The Depiction of the Loser Teenager in the Film and Television Adaptations of John Green's Young Adult Novels

La representación del adolescente perdedor en las versiones cinematográficas y televisivas de las adaptaciones para jóvenes de las novelas para adultos de John Green

La representació de l'adolescent perdedor en les versions cinematogràfiques i televisives de les adaptacions per a joves de les novel·les per a adults de John Green

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Abstract

In the last few decades the teen movie genre has left behind the genre of light comedies or farce comedies and deals with more substantial and fundamental issues concerning teenagers and young adults. In the literary universe of John Green, which has been the basis and source of inspiration for corresponding film and television adaptations, the form of the good-natured and well-intentioned loser teenager dominates. This hero watches with longing and anxiety the lives of his popular peers, longing to be given a chance to join their company. When this finally happens, he finds that things are not as they seem and the values that decorate his own universe are not as meaningless as he originally thought. The heroes in Green's books possess culture, dreams and ambitions and an already complete personal universe that their more popular peers often lack, lost in the abyss of adolescence, its changes and dilemmas. Their depiction in the mass entertainment media of film and television also reflects social changes in teenage and school culture, as well as the broadening of the personal outlook and expectations of the teenagers themselves. In the recent article we are going to analyse the type of loser geek/nerd hero in the film and television adaptations of his young adult novels Paper Towns (2015) and Looking for Alaska (2019).

Key words: Teenager's literature, John Green's novels, literature adaptations

Resumen

En las últimas décadas, el género de las películas para adolescentes ha dejado atrás el género de las comedias ligeras o las comedias de farsa y aborda cuestiones más sustanciales y fundamentales que afectan a los adolescentes y adultos jóvenes. En el universo literario de John Green, que ha sido base y fuente de inspiración para las correspondientes adaptaciones cinematográficas y televisivas, domina la forma del adolescente perdedor bonachón y bien intencionado. Este héroe observa con anhelo y ansiedad la vida de sus populares compañeros, anhelando tener la oportunidad de unirse a su compañía. Cuando esto finalmente sucede, descubre que las cosas no son lo que parecen y que los valores que decoran su propio universo no son tan insignificantes como pensó originalmente. Los héroes de los libros de Green poseen

cultura, sueños y ambiciones y un universo personal ya completo del que suelen carecer sus coetáneos más populares, perdidos en el abismo de la adolescencia, sus cambios y dilemas. Su representación en los medios de entretenimiento de masas del cine y la televisión también refleja los cambios sociales en la cultura adolescente y escolar, así como la ampliación de la perspectiva personal y las expectativas de los propios adolescentes. En el presente artículo vamos a analizar el tipo de héroe *geek/nerd* perdedor en las adaptaciones cinematográficas y televisivas de sus novelas juveniles *Ciudades de papel* (2015) y *Buscando a Alaska* (2019).

Palabras clave: literatura juvenil; novelas de John Green; adaptaciones literarias

Resum

En les darreres dècades, el gènere de les pel·lícules per a adolescents ha deixat enrere el gènere de les comèdies lleugeres o les comèdies de farsa i aborda qüestions més substancials i fonamentals que afecten els adolescents i els adults joves. En l'univers literari de John Green, que ha estat base i font d'inspiració per a les adaptacions cinematogràfiques i televisives corresponents, domina la forma de l'adolescent perdedor bonàs i ben intencionat. Aquest heroi observa amb anhel i ansietat la vida dels seus populars companys, anhelant tenir l'oportunitat d'unir-se a la companyia. Quan això finalment ocorre, descobreix que les coses no són el que semblen i que els valors que decoren el seu propi univers no són tan insignificants com pensava originalment. Els herois dels llibres de Green tenen cultura, somnis, ambicions i un univers personal ja complet del que solen mancar els seus coetanis més populars, perduts en l'abisme de l'adolescència, els canvis i els dilemes. La seua representació en els mitjans d'entreteniment de masses del cinema i la televisió també reflecteix els canvis socials en la cultura adolescent i escolar, així com l'ampliació de la perspectiva personal i les expectatives dels mateixos adolescents. En el present article analitzarem el tipus d'heroi *geek/nerd* perdedor en les adaptacions cinematogràfiques i televisives de les seues novel·les juvenils *Ciutats de paper* (2015) i *Buscant Alaska* (2019).

Paraules clau: literatura juvenile, novel·les de John Green, adaptacions literàries

1. Introduction

Young audiences, children and teenagers, were soon targeted by the cinema industry as a special audience. After the establishment of the Disney Studios they were officially recognised as a distinctive category with its own needs and quests. The age group of adolescents has occupied kept the cinema busy for the last decades with radical works breaking the traditional mould and the depiction of characters and circumstances out of the ordinary.

> **The teenage heroes of John Green long to live all this and to be fully incorporated in the group of their peers. Their dream is unexpectedly fulfilled through a series of events that totally transform their micro world.**

The young adult novels by the American author John Green have initially attracted the interest of the youth in the USA and Europe. In the core of Green's novels, we usually find as a non-popular, introvert, diligent teenage

student with an interesting personality and well developed critical thinking a protagonist (Topali, 2015). Adolescence is the era of self-image, friendship, companionship, adventure and the monopoly of love. The teenage heroes of John Green long to live all this and to be fully incorporated in the group of their peers. Their dream is unexpectedly fulfilled through a series of events that totally transform their micro world. Many of John Green's books have been adapted for the cinema and television like *The Fault in Our Stars*, *Paper Towns*, and *Looking for Alaska*. In this presentation we are going to analyse the film and TV adaptations of the last two novels*.*

2. Paper Towns (2015)-film adaption

Paper Towns (2015) was adapted for the cinema in 2015 and directed by Jack Schreier. Seventeen-year-old Quentin Jacobsen (friends call him Q) lives in Jefferson Park, Florida and attends the local high school. Quentin is a quiet, reserved kid, with a small group of friends, Ben and Radar. During his childhood he is a close friend to his neighbor Margo Roth Spiegelmann. In adolescence Margo becomes one of the most popular girls at school, who frequently runs away from home and leads a very adventurous life. Their intimate friendship is interrupted. Her favourite quote is *everyone deserves a miracle*.

One night, Margo sneaks in his room from the window, as she used to, asking him to follow her to a nocturnal adventure. They visit Jason's house together who is Margo's boyfriend and to her friends', Rebecca and Lacey. Jason has cheated on her with Rebecca and she believes that her best friend Lacey knew about it and didn't tell her anything. They are pulling them some ugly pranks, as well as to some other classmates. At the end of the night, Quentin thinks that he and Margo will be again good friends the following day.

The next day Margo misses school and as days go by it seems like she doesn't intend to come back. Her parents report her as a missing person to the police. Q finds himself to be in the position he was dreaming about in his whole adolescence. He is popular; boys who used to bully him are now afraid that he will betray their secrets and ruin their shinning lives. Quentin starts to believe that Margo has left signs for him to help him trace her. He investigates with his friends and when they track her down, they travel along with Ben's girlfriend, Angela and Lacey to the paper town *Anglo* to meet her. A *paper town* is a town that appears on the map but doesn't exist so that the editor can be reassured that the map will not be copied. When they get there and don't find her immediately, they leave again to attend the graduation ball. Quentin stays behind. He finally meets Margo and reveals to her that he is in love with her. She doesn't respond to his feelings and tells him she left as to find herself. She left the signs

to let him know she is safe. Quentin returns to his hometown, attends the graduation prom with his friends and they spend together the summer.

3. Looking for Alaska (2019)-television adaptation

The young adult novel *Looking for Alaska* (2019) was adapted for television in an eight-episode mini-series directed by Josh Swartz. The main character of the series is sixteen-year-old Miles Graves, who is transferred to a new boarding school, Culver Creek Academy, in Alabama from his hometown in Florida in 2005. He didn't have many friends at his old school and he felt he needed a change. He likes reading the last words of famous people just before they die. His favourite quote is the one by Francois Rabelais: *I am leaving for the Great Perhaps*.

The first person to meet there is his new roommate, Chip Martin aka *Colonel*. Gradually, he meets all the people, who are going to be his close friends in the new school, Alaska, Takumi and Lara. They inform him about the conflict between the Colonel and the *Weekend Warriors* group and the strict headmaster of the academy known under the nickname *Eagle*. Miles doesn't want to take any sides, but the Weekend Warriors made him do so after an ugly prank they unleash against him.

Miles is instantly fascinated by Alaska due to her unpredictable personality and her knowledge over literature. She dates an older college boy, Jake and tries to set Miles up with another student, Lara. The conflict between the two groups rages. Miles is led to the disciplinary board of the school after a prank against the Warriors. He chooses not to snitch his friends. Alaska breaks up with her boyfriend because she believes she is not good enough for him. She, also, appears to have snitched a pair (a boy and a girl) of students to the headmaster for spending the night together, although this is against the school's rules. Colonel and Takumi hate to think she is a snitch. Alaska doesn't want to go home for Thanksgiving and pleads Miles to stay with her. The war between the two rival groups continues. Things culminate when Miles and his friends hack the college files of the members of Warriors. One night Alaska asks for help from Miles and Colonel to sneak out of school. The next morning Eagle informs the students that Alaska is tragically killed in a car accident. Miles, Colonel and Takumi investigate Alaska's death. They are not sure if it is an accident or a suicide. They find out that she wanted to visit her mother's grave because it was the anniversary of her death. They get some answers but they are not entirely sure if it has been an attribution of responsibilities. At the end of the series, they unleash a funny prank to honour her memory.

4. Historical review of teenage films in the American film industry

Teenage films in their classic form come forward in the '50s. Nevertheless, the Hollywood industry have already created films starring wonder kids in the corresponding roles during the '30s and '40s, like Shirley Temple and Judy Garland. Mary Pickford and Gary Cooper started their career playing roles of troublesome youth (Shary et al., 2005). The '50s are an essential milestone for the development of teenage films. The urbanisation of American society and the rise of consumerism highlighted the teenage audience as a special consumer category (Driscoll, 2011/Doherty, 2002). Films of the decade like *The Wild One* (1953), *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) brought to light the hidden concerns, fears, agonies and hopes of the teenagers of that time (Shary et al., 2005/Driscoll, 2011). A series of matters which were regarded as taboos back then: drags use, homosexuality, racism, abortions etc. is touched up (Doherty, 2002).

During the '60s the interest of the film industry turns to more entertaining topics. In the '70s teenage cinema declines and there are no longer teenage star actors. Only at the end of the decade do films like *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and *Grease* (1978) herald the film topics of the next decade. The '80s are characterised by the emerge of new subgenres, which previously were addressed to adults: thriller, melodrama, science fiction, school dramas, sexcomedies. The depiction of teenagers' life is schematic and unrealistic. Love scenes are censored. In the middle of the decade things change with the release of films such as *Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Pretty in Pink* (1985). This replenishment is also attributed to emerge of multiplex cinemas. In the '90s and until the dawn of the 21th century the topics and the representation of teenage life are continuously expanding (Shary, 2002).

5. Bildungsroman

Bildungsroman made its appearance as a literary genre when the novel by Goethe *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* was published in 1795-96. In this novel Goethe narrates a young boy's course to maturity and this is exactly the central subject matter of the genre, a young person heading to adulthood facing obstacles and tests (Ambatzopoulou, 1994). The term was used for the first time by Karl von Morgenstern in 1810 and was established a few decades later by the philosopher Wilhelm Whitley (1870/1906). Originated from the German word *Bildung* which means configuration, conformation and education in a metaphorical sense (Schaarschmidt, 1931/Dohmen ,1964, 1965/Vierhaus, 1972)/Løvlie et al., 2002/Horlacher, 2004), the term also influences the reader as he sympathises with the hero throughout the novel (Moretti, 1987). The notion Bildung has a religious dimension, too, as it is immensely connected to human existence as an image of God (Ampatzopoulou, 1994) and became fertile ground for the German religious protestant circles (Kiosses, 2008).

The hero in Bildungsroman, who is usually male (Kiosses, 2008), feels supressed, special, different from everybody else and ends up in conflict with his family and society (Swales, 1991). One of the main targets of Bildungsroman literary genre is to finally bridge the gap between a person and the society (Chanialaki, 2014). There is certainly a dialogue between the hero and society in the novel (Hirsch et al., 1976). According to Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), the readers are not only observing the shaping of the hero's personality but also have the chance to receive information about the historical, social and political changes of the time he lives in which either influenced him or he influenced it.

Bildungsroman is divided in two subgenres: the *rebellious* novel (*Entwicklugsroman*) and the *pedagogical* novel (*Erziehungsroman*). In Entwicklungsroman the hero develops his mental and physical abilities, just like in Bildungsroman. He conflicts with his school, family and social surrounding (Gerhard, 1968). In Erziehungsroman we can watch the hero growing up under the guidance of a teacher or a mentor without conflicting with the perceptions of the close social and family environment (Koehn, 1969).

6. Nerds, geeks and losers in teen films

Quentin, Miles and their friends are an almost typical example of what Americans call *nerd/geek loser* in school society. In a humorous definition of geek, Benjamin Nugent (2008) defines them as a person who: a) is passionate and interested in very specific subjects which don't include emotional and physical embroilment, sex, food and beauty (everything that interests non-geek people), b) speak sophisticatedly, c) obey to common sense only and d) like to play and be occupied with technology much more than average people.

In *The Cambridge English Dictionary* (2022) a *loser* is defined as: a person who doesn't win in a game or a contest, someone who fails in everything, who is not appreciated or something that loses all the time a part of its value. The combination of these two notions is almost the norm in American teenage films.

More specifically, the image of nerd hero has been through a lot of changes as time passes by, until we reach the modern image in contemporary films. In the '80s they are mainly presented as the ultimately devoted, diligent student having a few or no friends at all. They would give everything to be incorporated in the mainstream school society and mostly appear in secondary roles. In the '90s nerdy characters begin to have more depth, claim bigger roles and their complexity and the depth of their personality is significantly stressed. They are not always willing to sacrifice their integrity for popularity.

Boys have a harder time than girls (Driscoll, 2011). In the films of the last two decades nerd characters star in more and more films conquering the space they deserve.

7. Paper Towns (2015)-the image of the loser teenager

Quentin comes from a middle class American family. Both his parents are psychologists and believe for this reason, too that they have a really good relationship and communication with their son. He is an excellent student; he has been accepted to the college of his choice and spends his last weeks at school. He has never been in trouble and it looks like he is bullied from time to time. Along with his best friends, Ben and Radar, they wish could be members of the school elite.

At first, the teenage companions seem like they meet the criteria of what we call geek and loser. Quentin remains focused on his goal to create a flawless college application file which will lead him to an excellent university. His friends did the same but in addition they are the ones who are more occupied with computers and technology in general. The real image is very different than it seems. Each and every one of them would prefer to have more friends, take part in more group activities and to be invited in *legendary* parties. Ben is the only one who has got a girlfriend, Angela, although the school cool students would say their relationship is conventional and boring. Radar is, perhaps, the only member of the company who can be considered to be a nerd or a geek. At the beginning of the film he is mostly interested in kissing a girl or having sex apart from computers, in order to become a cool person.

Quentin is special in his own way from the start. He is aware that adjusting and following his teachers' advice is beneficial not only for him but for everybody. According to research, this is a distinctive feature of gifted children and teenagers (Baska, 1989; Tuttle et al., 1983). Q falls in love with his neighbour, Margo. It is not just another teenage obsession. He falls for her of what she is and all the things he will experience and learn by her side. Recent research has shown that for a number of people good looks is not enough to attract their love interest. They pay more attention to the inner world and the personality of their potential partner. This trend is known as *sapiosexual* people (Gigniak et al., 2018). Ben is in a serious relationship and Radar is trying to single out what he wants.

At the adventurous night, Q and Margo live in order to take revenge on her ex-friends for betraying her, which partly fulfils his unrequited love for her. However, Margo functions more as a motherly figure than his future girlfriend. She tries to make up to him for not hanging out as teenagers and to help him finally become *visible* and enjoy his last days at school. Realism of adult life has already

affected Margo before she is even an adult. Quentin can still dream, hope and not think of human relationships as a type of exchange as Margo like does.

The signs Margo has left behind, which Quentin falsely believes were meant for him in order to find her, bond him even more with his friends. All of them contribute to decode them. During their research they get to know each other better, with some of their classmates and especially Lacey, Margo's ex best friend. Lacey feels that the boys see her as a person too not only as a pretty girl like everyone else and that they are much more than geeks and nerds. They revise their opinion for each other and become friends. Psychologists claim that a strong network of friends can protect children and teenagers from being bullied and set the foundation for a successful and happy adult life (Lester et al., 2013; Schuh et al., 2014; Furrer et al., 2014). The classmates' opinion of the three boys as a gathering of losers and outcasts is, in fact, the springboard for future happiness and success.

The decision of Q's friends' to accompany him to his quest journey proves their love and devotion to him even further, which is an element found in many come-of-age stories. In the 18th and 19th century the sons of noble families of Europe used to take a long journey of knowledge and adulthood, known as *Grand Tour*, mainly to Italy, the Ottoman empire (they preferred Greece for its glorious ancient past) and the Middle East (Goldsmith, 2020). The journey of Quentin and his friends in the paper town to meet Margo

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constitutes their entrance to adulthood. Things in life don't always turn the way we want but this doesn't mean it isn't worth trying. Margo may not be in love with Quentin or wish to be a part of his everyday life, but there are so many things for him to enjoy in life: his friends, college, the summer holidays and the possibility of a new love. And this is Quentin's act of adulthood.

8. Looking for Alaska (2019)

Miles wants to have a start fresh in the new boarding school. His new friends are the school's outcasts (Vincent, 1994). Colonel, Takumi, Alaska and Lara are considered nerds and losers, according to their classmates' opinion. They are old-fashioned, out-dated and not trendy at all. Colonel comes from a poor family. He is a computer nerd and occasionally does drugs. He is committed to Angela but isolated from everybody else. Takumi is a computer nerd, clumsy though. Lara is an immigrant from Romania. She attends the private school thanks to a scholarship she has received. She is an introvert and a

diligent student with a good command of computers. Alaska matches more to the loser's profile. She may be beautiful, restless, cultivated and a good student although she resents school. She openly scorns her classmate and dates an older, adult boy. Her mother has died and doesn't get along with her father. The scars in Alaska's soul seem to be hidden behind her impressive looks and her unique ability to charm people around her.

The director focuses on issues ranging between the social truth and objective reality, what people are in contrast to what they seem to be. The companionship of the teenagers mentioned above is just boring for the average school society (Azizi-Kalatzi, 1996; Dragona, 2007). They consider them as colourless personalities, with a settled life, who are studying all day and chase academic success. This lifestyle, while being still teenagers, will possibly lead to a similar ordinary adult life without any fun or joy. Preferring fun to the stillness of Miles' and his friends' deadly routine they would never befriend them. Miles' classmates, like every teenager, judge things based on their small life experience and immaturity. On the contrary, Miles and his friends show great maturity and responsibility towards school and people around them. They don't need to make a fuss to feel special or desirable.

Miles and his friends have also developed a great sense of empathy (Goleman, 1999) in comparison to their classmates. They support each other and especially Alaska who is having a rough time. Miles and Colonel (being her older friend) support her with all their heart. The companions will face Colonel's troubles with his girlfriend united as a fist, when he must escort her to an event of the higher social class she belongs to. The consequences of the pranks they are unleashing against Weekend Warriors and Warriors against them also constitutes a team problem. Generally, they never give in, when it comes to moral issues.

In the love field, there is a variety of views and stances. Miles sees love romantically as he falls for Alaska, Colonel is in a serious relationship, Takumi is the stereotypical immature adolescent, Alaska is confused, Lara is also romantic. Alaska holds an unconventional role by exploiting greatly Miles' love for her. Confused and lost in her own blurry labyrinth, Alaska wishes to be loved but cannot understand that she must love people back because she has never felt it or thinks that she is not obliged to. The bonding of the companions emerges stronger after Alaska's death during their search to find the truth and whether they were responsible for it. To sum up, in *Looking for Alaska* the outcast teenagers don't pursue to be make up with the mainstream school

In *Looking for Alaska* the outcast teenagers don't pursue to be make up with the mainstream school society but rather to guard the group they've created as losers so as to share mutual values, expectations and dreams.

society but rather to guard the group they have created as losers so as to share mutual values, expectations and dreams.

9. Conclusions-discussion

Teenage nerdy or geek loser heroes who star in the cinema and television adaptation of John Green's youth novels seem to have all the features their peers attribute to them. Languid, isolated, introverted and fully occupied with studying, unwilling to follow the trends their peers do. This image is shed if someone looks deeper. In *Paper Towns*, the heroes express a strong desire to assimilate at first. With Quentin leading Margo's quest, they soon realise the common elements that connect them and how precious their friendly bonds are. Just a step before adulthood, they have more important things to do than school dramas and childish repressed hopes. Miles and his friends in the television adaptation of *Looking for Alaska* choose to stay in the school's social margin. Miles feels really happy to have lots of friends in his new school because he didn't have any in his previous one. There are composed teenagers like Colonel, naïve ones like Takumi, disoriented ones like Alaska. Tragedy urges them to face the harsh side of life and to learn how to survive for the first time. The teenage boys starring in the cinema and television adaptation we analysed above manage to overcome many of the stereotypes we find in teen films about boys in adolescence (Shary, 2014). Their lives do not revolve around sex (Shary, 2014) and they respond to the contemporary male role models away from the toxicity of the previous decades (Cann et al., 2021). The foundation of a true friendship is established through conflicts, happy moments and tragedies. There is no *Great Perhaps* that everybody is entitled to a *Miracle*.

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