

Frequently in a coming-of-age film the characters goal that they want is often in opposition to what they need and this need remains very elusive to the protagonist. It is the moment of rebellion that sows the seeds of change within the character and we see that rebellion grow into something mature and solid with its roots firmly embedded in the foundation of the character.

Another synonym of ‘rebellion’ is ‘revolution’. Revolution is a fascinating word, coming from the late Latin word ‘revolvere’ meaning “turn, roll back” (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2020b). It contains a meaning of “a sudden, radical or complete change” (Dictionary by Merriam-Webster, 2020b). I think it is only fitting that this word associated

with rebellion also has a definition that is cyclical in nature. In the film *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985) the characters spend a Saturday in detention and discuss their lives and relation to their parents. The character Andrew states “My God, are we gonna be like our parents?” To which Claire replies “Not me... ever,” and Allison finally says “It’s unavoidable. It just happens.” This idea that the journey from youth to adulthood is cyclical and repetitive is one that harkens back to that Latin root word of revolution, *revolvere*, meaning “to turn or roll back”. The teenagers in this film fear that adulthood will cause that backwards step that simply reverts them to behaving the way their parents did, but it is actually the self-awareness of their surroundings and ability to reflect that will rescue them from becoming the thing they hate. This is the gift that they did not want, but instead needed. The end of the film finds them willing to set aside things like social regulations, popularity and cliques in order to achieve a higher level of understanding. It was appropriately their initial mindless act of rebellion that landed them in detention on that Saturday, but it was a very mindful rebellion that allowed them to attain a heightened consciousness.

Rebellion is the act of defiance utterly necessary in order to precipitate growth in a young person, particularly a young adult. While rebellion can come in many forms, both as seemingly mindless acts of insolence and as calculated feats of insubordination, it serves a very important purpose to allow a young person to grow through challenging their superiors and testing the boundaries of their existence in order to realize their deep-seeded goals of maturity and eventually adulthood. In his *Psychology Today* article “Rebel with a Cause: Rebellion in Adolescence”, Carl E. Pickhardt PhD states:

Although the young person thinks rebellion is an act of independence, it actually never is. It is really an act of *dependency*. Rebellion causes the young person to depend their self-definition and personal conduct on doing the opposite of what other people want. That's why the antidote for rebellion is the true independence offered by creating and

accepting a challenge — the young person deciding to do something hard with themselves for themselves in order to grow themselves.

(Pickhardt, 2009)

The potential of growth is the bedrock of character development and growth itself is the reason for telling stories. Egri states:

“Growth” is a character’s reaction to a conflict in which he is involved. A character can grow through making the correct move, as well as the incorrect one – but he *must* grow, if he is a real character

(Egri, 2004, p. 77)

For any kind of narrative to be a successful and worthwhile one, growth must happen in some way, shape or form. If the characters within the story do not grow, then it must be a tale that at least causes the audience to grow through witnessing them.

In the film *Lady Bird* (Gerwig, 2017) the titular character feels oppressed by her parents, her school and her circumstances. She consistently rebels against her mother at every turn, defies the rules of her private Catholic high school and alienates herself from her best friend in hopes of achieving a superficial goal she has to be popular and be with the boy she finds attractive, even though he is shallow. Eventually she realizes she has made a mistake and reconciles with her best friend. These mindless acts of rebellion are the occurrences that help bring forth the realization to Lady Bird what is truly important and allow her to receive the gifts of development and self-reflection. At the end of the film she flies to New York for college without properly saying goodbye to her mother, from whom she’s become estranged and is no longer on speaking terms with. While in New York she engages in a mindless act of rebellion and drinks heavily at a party to the point of needing to go to the hospital. The morning after she attends a Presbyterian church service. Having previously rebelled against her Christian

school that she attended before going to college, this willingness to attend a church service of her own freewill and accord represents a very mindful act of rebellion and the symbolism of the church invokes themes of salvation and redemption. This causes Lady Bird, now referring to herself by her given name of Christine, to call her parents' home and leave a voicemail message for her mother, reconciling with her.

In the film *Mid90s* (Hill, 2018) we see life through the eyes of the 13-year-old Stevie, played by Sunny Suljic. His home life is difficult with an absent mother and an abusive older brother, so Stevie finds acceptance among a group of skateboarders. The audience witnesses details of his life that help explain his mindless behaviour with the film ending in a near-death experience that hopefully leads Stevie to a spiritual awakening. Although we do not witness any advanced form of growth in the film, the audience grows in being able to find understanding in the protagonist's situation and gain knowledge as to why those mindless acts of rebellion take place. Similarly in *The 400 Blows* (Truffaut, 1959) we observe the life of Antoine Doinel, a dysfunctional and misunderstood adolescent boy. In the film it is very easy to see the situation from the perspective of his parents and school teachers, however the audience has the marvellous ability to witness life through the eyes of Antoine as well and understand that there are two sides to every story. The film's final scene finds Antoine escaping the juvenile detention home he's been sent to and making his way to the sea, with no plan in sight. This may seem like one more mindless act of rebellion to add to the many within in the film, but it lends us an insight into both the hopelessness and the hopefulness of the character. Professor Julian Cornell states:

What Truffaut and the people working on the film want to leave you with is, they don't want to dictate exactly how you're supposed to feel about the experience that you just watched.

(Cornell, 2016)

The open-ended nature of the film's finale allows the audience to develop their own reflection of the events presented in the film, giving both the audience a chance for growth as well as highlighting the protagonist's potential for growth.

In any coming-of-age story both the protagonist as well as the audience must allow the potential for growth to develop throughout the narrative in order to help facilitate the journey from youth to maturity.

This pattern often repeats in coming-of-age narratives: some form of oppression inspires mindless rebellion which leads to a realization which then leads to mindful rebellion which leads to growth. Without all of these components, in some capacity or another, the coming-of-age or rite-of-passage results in a lack of movement and the narrative becomes static. Similar to Newton's third law of motion (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2020) there must be an action that causes an equal and opposite reaction, and in this type of storytelling it is the oppressive force that brings forth this need to rebel. The opposing reaction of rebellion always ends in consequences that will bring a realization to the character and often some sort of reflection which will allow them to further their development. This heightened understanding then precipitates more carefully calculated mindful acts of rebellion that then contributes to the overall growth of the character and/or the growth of the audience. This is the heart of the coming-of-age story and the structure that brings these narratives to a fulfilling conclusion.

Rebellion in the face of oppression is an utterly necessary device in the narrative of coming-of-age cinema and can be found within any example of the subgenre. The presence of a rebellious nature as a response to an overbearing authority will always be the means by which the narrative's characters and audience can both reflect, grow and thrive. Knowledge of this structure in a coming-of-age narrative poses the question: When presented in narrative format is it the seemingly reckless nature of young people that eventually gives birth to the

understanding and awareness accompanied with maturity and adulthood? That is to say, is it the mindlessness of youth that eventually leads to the mindfulness of adulthood?

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