

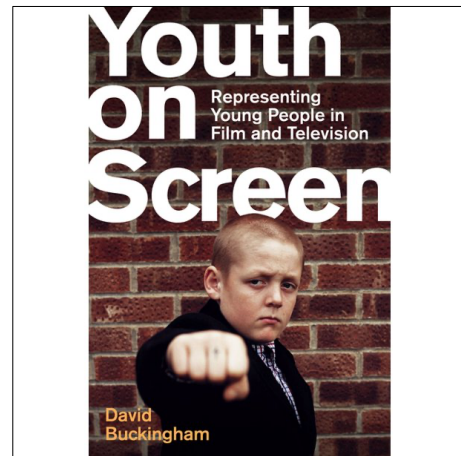
### Historical and Contemporary Representations of Youth and Teens in Media Fictions

David Buckingham, **Youth on Screen: Representing Young People in Film and Television**, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2021, 192 pp., \$58.00 (hardcover), \$24.95 (paperback).

Stefania Marghitu, **Teen TV**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2021, 236 pp., \$38.00 (hardcover).

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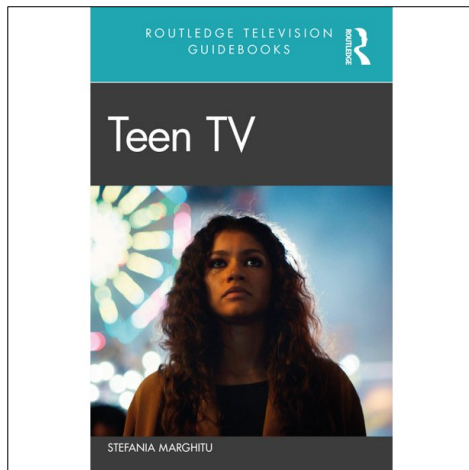
Adolescent audiences, a central demographic for the coming-of-age genre in media entertainment, have been a key focus for content creators and producers for over half a century. Recognizing the extensive history, abundant material, and shifting trends of adolescent-centered media, Stefania Marghitu's *Teen TV* and David Buckingham's *Youth on Screen: Representing Young People in Film and Television* offer engaging chronologies on representing youth. As it relates to entertainment media, the notion of representation has recently expanded from an area of academic inquiry to a social moment.



What started as a sentiment that signified the way we use language and images to shape our understanding of ourselves and our surroundings has turned into the phrase “representation matters,” which has taken on a culture of its own. Representation matters is a hashtag, a Netflix genre category, a merchandisable catchphrase, a marketing technique, and a social justice rallying cry. Therefore, the two books I discuss in this review are not only culturally relevant, but they also submit a cognate account of historical and contemporary youth representations. If for Stuart Hall (2013), representation “produces and connects with power, regulates conduct, make up or constructs identities and subjectivities and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced and studied,” then these rich dives into adolescent representation are necessary explorations into contextualizing and historicizing youth culture (p. xxii).

While both authors acknowledge and address the impact periphery media forms have had on their topic, each monograph has a centralized framework; Buckingham traces representations of North American and British youth in film (touching on television and new media) more broadly, whereas Marghitu specifically examines North American (and British) teen television generationally. With little overlap in analyzed text (aside from UK series *Skins*; Elsley, 2007), each book engages with a variety of coming-of-age content by situating media artifacts and their representation of adolescents/teens within the sociohistorical conditions of each era. Both Marghitu and Buckingham address the significance of how and when youth subcultures are represented on screen, and the creators’ discernment in highlighting certain character journeys and narrative arches that reflect youths’ abandon for love and life, as well as their struggles for change and acceptance within and against the dominant (youth and/or adult) culture of each generation. Buckingham’s

attention to gender politics throughout his chapters emphasizes how this struggle manifests differently for boys and girls in various eras/geographies. Further, Marghitu implicitly employs an intersectional approach that highlights how the portrayal (or obfuscation) of various, interlocking identities challenge (or are challenged by) media fictions.



In *Teen TV*, Marghitu's thorough and engaging articulation of the most successful teen television series over the last 60 years underscores the fluidity of the genre. She defines teen TV as "a comedy or drama centered around adolescent characters with a focus on cultural milestones and rites of passages" (pg. 4); this denotation intrinsically lends itself to compelling stories and characters. Not unlike Lotz's (2018) *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast*, which (among other things) traces how the evolution of cable and streaming impacted the structure and content of television texts, *Teen TV* astutely articulates how "generational identity," in conjunction with shifting societal, cultural, and industry trends, influenced the genre over the decades (p. 3). Each chapter of *Teen TV* chronologically focuses on a generational

era: Baby Boomer Teen TV (chapter 1), Generation X Teen TV (chapter 2), Millennial Teen TV (chapter 3), and Gen Z Teen TV (chapter 4). The inclusion of production methodologies nuances *Teen TV*'s contribution to television studies. In addition to detailed descriptions and cultural analyses of each generation's most popular television series, every chapter includes a transcribed interview between Marghitu and an industry professional (such as a showrunner or costume designer) whose work significantly contributed to one of the series discussed in the chapter. Although these interviews are not broken down for analysis and application, their inclusion offers a valuable look into production processes and creator agency.

Teen representation, from foundational, generic tropes through inclusive depictions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, geography, and national identity, is key in achieving Marghitu's "goal" of "[incorporating] representation and structures of power" as a through line of the book (pg. 19). Seamlessly weaving the fields of production cultures and cultural studies, *Teen TV* cogently celebrates and critiques the facets that comprise and define the genre (including the content creators and celebrity performers). Marghitu historically and socially situates teen-centered television as a comment on and product of each generation's transient, coming-of-age culture.

Representation also plays a central role in Buckingham's *Youth on Screen*. Unlike *Teen TV*, which is focused exclusively on television about teens and intended for teen audiences, *Youth on Screen*'s lens is broadened to include films and television series that depict adolescence but were not necessarily created for adolescents. Buckingham explores "how the *idea* of youth itself is invoked and portrayed, both explicitly and implicitly," across various, scripted media over the last 75 years through historical case studies by challenging the binary thinking that is often ascribed to representation (p. 5). He argues that youth representation "cannot be so easily divided into 'positive' and 'negative'" (p. 9). While the media discussed in each chapter follows a historical chronology, every chapter has an additional focus that serves to underpin

a pervasive discourse on youth within that era. Following a comprehensive introduction that addresses and justifies the chosen case studies and approach, chapter 2 considers British and North American juvenile delinquent filmic depictions of the 1940s and 1950s. Chapter 3 examines 1950's and 1960's youth pop culture icons in film. Then, in an effective twist, Buckingham examines the use of nostalgia through period-piece, retrospective films with adolescent characters (chapter 4). This section's generative analysis and critique of nostalgic representations serve as an effective bridge between the book's midcentury case studies (chapters 2 and 3) and its more contemporary, British texts, such as the "miserable memoir," *This Is England* (Herbert & Meadows, 2006; chapter 6) and teen-centered television (chapter 7; p. 137). In chapter 4, Buckingham emphasizes "generational memory" (p. 65) as a way for creators working in the context of their current era and media production (whether that be the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s) to comment on youth in moments of cultural change during the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, respectively. Through films such as George Lucas's *American Graffiti* (Coppola, 1973), Gary Ross's *Pleasantville* (1998), or Richard Linklater's *Everybody Wants Some!!!* (2016; a few of the examples he discusses in this chapter), Buckingham demonstrates how such films "speak of one era from the perspective of another" (p. 92). Ultimately, this sentiment tacitly runs through each chapter (p. 11), and this section grounds that focus.

In "Gender Trouble: Cinema and the Mystery of Adolescent Girlhood" (chapter 5), Buckingham addresses "a challenge to the (predominantly male) rite-of-passage narratives" through an analysis of five female-centered films, disparate in era and setting, that "dwell on 'Gothic' themes of sexuality and adult repression and, ultimately, on sickness, contagion and death" (p. 118). Buckingham's identification and interpretation of these themes, grounded in scholarship (Bennett, 2006; Bradely, 2018; Handyside, 2017; Koehler, 2017; Monden, 2013; Smail, 2013; White, 2017), is a distinctive facet of girlhood representation. Such themes are also touched upon by Marghita in *Teen TV* through a feminist lens. While neither book engages with a feminist critique of such themes (Hentges, 2005; McRobbie & Garber, 2006), the female protagonists identified in *Teen TV* exhibit more explicit and conventional traits of autonomy and empowerment than the female protagonists of *Youth on Screen*'s chapter 5.

Both Buckingham and Marghita are upfront in the parameters of the material they discuss—English language-based, Western media. The concluding chapters of each book discuss how digitization is changing youth screen content and audience reach through globalized networks. Additionally, both books close with useful resources. Buckingham includes a "Further Reading" list, which catalogs other books discussing youth and teens in entertainment media, and Marghita documents a comprehensive (English language-based) teen TV filmography, which is organized according to decade and network/platform. Furthermore, *Teen TV* contains example discussion questions for each chapter.

I recommend these two books, read in tandem or individually, for students and researchers (as well as nonacademic readers) of media studies, media histories, and the youth media genre who are interested in North American, British, and Australian adolescent-centered film and television. Both books are clear and approachable in style and strong examples of how monographs can maintain complexity without extensive reviews of literature and theory. *Teen TV* and *Youth on Screen* add to a vigorous body of work that validates and celebrates the popular and accessible.

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