

Growing Up Modern: An Introduction

Childhood and youth have always been a focus for our most intense hopes and fears. Yet over the past seventy years, there has been a far-reaching transformation, both in children's and young people's lives and in our ideas about childhood. *Growing Up Modern* explores these changes by looking at popular culture – film, television, popular music and literature, and consumer products more broadly. It considers how children and young people have been represented, addressed and entertained, and what this tells us about the broader social and cultural developments of the time. From *The Famous Five* and *Rebel Without A Cause*, through emo kids and *Schooldkids Oz*, and on to *Skins* and *Teletubbies*, it explores the popular cultural worlds of childhood and youth in an era of radical change.

This project aims to fill several gaps. While there has been an explosion of popular social history writing in recent years, most historians tend to ignore children, and deal with young people in very limited (and often sensationalist) ways. There is a small and growing academic literature on the history of childhood and youth, but much of this is concerned with the period before the mid-twentieth century. The popular culture of childhood is often neglected or not taken seriously. While some more glamorous or spectacular aspects of youth culture (especially popular music and fashion) have been well documented, the cultural experiences of 'ordinary' young people – especially younger teenagers – have largely been ignored. Meanwhile, academic research and popular debate about children, young people and media is fixated on the very latest developments, and tends to lack a historical dimension.

Popular discussions of children's culture are often infused with nostalgia. To some degree, this is inevitable: most of us look back fondly to the enthusiasms of our own childhoods. Yet in doing so, we risk perpetuating a fantasy of an imaginary golden age, and of a natural childhood somehow untainted by commercialism and corruption. While nostalgia for the past can provide the basis for a critique of the present, such rose-tinted ideas of childhood innocence can also be positively reactionary. Meanwhile, discussions of youth culture often reflect a different kind of nostalgia. Looking back, we imagine that the cultural experiences of our own teenage years possessed a kind of authenticity that is no longer available to the youth of today. Back in the day, youth culture was a spontaneous expression of rebellion, not a figment of the commercial market as it is today. Back then, we were *truly* radical and resistant. In both cases, the present is compared unfavourably with the past, in a way that sustains easy narratives of cultural decline.

This view of the past finds an alternative expression in the smart, postmodern irony that is apparent in the growing fan culture surrounding children's media. Those who collect and catalogue media memorabilia, who compile fan websites and attend fan conventions, are undoubtedly sincere in their motivations. Yet many of these enthusiasts for the 'cult' children's animation of the 1970s, or the tacky, stereotyped superhero toys of the 1980s, are also guilty of condescending to the past. Their activities are premised on a view of the past as somehow 'cute' – as charmingly simple and naïve – and on the concomitant view of the present as necessarily knowing and sophisticated.

Growing Up Modern is not another exercise in nostalgia, or in postmodern irony. On the contrary, it is intended as a *critical* project. It aims to analyse and interrogate the ways in which we typically understand childhood and youth – the stories of liberation and progress, or of lost innocence and freedom; the images of cute children and rebellious adolescents; and the exaggerated anxieties and aspirations that routinely circulate in the public debate. In looking back to the past, it also seeks to challenge how we understand the present and the future.

These ideas have important implications in terms of the cultural resources and experiences that adults create and make available to young people today. Yet these representations of childhood and youth also reflect much broader tensions that are evident within the culture and society of their time – even if those tensions are sometimes suppressed or not acknowledged. The figure of the child or the young person is frequently a symbol, a metaphor, or a metonym (a part that stands for the whole): it may tell us very little about the realities of young people's lives, but in fact say more about the perspectives of adults. In exploring these themes, *Growing Up Modern* uses childhood, youth and popular culture as a lens through which to interpret broader social and cultural changes during the period.

The aim here is not to 'set the record straight' about the past. It is not to recapture young people's experiences in earlier times – even if this were possible. Rather, it is to explore the diverse and sometimes contradictory *ideas* of childhood and youth that have been encapsulated in cultural artefacts both *for* and *about* young people – artefacts that are almost entirely produced and purchased by adults. As such, it considers:

- forms of popular culture produced *for* children and young people, ranging from books and comics to television, film, pop music, toys and advertising;
- representations *of* children and young people aimed primarily at adults, including novels and films, as well as advertising and other media imagery;
- debates and campaigns focusing on the effects of media and popular culture on the young, in relation to issues such as sex, violence and commercialism.

In all these areas, we encounter adults' expectations, projections, fantasies and fears, as well as traces of the perspectives and experiences of *real* children and young people – of adults' memories, of their relationships with their own children, and of their encounters with child audiences. Yet how children respond to this material, and what they make of it, is another question.

Growing Up Modern consciously aims to cover a wide variety of topics, across a range of media and time periods: it will jump erratically from childhood to youth, from the 1950s to the 2000s, from pop music to art movies to children's books. Its focus is historical, but from time to time it also addresses highly topical, contemporary controversies. It is intended as a public knowledge project, which will be accessible for the 'general reader' – whoever that may be. It struggles – not always successfully – to dispense with academic jargon and pretentious verbiage, in favour of a direct and hopefully engaging style. The emphasis here is on specific cases and examples: more general, theoretical questions are addressed in a light and straightforward way, although some of them are explored in more detail in somewhat more academic pieces too.

Why history?

I am a former academic, who has conducted research on children, young people and media throughout my working life. To a large extent, my research has followed the trajectory of technological change; and at times, I have briefly managed to ride the wave of novelty. I began by looking at television, and gradually moved on to video, computer games and the internet. Yet here, as in media research more broadly, there is a significant danger of *neophilia* – an exclusive preoccupation with what's new. Children and young people today still watch television, go to the cinema, read books and comics, and play with non-electronic toys; but researchers (and those who fund research) often seem to be interested only in the latest technological developments – in social media, in mobile devices, or in wearable technology. If we're not looking at what is happening today, or (even better) tomorrow, it seems that our research is considered irrelevant. Yet the rate of change is such that serious research will almost invariably fail to keep up; and in struggling to do so, we often sacrifice the ability to learn from the past.

In this respect, the agenda and funding for research in this field seems to be partly driven by the breathless hype of technology companies. However, it is also informed by a set of recurrent concerns that have been around for many years. The public debate about children, young people and media has always been dominated by intense, and often exaggerated, fears and anxieties on the part of adults. Children are frequently deemed to be innocent and vulnerable; while young people are perceived as potentially dangerous and threatening. In different ways, both are seen to be at risk of corruption at the hands of media and popular culture: media will expose them to knowledge and experiences that will endanger them, and turn them into anti-social monsters. As such, they are in urgent need of protection from adults, who (of course) always know better.

At the same time, there is a contrary impulse, which looks to media of various kinds as a source of guidance. From this perspective, popular culture can also be a source of informal education, providing 'positive role models', healthy forms of play and even the potential for 'empowerment'. This is apparent now in relation to new media such as the internet, but similar arguments have frequently been made in relation to children's literature (albeit not the popular literature we are mainly concerned with here) and in relation to some forms of television. The interest here is not so much in media as a form of cultural expression, or even a source of 'mere' entertainment, but in the need to be *doing good* to children. Yet this is an impulse that is often seen in narrowly educational terms.

These contrasting perspectives reflect some genuine motivations on the part of adults – not least parents' concerns about keeping their children safe from harm, and ensuring their correct psychological development. Yet the most vocal participants in these discussions – the campaigners with axes to grind, the do-gooders eager to rescue children from harm, the journalists keen to deliver their required copy – tend to frame the issues in simplistic, and often melodramatic, terms. This results in a very generalized, and frequently polarized, debate, which generates much more heat than light. Either these media are good for young people, or they are bad for them; either they are benign and educational, or they are corrupting; either they are

enslaving, or they are liberating. As each new medium enters the scene, there is often a flurry of positive marketing claims, followed shortly afterwards by dire predictions about its impact.

Most of my academic research has been designed to address these concerns – fears about sex and violence and commercialism, as well as optimistic projections about the educational and civic possibilities of different media. I have written a series of books and reports on each of these issues, and others besides. In each case, I have argued for a more considered, cautious approach, partly by seeking to puncture exaggerated claims, but also by talking directly to young people and attempting to show how things look from their perspective. Implicitly, I have urged my readers – not least policy-makers, educators and media producers – to *listen* to young people's voices. I still think this is a valid approach; but equally I am not convinced that it has made much difference to the tone of public debate. Furthermore, I doubt that we can simply access the authentic, pristine voices of children and young people in a direct or unmediated way. Like everybody else, I have been involved in *representing* children. I have tried to analyse and interpret what they said, but for the sake of a broader argument whose terms had been set out by adults.

Looking at history offers a way of stepping back from these frustrating, and ultimately rather unproductive, debates. Of course, there are dangers. In the end, we can only read the past from the perspective of the present – although we can at least try to read the evidence as closely and sympathetically as we can. We need to resist the breathless enthusiasm for change – the idea that the recent past is a long, long time ago, and that everything has changed utterly and irrevocably. Equally, we need to avoid the implication that we have seen it all before, and that there is nothing new under the sun (or on the screen). Yet the point of looking at history is surely that it casts a different light on the developments and controversies of the present. And in the process, it can help to generate a more measured and thoughtful understanding of what is happening now, and might be happening in the future.

Obviously, there is an even longer history of children, youth and media than the period considered here. We can look back to the popular literature and performance of the nineteenth century, or the early days of cinema. But 1945 is a clear point to begin; and, as a child born in the mid-1950s, I have my own memories of the period since that time, as well as my experiences as a parent, a teacher and a researcher. The intervening period might be divided fairly neatly into two, with the election of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US in 1979 and 1980, as a kind of hinge. Before that time, ideas about childhood and youth were still predominantly informed by a kind of 'welfare-ism'; while afterwards, they came to be seen much more unequivocally as a market. Academic commentaries on this are predictably disputed, but many would agree that at some point in the 1970s, a new phase in capitalism emerged, along with a new cultural ethos. Of course 'neoliberalism' and 'postmodernity' are very slippery labels, and the story is much more complicated than this. In the everyday lives of children and youth, these wider social and cultural changes are often muffled, and may take much longer to become apparent, if they do so at all. Yet the broader debate about these changes informs *Growing Up Modern*, and lies behind many of the specific examples it explores.

There has been some academic history that is relevant here: the work of people like Mary Kearney, David Oswell, Heather Hendershot, Mathew Thomson and Bill Osgerby come to mind. I have delved briefly into this area myself, most notably in a book about children's television, imaginatively entitled *Children's Television in Britain*. But there isn't much to go on, and certainly very little that is accessible to the non-academic reader. However, *Growing Up Modern* is not an academic project, but an attempt at a more popular, accessible form of cultural history and criticism. I hope that it will educate, inform and entertain – and perhaps even provoke you to respond.

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Some further thoughts on the problem of nostalgia in writing about children's and youth culture can be found here:

<https://ddbuckingham.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/nostalgia.pdf>.

I have also written in more detail about the limitations of the public debate about children, youth and media here:

<https://ddbuckingham.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/speaking-out.pdf>;

and about the problems of 'media panics' here:

<https://ddbuckingham.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/media-panics.pdf>.