

Over the Edge: Suburban Planned Communities, the Second Frontier, and the Rise of 80s High School Films

By Daniel Robert McClure

[SLIDE #2] Jonathan Kaplan's 1979 film, *Over the Edge*, inaugurates the trickle-to-flood of 1980s teen movies taking place in American suburbs. Filmed in Colorado in 1978, cinematographer Andrew Davis commented on the surreal documentary-like nature of making the movie: the various towns they filmed in "were literally building this sprawling suburb around us as we shot *Over the Edge*."¹ Centered on the families of baby boom parents entering their mid-thirties and early forties, *Over the Edge* set the tone for the "1980s High School" film genre, which largely depicted the white children of baby boomers—Generation X—inheriting a world in which their parents and grandparents shaped across the post-World War II era. Parental narcissism, greed, a lack of empathy, and an incessant mantra of entrepreneurialism often defined these movies—with the shadow of this adulthood cast upon the young "bullies" of these films (including the iconic "cocky blond guy," William Zabka: *The Karate Kid* [1984]; *Just One of the Guys* [1985]; *Back to School* [1986]). Nineteen-eighties teen films—mostly depicting life in high school—portrayed this new Manifest Destiny white teenagers navigated in their 1980s suburban worlds at the dawn of the Reagan era.

[SLIDE #3] *Over the Edge* follows the lives of junior high school students living in a dull planned community named New Granada—a not-so-subtle reference to the Spanish colonial possession in the New World (centered on modern day Columbia) while evoking the aura of "new beginnings" embodied in the European image of the Americas. Within the North American context, of course, this gesture resonates with the same sets of ideas woven through the imagined *West*, its conception as a frontier, and the legacy of ethnic cleansing demanded to eventually build the postwar planned community.² The first images of the film capture a brief glimpse of the

fictional city, outlined by newly developed split-level homes and condominiums situated within a sea of manicured lawns, wide streets, tennis courts, and businesses. Setting the tone of this frontier-like existence, an early scene depicts a teenager wearing an iconic 1950s Davy Crockett coonskin hat—ironically, of course—as he lay in ambush on a freeway overpass, shooting a law enforcement officer’s windshield with a pellet gun. Clearly, the new settlement is not as pristine as the landscape suggests. Leisure space and outlets for the teenagers are scarce amidst the celebration of the planned community’s settlement, leading restless children of disinterested parents toward juvenile delinquency, including illegal drug use, drinking, vandalizing private property, burglarizing people’s homes for “kicks,” and shooting pellet guns at the police.

This paper examines the way *Over the Edge* introduces the 1980s film genre depicting the world of predominantly white teenagers living in the ever-expanding suburbs of the 1970s and 1980s. Much like their parent’s Jim Crow world, it is still largely a “white’s only” space—a frontier beyond racialized urban centers. A critical thread running through this film—and many others—includes the imagery of the West, Westward expansion, or settler colonialism. According to the 1980 census, 40 percent of Americans “lived in the suburbs,” and this growing population fueled a market for films depicting life in the suburbs for young people.³ While previous decades portrayed youths in films ranging from *Rebel Without A Cause* to *Blackboard Jungle*—both released in 1955—films in the 1980s operated through the new logics of youth advertising pioneered in the 1960s and emerging in full-force during the 1980s.⁴ Projecting novel lifestyles upon the big screen proved to be a critical avenue for obtaining shares in the youth market, including catch phrases and clothing trends from John Hughes films like *Sixteen Candles* (1984) and *The Breakfast Club* (1985) to the edgy patriarchal entrepreneurship of *Risky Business* (1983). As an archetype of this film genre, *Over the Edge* offered a more sober—a

more 70s—outlook on youth attempting to find meaning and identity in a corporate-driven suburbia. Both a setting for paradise as well as an existential hell for the youth growing up amidst it, the film mobilizes images and themes of the West and frontier, majestically haunting the characters' space.

[SLIDE #4] Its release date of 1979 situates *Over the Edge* between the bleak 1970s and the utopia of new planned communities in the 1980s, pulling the film toward the 1980s sea of suburban escapism. The story was written by Bruce Koon in the early 1970s about rebellious teen vandals in the planned community of Foster City (south of San Francisco).⁵ As such, the film embodies the 1960s hangover of the counterculture's questioning of parental authority and the paranoia toward youth violence in the 1970s. An entire exploitation film genre found expression from these anxieties, as movies portrayed youthful, psychopathic teenagers prowling the streets for cheap entertainment built on violent confrontation, including *A Clockwork Orange* (1971); *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976); *Switchblade Sisters* (1976); *Boulevard Nights* (1979); and *The Warriors* (1979). The difference between *Over the Edge* and these other films rests on its wide open, frontier-like settings in the white planned community of New Granada. In short, there appears to be optimism under the 70s gloom. Filmed in Greeley and Aurora, CO, the town appears as a pattern of mass-produced apartments, condominiums, and homes fused with modernist angles and the split-level, timber-frame, "post-and-beam" construction style coming to prominence in the 1970s. The only deviation from this architecture is the apartment complex of lead-rebel, Richie White (played by a young Matt Dillon), which exhibits a more traditionally urban, subsidized housing aesthetic: a simple multi-leveled brick structure with outside walkways and staircases to a common area without the manicured lawns of the wealthier parts of New Granada. The 1970s bleakness emerges most visibly through the juxtaposition between this

new, bland setting, of the suburban frontier and the anti-social behavior of the kids—an ostensibly peaceful settlement disturbed by its frontier existence.

While Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* is clearly outside the film's aesthetic of suburban teen rebellion, the 1971 film's dystopian background is subtly used as a character device pressing the more spectacular moments of *Over the Edge*. Bruce Koon's original newspaper piece on Foster City explicitly makes this connection: "It sounds like the scenario for an underage *Clockwork Orange*, a futuristic nightmare fantasy. But all the incidents are true." In the shadow of this violent youth trope, *Over the Edge* removes the murderous violence from teenagers, and instead replaces it with a more symbolic violence emanating from community neglect towards its youth. It is this twist on the 1970s manic youth aura that gives *Over the Edge* an enduring urgency.

The opening shot of the film introduces the community with a sign: "Welcome to...NEW GRANADA: "tomorrow's city...today." On the sign are symbols representing the supposed lifestyles of the town: sunshine, sailing boats, forest wilderness, and a roller-skating rink. In true exploitation film style, an opening scroll moves across this image warning of increased youth vandalism across the nation: "In 1978 110,000 kids under 18 were arrested for crimes of vandalism in the United States. This story is based on true incidents occurring during the 70's in a planned suburban community of condominiums and townhomes, where city planners ignored the fact that a quarter of the population was 15 years old or younger." Director Jonathan Kaplan emphasizes this non-paradise suburbs setting: "This wasn't going to be a nostalgic look back on what it was like to be a teenager. This was going to be authentic and potentially scary." Much like Clint Eastwood's 1973 *High Plains Drifter*, the notion of the Western film is pressed to its most desperate edge: the promise of domestic peace in the new settlement is squelched under the

self-centered specter of individual freedom—greed—which undermines the collective sense of community. Moreover, the teen rebellion in *Over the Edge* presses the viewer to sympathize with the criminal teenagers as the film presents a broad, systemic critique of the very elements contributing to their apathy and vandalism: a destructive boredom derived from the lack of promised entertainment outlets by the community. Rather than some separate malevolent force fostering dystopia, the parents' drive for material success and economic growth becomes the primary factor destabilizing New Granada. In short, the film suggests that the very processes and logic leading to the establishment of this second frontier is harming its children.

[SLIDE #5] The outbursts of violence by the teenagers are aimed primarily towards property in the community—the symbol of the adolescent's torment, and the prized possessions of their parents. If placed within the Western genre, the viewer cannot help but root *against* the settlers—as the very process of settling the West demanded the violence of ethnic cleansing against Native Americans to open the space for settlements like New Granada. Mimicking the mobility of Native Americans in the Western film, teenagers in *Over the Edge* ride their bicycles through the town, cutting through both undeveloped fields and carefully crafted islands of development. The only sanctuary for teenagers is the small, inadequate Recreation Center (“the Rec”), housed in a temporary Quonset hut. Here, the children wait in vain for something to do besides getting hassled by the police for loitering in a community which views kids as a nuisance.

[SLIDE #6] One large specter of the West hovering over the lives explored in *Over the Edge* includes the theft of a revolver—an iconic symbol of the West. Upon taking turns shooting the limited amount of ammunition, Matt Dillon's character, Richie, holds onto the gun in the hopes of selling it. As the lives of Richie and the main protagonist of the film, Carl (played by

Michael Kramer), become targeted by local law enforcement, the two kids plan to run away from the community. In a sequence mirroring a horse chase across the West, an ensuing police pursuit sees the teenagers overturn their vehicle, with the two kids sprinting away from the wreck in different directions. In true Western film fashion, Richie turns to confront his nemesis, Sgt. Doberman—aiming his unloaded pistol at the law enforcement officer. Not knowing if the gun was loaded, the officer shoots the teenager dead in self-defense, granting a desire expressed by Richie earlier in the film fulfilled: he dies “on the streets.”

[SLIDE #7] This “old West” shootout precipitates a call for a local parent meeting at the Junior High School, where blame is cast around explaining why the teenagers of the community are so rebellious. As the parents argue, a large crowd of teenagers—their own kids—gather outside in the parking lot. In another allusion to the Western film, the children encircle the school, lock all the entrances with their bike chains and begin to smash windows and set cars on fire. In short, they become the so-called “Indians” attacking the settler community. The conclusion of the film shows Carl taken away by law enforcement authorities after being caught participating in the riot and driven to a juvenile detention facility along with others. In an act of solidarity, his friends celebrate Carl’s heroism as they are driven away.

[SLIDE #8] Despite this exaggerated ending, *Over the Edge* maintains a stark realism throughout the film. Most of the actors were amateurs, cast because of their look and age-appropriateness for the characters they portrayed, allowing their interactions to remain spontaneous and unselfconscious. Indeed, Matt Dillon was accidentally discovered by the casting crew when they were leaving a junior high school and spotted Dillon ditching class in the hallway. This attempt at an authentic cast contributes to the film’s cult status over the years. At the time, critic Roger Ebert highlighted these qualities: “‘Over the Edge’ is a funeral service held

at the graveside of the suburban dream. It tells a ragged story that ends with an improbable climax, but it's acted so well and truly by its mostly teen-age cast that we somehow feel we're eavesdropping.”⁶ In some ways, the lessons in *Over the Edge* could be read as analogous to the Census Bureau's 1890 announcement that the frontier was closed. Displaying its 1970s pessimism, the film's logic points toward the onset of discontented white suburban teenagers during the 1980s. However, as a model for 1980s teen movies, some elements in *Over the Edge* were removed from future films.

[SLIDE #9] Made before the ascension of Reagan's social conservatism and the 1986 “Just say no” campaign, the filmmakers brought further authenticity to *Over the Edge* by foregrounding teen drug use. Substance abuse is a constant throughout the movie—ranging from marijuana and hash to LSD and alcohol. The characters, however, are not morally punished for using drugs; it is another symptom of boredom and a lack of entertainment outlet for teens. While a hallmark of 1970s cinema, films from the 1980s depicting teenage rebellion quickly shed the scent of marijuana from the habits of protagonists as the voices of conservatism rose to prominence. By the mid-1980s, with a few exceptions, characters using illicit drugs most often received punishment, while alcohol was a celebrated alternative casting comedic light on drunken teenage antics. In the commercial-political world, this connected to the American celebration of alcohol and the historically racialized criminalization of drugs deemed illicit. An R-rating would be the tradeoff for youth drug consumption; for example, the use of marijuana in *The Breakfast Club* (1985). For PG-rated *Over the Edge*, drug-use operated as just another systemic aspect of teenage boredom.

[SLIDE #10] Orion Pictures was apprehensive about the film's depiction of teen violence against property. In an effort to disassociate the film's connection to other 1970s movies about

youth gang violence—particularly *The Warriors*—Orion Pictures tried to market *Over the Edge* as a horror movie—including nonsensical promotional posters showing the teenagers with whitened, zombie-like eyes. The fear of releasing a film showing white teenagers causing damage in the suburbs made the studio weary of the movie’s primary demographic: white suburban teenagers. In retrospect, the film’s producer, George Litto, suggests: “The real problem with the film was that it dealt with suburban white kids who cause a bit of violence—never against people, mind you, but against objects. If these kids had been urban and black, I think it would have scared Orion less.”⁷ In other words, the film subversively inverted the racial sources of violence in a nation which, since the 1960s, associated rioting with Black bodies. Moreover, as the teenagers are depicted as Native Americans to the white settler-suburbanites, *Over the Edge* also snuffs out both the flickering light of manifest destiny and the utopia of post-World War II Victorian morals guiding depictions of white suburban life.

Director Kaplan’s use of subtle dystopian moments highlight the latent violence sparked by a generation of children who are placed second to their parents’ yearning for material gain at the dawn of the Reagan era. Foreshadowing a critical trope for 1980s teenage-centric films, *Over the Edge* should be considered a pioneering effort in the eighties teenage film cycle that often foreground deep mythological themes of the West to help explain the lives of teenagers living in the artificial and racialized spaces designed by their parents and grandparents. Stoking a new adolescent individualism, *Over the Edge* also helped set the lifestyle trends of 80s teen movies with a soundtrack consisting of young bands such as Cheap Trick, Van Halen, and the Cars. As a film rooted in the 1970s, however, *Over the Edge* firmly belongs within the first wave of teen movies up through 1982—with the notable *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) offering a bookend to *Over the Edge*. After 1982, most teen films succumbed to less edgy themes—no

drugs, no talk of abortion—best personified by the surrealist affluence of John Hughes’ Midwest. Possibly for this reason, by the end of the 1980s *Over the Edge* had become a cult classic through movie rentals, even celebrated by one of its own, Nirvana guitarist and singer, Kurt Cobain, who asserted: “*Over the Edge* pretty much defined my whole personality. It was really cool. Total anarchy.” To conclude, the film represented the anxieties and desires of individual freedom circulating through American frontier imagery, where, ironically, the settlements had succumbed to its own settler colonial violence, as the liberty of “want” and “possession” displaced the needs of the community.

¹ Interview quotes from Mike Sacks, “Over the Edge,” *Vice* (2009).

² See Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019).

³ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

⁴ See Timothy D. Taylor, *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 180. Also see Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). A critical factor was the mid-1970s innovation of the Universal Produce Code (UPC) which tracked consumer behavior more efficiently.

⁵ Bruce Koon and James A. Finefrock, “Mousepacks: Kids on a Crime spree,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 11, 1973.

⁶ <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/over-the-edge-1980>.

⁷ See Mike Sacks, “Over the Edge,” *Vice* (2009).