

# KEY TRENDS IN AMERICAN FILM

**Session Four**  
**Gen-X Cinema**

**Department of Film and Audiovisual Culture**  
**Dr. Richard Nowell**

# Agenda

14:20–15:50

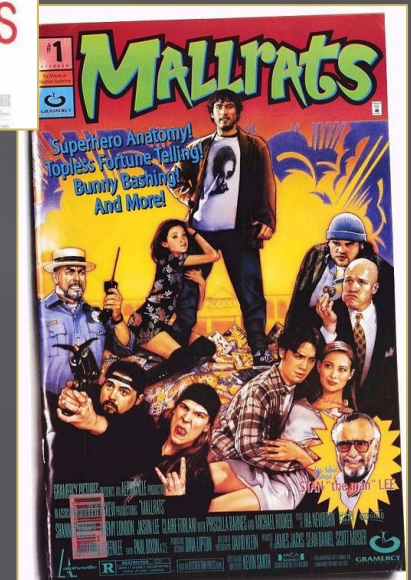
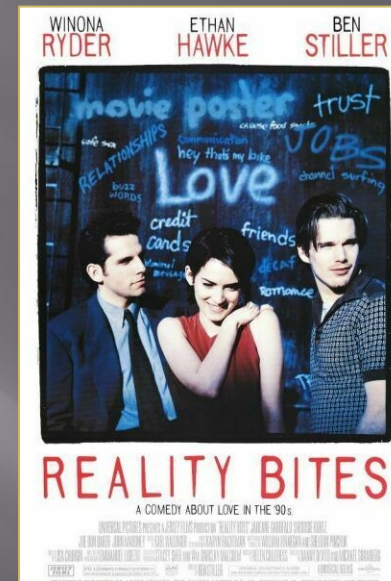
Screening: *Mallrats* (1995)

15:50–16:05

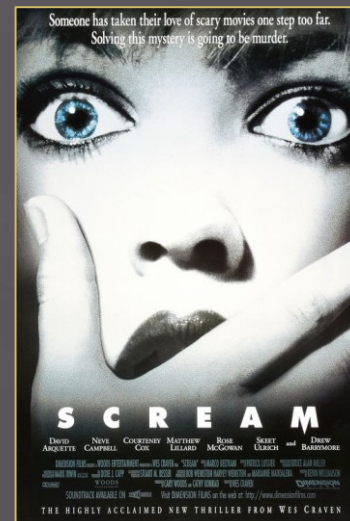
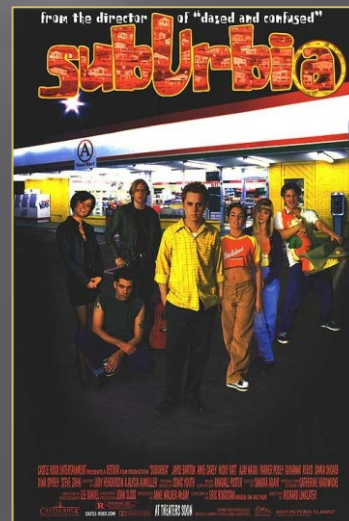
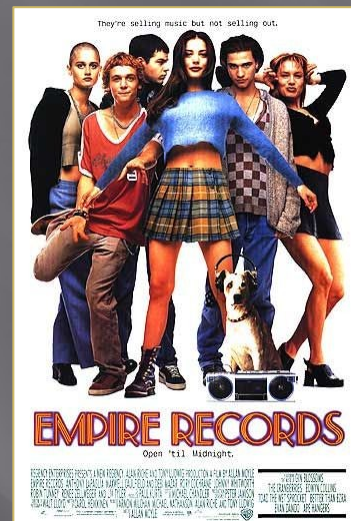
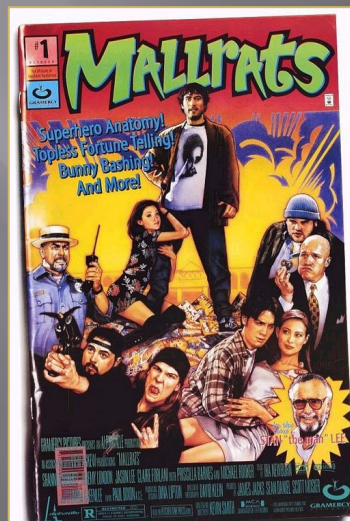
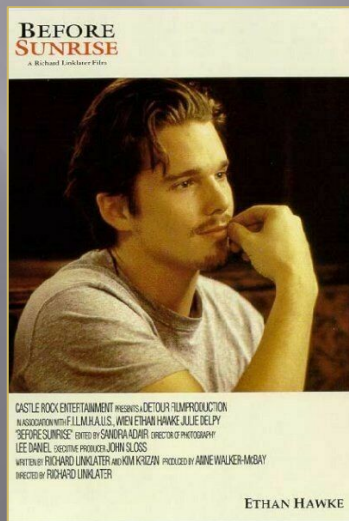
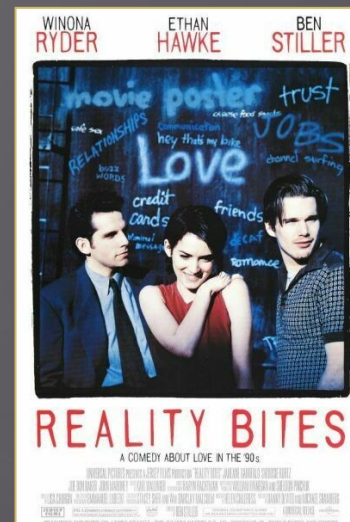
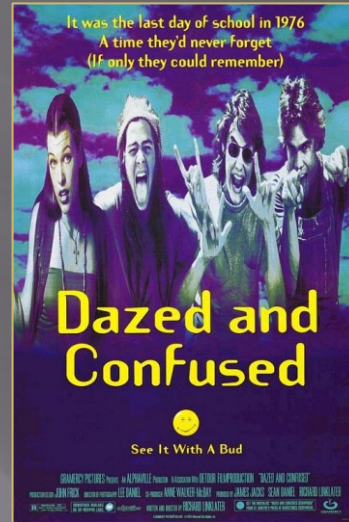
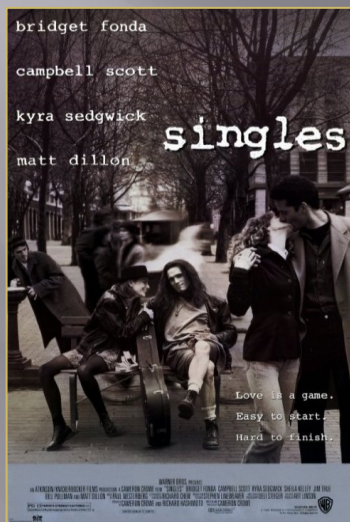
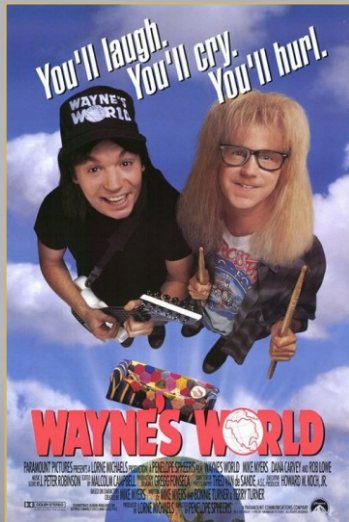
Break

16:05–17:25

Discussion: Gen-X Cinema



# Generation X Cinema

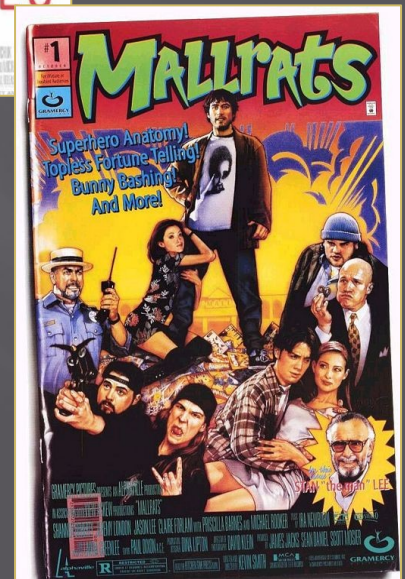
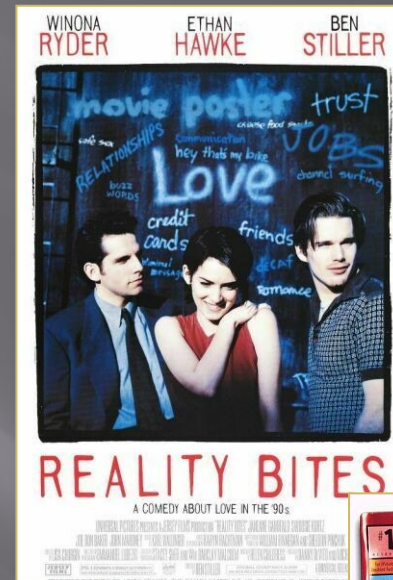


# Agenda

US Indie Culture and Gen-X  
Sensibility

Hollywood and Gen-X

The challenge of  
subcultural cultivation



## Screening Questions: *Mallrats* (1995)

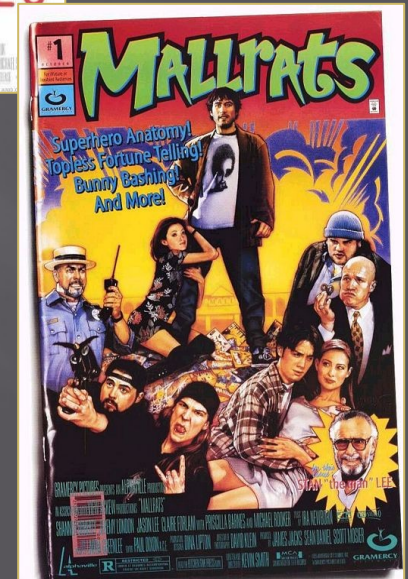
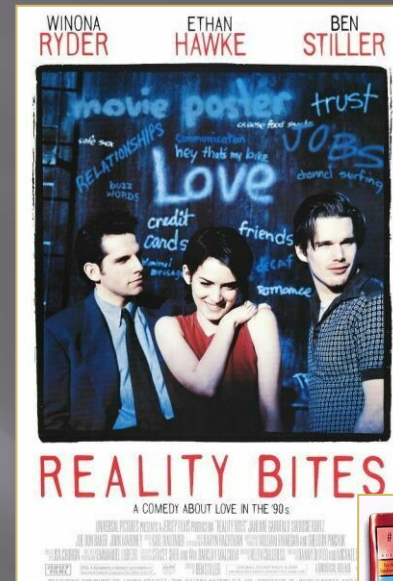
1. How does this film portray its Gen-X protagonists?
2. How is the “mainstream” media portrayed in this film?
3. What roles do “mainstream” media texts play in the lives of these young people?
4. How do the makers of this film attempt to ensure that Gen-Xers will view it as “credible”?

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US Indie Culture and Gen-X  
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What does Michael Z. Newman identify as the distinguishing characteristics of American “Indie Culture”?

# Fantasies of an Authentic, Autonomous, Alternative

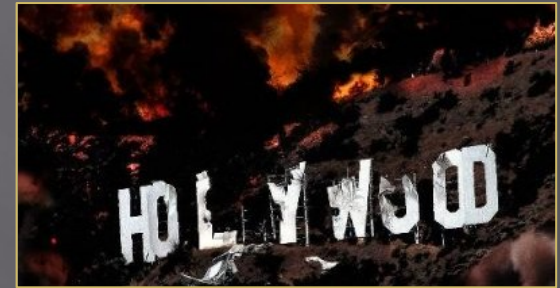
Subcultural disposition characterized by a specific manifestation of oppositional taste

Elitist left-liberal sensibility positioned as superior to the imagined “mainstream”

**Mainstream**: a mass culture caricature

1. Cynical, corporate production ... suits
2. Stupefying, formulaic texts ... trash
3. Mindless, conformist consumers ... dupes

Embraces fantasies of authenticity and autonomy: products of integrity, made outside commerce





What does Oake suggest characterizes Gen-X as a distinct subculture?

# Gen-X: An extreme manifestation of youth angst and alienation?

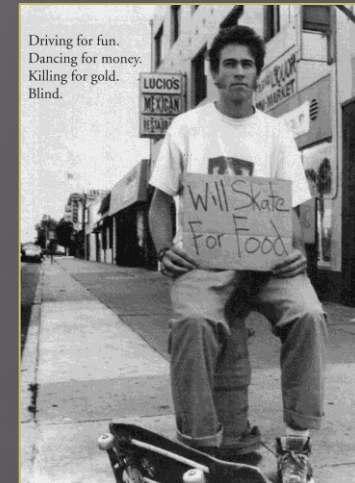
A historically specific development within US indie culture: late 1980s to mid-1990s

A youth subcultural disposition based on a specific way of consuming media products

Hyper-media literate; cynical, detached, and ironic modes of media consumption

Media central to understanding the world

Like indie, is associated with middle-class, educated, white, left-liberal, anti-corporates



## Questions about *Reality Bites*

1. What does Oake argue about the makers of *Reality Bites*' attempts to portray Gen-X?
2. Do you agree with his assessment?
3. What would the motivation be for portraying this group in such a way?

# Oake on how *Reality Bites* Bites ...

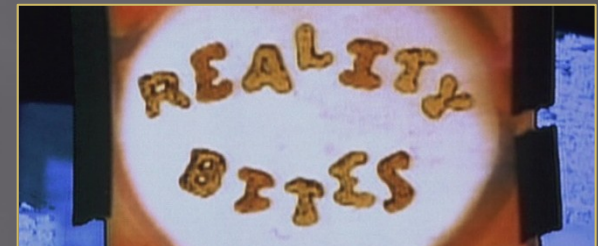
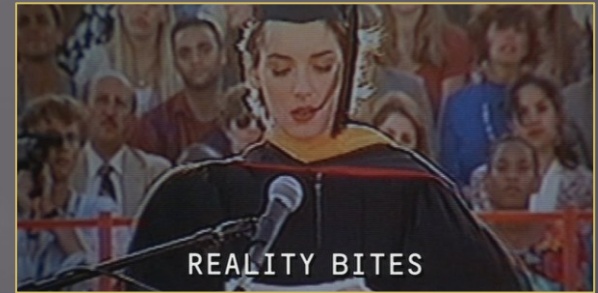
In spite of his claims to neutrality, Oake is clearly shaped by his own Gen-X politics.

*Reality Bites* seeks to contain and disempower Gen-X, through domestication of protagonists

Hollywood cannot be true to this group, because it is essentially conservative in outlook

But why would commercial film producers reach out to an audience, only to condemn it?

Perhaps, Oake is missing the point ...



## Screening Questions: *Reality Bites* (1994)

1. How does this film portray its Gen-X protagonists?
2. How is the “mainstream” media portrayed in this film?
3. What roles do “mainstream” media texts play in the lives of these young people?
4. How do the makers of this film attempt to ensure that Gen-Xers will view it as “credible”?

# *Reality Bites*: Well-meaning but perhaps trying a little bit too hard to be “cool” (?)

*Reality Bites* was made to appeal to Gen-X, a group of loyal but alienated media consumers

This film seeks to remind Gen-X that “mainstream” media is central to its identity

Emphasizes how Gen-X uses “mainstream”: nostalgia, ironic appropriation, quotation etc ...

Also suggests that corporate media personnel might be unhip, but also love popular culture

Frames extreme Gen-X sensibility as a coping mechanism, too much is sad not bad!



## Screening Questions: *Mallrats* (1995)

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# *Mallrats*: Quietly “Correcting” Gen-X critique of “Mainstream” to appeal to Gen-X

Sympathetic Gen-Xers are contrasted to unlikable characters (youths and adults)

Uses self-reflexive depictions of media to reach out to Gen-X, and insulate itself from critique

“Mainstream” media portrayed as:

Sometimes a product of “autonomous” personnel

Capable of “authentic” expression

Enabling consumer discrimination and choice

Enabling challenging/empowering consumption

Stresses an alternative to oppositionality!

That a gen-X-friendly subculture can exist –  
because it does exist – within the “mainstream”





# Why Hollywood Needed Gen-X: Or holding on to the life blood of the industry

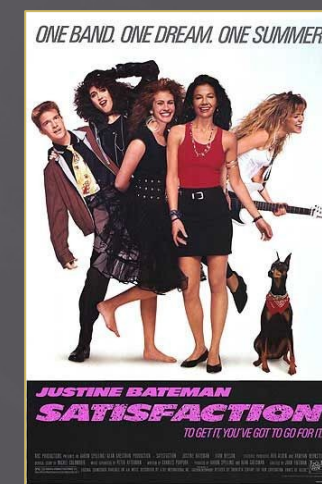
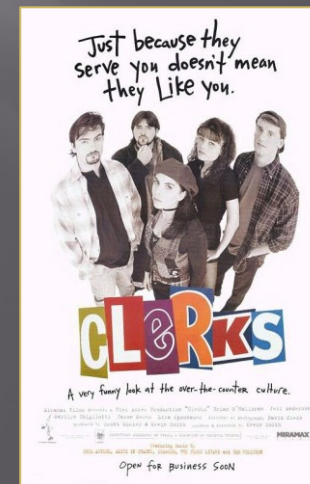
Oake claims Gen-X was invented by media, which then sought to discredit it: hokum!

Gen-X preceded media interest; this interest simply cemented Gen-X's traits and identity

Youth-oriented blockbusters of mid-1980s gave way to period of youth market decline

Not in Hollywood's interest to further alienate Gen-Xers; they were avid media consumers!

Moreover, independently released films clearly indicated the commercial power of this group



# Gen-X Cinema as a Overlooked Audience

## Targeting Strategy

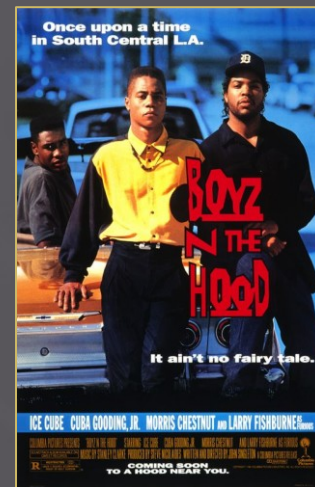
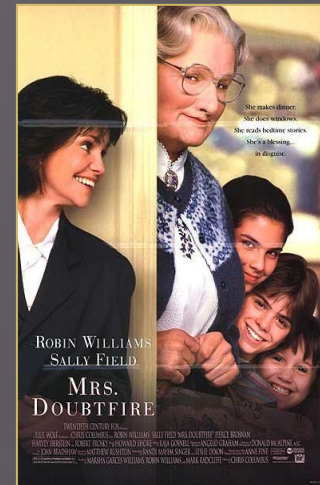
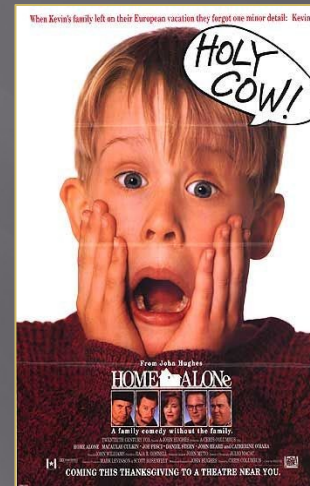
Commonly argued that early 1990s Hollywood abandoned youth in favor of families/children

Also argued, that only in late 1990s did Hollywood return to youth-oriented product

But, Gen-X films were part of Hollywood's ongoing cultivation of American youth

These films also included tales of ghetto life, and a number of films that failed commercially

These tend to be overlooked as youth films, as they are not about middle-class white teens!



# Framing Gen-X Cinema: Perennial/Indie/Hollywood

*Clerks* Trailer:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mlfn5n-E2WE>

*Reality Bites* Trailer:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDYGo0UgIVM>

*Mallrats* Trailer:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOd5zJLsZEc>

# The Case of Hollywood & Skateboarding

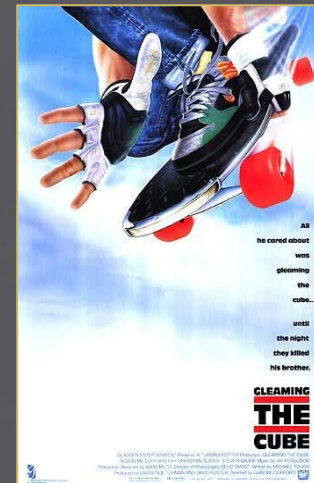
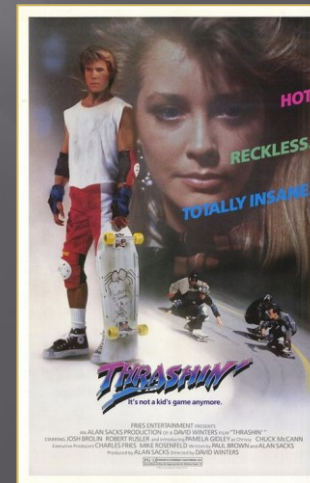
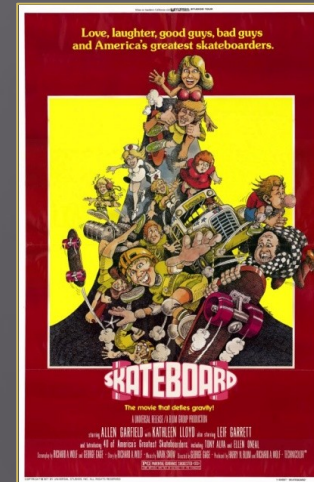
Their failure is indicative of the challenge of Hollywood's courting subcultural sensibilities

Skateboarding booms take place in the late 1970s, the mid 1980s, and the late 1980s

Each time, a Hollywood company sought to tap into this pastime but with no success

Like other sizable subcultures, skateboarding has not translated into strong box office

Hollywood usually fails to undermine its status as an "Other" of many subcultures



# Coda: Gen-X Cinema and Indiewood

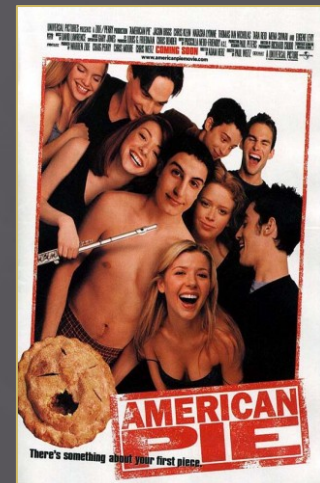
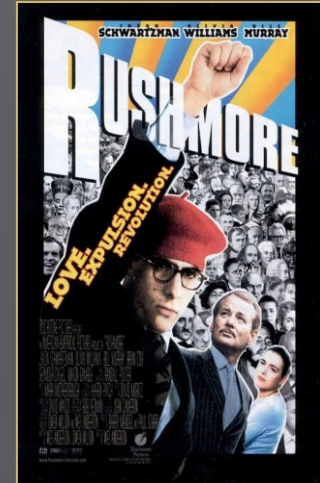
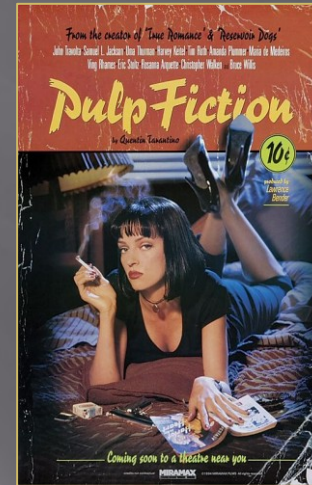
Failure of Gen-X films prompts Hollywood to rethink cultivation of Indie sensibility

Miramamax's successes, especially with *Pulp Fiction*, indicated Hollywood was the problem

Conglomerates that own Hollywood studios set up specialty divisions to handle indie films

These companies enjoyed some success from the late 1990s to the mid 2000s

Hollywood continued to remind young people mainstream media is central to youth identity



## In Sum

Where Gen-X films were scorned as inauthentic appropriations of a subculture, this romanticizes independence and Otherizes Hollywood

Hollywood clearly intended to reach out to the declining young market

The films were used to “remind” cynical media-literate Gen-Xers that “mainstream” media was central to their identities and their lives

Here, mainstream media was presented as offering an alternative, and as accommodating supposedly autonomous talent and authentic visions

This strategy struggled due to Hollywood’s status as a key foil against which audio-visual subcultures define themselves: as the enemy