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Geeks, Rebels and Prom Queens: The Risky Business of Perpetuating the Capitalist Family in 1980s High School Genre Films

When I was growing up, I wanted nothing more in the world than to be a character in a 1980s high school film. The characters in these films had the coolest of everything: cars, clothes, dance moves. Their parents went away on European vacations *and* left them at home. They trashed huge mansions without a second thought. Of course, all of that was only true on one side of the deeply divided socio-economic landscape. On the other side, cute rebels worked on their motorcycles while pouty girls designed clothes that were cooler than what the rest of the kids were wearing.

I was willing to exist on either side of this great divide. I could have been friendly with the rich kids, with their parties and sports cars, but I was equally enticed by the creativity, honor and drive that the working class kids seemed to represent. It is only now, as I look back to the characters I so admired, that I begin to ask some questions about my favorite films.

Why were so many teenagers in these films virtually abandoned by their parents? Why were so many cars destroyed and dresses mangled? Why was romance, but only heterosexual romance, such an essential component to every film? Why did working class characters have different rules for success than their middle class counterparts? In essence, why are the rules of a 1980s high school genre film set the way that they are?

My contention is that these questions, and others, can only be answered by examining what makes a genre film and, more importantly, what the purpose of such films are. In his essay, “Genre,” Andrew Tudor suggests that genre films operate within a

"previously defined world" that has certain common themes, typical actions, and characteristic mannerisms. More importantly, he says, calling a film a genre film is "more than just saying that that film is a member of this class of films because of shared characteristics. It is equally important that that film would be universally recognized as such in our culture."[1] Tudor points out that if the audience does not know what the rules of the genre film are, then there is no way to make a statement by breaking those rules. These three important points (shared characteristics, a universal acceptance of what those characteristics are and the idea that these characteristics can be changed) will be the basis for discussing genre in this essay.

Establishing the purpose of a genre film is more controversial. Various theorists have various ideas about what that purpose might be, ranging from pure entertainment value to subverting a potential uprising of the working class. In "Ideology, Genre, Auteur," Robin Wood argues that genre films extol the virtues of capitalist ideology. According to Wood, characters, relationships, plot lines and icons are meant to reinforce that ideology.[2] One might expect this to be different for popular teen films, which, given the audience and subject matter, would presumably place a high value on rebellion and non-conformity. But, far from advocating non-conformity, these films present a world where teenagers are ready-made capitalists, inevitably continuing both the economic and social ideologies endorsed by their parents.

In later writings, Wood discusses the cultural significance of several genre movies of the 80s, but he spends little time on the teen genre. He believes that these films do not take teenagers' concerns seriously, that they are portrayed as sex-obsessed. In these films,

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[1] Tudor, Andrew. "Genre." *Theories of Film*, New York: Viking Press, c. 1973, p.131-150
[2] Wood, Robin. "Ideology, Genre, Auteur," *Film Comment* Vol. 13, No. 1, Jan.-Feb. 1977, p. 46-51

"Generally, the assumption is that teenagers could not possibly be interested in anything but sex, and it would be rather absurd to expect it."[3] In this essay, I hope to show prove how Wood has underrepresented the importance of these films. By portraying them as no more than frivolous sex romps, he has ignored an important genre and has failed to see how it reflects the consciousness and concerns of the younger generation.

Other critics have been more willing to delve into a discussion of teen films. In her book, *Dreaming Identities*, Elizabeth Traube uses several teen movies to show how films during the 1980s endorse a new kind of work environment. Domination, orchestration and manipulation are more important than collectivism and an old fashioned work ethic in this new schema. But Traube's argument fails in that it is based on the assumption that middle class teenagers are the entire audience for these films. She therefore assumes that "the work ethic is a thing of the past," when in fact that is only true for middle class characters.[4] While she is correct in arguing that the traditional work ethic is no longer the key to success for middle class teens, she fails to note that there is still no other method available for their working class counterparts.

Putting History on the Screen

Although the 1980s was an era of unbridled capitalism, it was also a time for a number of social changes that come into direct conflict with capitalist ideology. In order for capitalism to continue, future workers must have been brought up in a stable, nurturing environment. However, more women, particularly mothers, entered the workforce during the 1980s than ever before. According to the Women's International

[3] Wood, Robin. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986 p. 215

Center, in 1980, 45% of married women with children under the age of six worked. By 1987, that percentage had jumped to 57%. In that same year, 51% of mothers with children under the age of three were in the workforce as well.[5]

At the same time, fathers were also spending less time at home with their children. Longer work hours and even longer workweeks in an increasingly cutthroat business world became the norm. With both men and women working more, according to data compiled by the Panel Study of Income Dynamics at the University of Michigan, by 1988, prime age working couples were putting in an average of 3,450 hours per year in combined employment.[6] That's an increase from 2,850 only two decades before. Thus, by the end of the 1980s, the typical dual-earner couple was spending an additional day and half on the job every week.

The same study found that college educated couples increased the amount of time spent at work more than those who did not have a college degree. In marriages where husbands had at least completed their undergraduate degrees, the couple's combined time spent at work increased by nearly 730 hours. There was an increase of only 490 hours in marriages where husbands were high school dropouts. As a higher education level tends to have a direct correlation with a higher economic class, it can be assumed that while working hours increased across the board during the 1980s, the children of those in middle class and upper class families saw even less of their parents than working class children did.

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[4] Traube, Elizabeth. *Dreaming Identities: class, gender and generation in 1980s Hollywood movies.* Boulder: Westview Press, 1992, p. 80
[5] http://catalog.com/wic/misc/history.htm
[6] http://www.isr.umich.edu/src/psid/

The lack of parental involvement in teen films reflects this trend. The tenets of capitalism, namely consumerism and constant work, have sent parents in search of a spiraling increase of work hours. However, their children are not receiving the familial support needed in order to take up the task when their time comes. Much of the tension created in the high school movies of the 1980s comes from this paradox. Teens are attracted to their parents' high priced, expensive consumer goods; they steal their cars and their clothing. Yet at the same time, they often destroy the very items that they also desire. There seems to be a simultaneous attraction to material goods and a rejection of the methods used to acquire them.

This attraction and repulsion also translates onto the romantic partners that teenage characters choose. The students in these films often resent their parents for their parents' unbridled capitalism, yet they still seem to search out romantic partners that would perpetuate the capitalist family. In film after film, boys and girls who prescribe to the gender roles of capitalism end up romantically linked. Any characters who question those roles remain unattached, or become part of a pairing too ridiculous to be taken seriously. Thus, another tension arises: teenagers' distaste for their parents lifestyle versus their acceptance of its inevitability.

Another important social change represented by these films is the changing role of college acceptance during the 1980s. While it was once possible to make good wages and raise a family without a college degree, the 1980s saw the basic disintegration of the industries that had supplied these opportunities. Steel workers, coal miners, auto workers, meatpackers and other unionized, once high paying jobs became less and less available during the 1980s. Many companies closed factories all across the U.S. and reopened them

in other countries where the work force was far cheaper to come by. High school seniors looking to the future during this time could no longer count on finding a well-paying job without a college degree. A number of films in the genre dealt with the newfound importance of gaining college entrance, with those in working class communities feeling the pressures of the new economy in a distinctly different way from their middle class counterparts.

The 1980s was also the time for an increased awareness and, consequently, a frightened reaction against homosexuality. Beginning with the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969, the gay rights movement had been gaining energy and publicity. Many states had repealed sodomy laws that penalized and fined gay men and more people began thinking of homosexuality as a biological "orientation" and not a "preference."

However, the 1980s brought a backlash against the gay community, particularly from Christian groups and Republicans. While Wisconsin made history in 1982 by passing the nation's first state law prohibiting discrimination against gays, on a national level, gay rights activists lost ground under a Republican administration. In 1985 the U.S. Court of Appeals panel in Washington, D.C. found it "impossible to conclude that a right to homosexual conduct is 'fundamental'." Additionally, in 1986, the U.S. Supreme Court released a 5 to 4 decision upholding the right of states to enforce laws against sodomy and Pope John II severed gays from the church, calling them "intrinsically disordered" and "evil." Also, the AIDS epidemic first hit the gay community during the 1980s, giving many another reason to fear homosexuals.

But even as many during 1980s may have objected to homosexuality based on stereotypes and fear, there were still no large gay communities outside of major urban

settings. Many people had a vague idea that they disliked gays, but most of them had probably never had a personal encounter with a gay man or woman. Therefore, another tension that exists in these high school 1980s films is the threat of homosexuality versus the presence of any actual homosexuals. In a number of films that I examined, homosexual slurs were used and those who were outsiders were almost always deemed "fags." Yet, there is no representation of any actual gay men or women in any of the films.

Choosing the Films

As mentioned earlier, genre films must conform to a certain list of known criteria. Therefore, an important piece of establishing a genre is to establish that list of criteria, or constructs. Not all of the films must fit every construct in order to be included, but there are certain base constructs that must be fulfilled in order to make this investigation culturally significant. Those films that do not fit the base criteria would not be included in the genre and will not be discussed in this essay.

My first base construct is that the protagonists of each film have to be in high school. In this way, films in the teen genre would show how changing socio-economic conditions are affecting the younger generation, not their parents. There could be other important characters of varying ages in the film, but the main characters all had to be high school students. For example, even though *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* contains a large role for Ferris' principal, Ed Rooney, the film is still really from Ferris' perspective and is therefore included in the study. On the other hand, *Lean on Me* has many roles for high

school students, but none of them are as fleshed out as much as their high school principal's. Therefore, this movie was examined, but ultimately not included.

Additionally, all the films included must be produced between the years 1981 and 1990. They are also set during that same time period. This base criteria assures that the teen genre films selected are examples of how filmmakers of the 1980s viewed the time period as they were living it. Later pictures of the decade would be taken with a nostalgic lens. For instance, films like *200 Cigarettes*, in part about high school students during the 1980s, but produced in 1999, would not be included.

The third base requirement for inclusion is that all films have to take place in a high school setting. Assuring similar settings guarantees a greater list of traits common to all films. This means that no "summer movies" are acceptable, since they have a very different set of characters, plot lines and other genre constructs. Even films like *Summer School*, which take place in large part in a high school but are still set during the summer, are not included. However movies set during the school year, but not particularly concentrated on class time, will be discussed. The aforementioned *Ferris Bueller* is one example of such a film, as is *The Breakfast Club*, which takes place on a Saturday, but in a high school library.

Fourthly, I only look at films that were at least moderate successes, either critically or at the box office. In other words, I am only interested in films that had an impact on their largely teenage audiences. While the idea of looking at films that fail is an interesting one, it is not something that will be tackled directly in this paper. Examining a film that just faded away, without leaving much of a cultural impact, would be a futile task for the purposes of this essay.

While others interested in this topic might want to examine some of the films that were eliminated for failing to meet any one of these criteria, I did not feel that they offered anything particularly meaningful to the discussion. The films which I did select, as well as the more complex common traits that I examined, can be found in the accompanying appendix. Not all of these films and traits will be discussed in this paper, but the appendix provides useful background material with which to view the rest of this document.

Where Have All the Parents Gone?

One of the constructs that was most apparent to me while watching these films was the lack of parental involvement. On the surface, teenage characters seem happy to be free of their parents' control, but underneath that surface lies anxiety, fear or even disgust with how their parents have left them on their own. A common issue that distracts parents from their children is problems at work. Given what we know about increasing work hours during this time, the fact that that social trend would appear in these films is unsurprising.

What is surprising is how explicitly the films blame work for poor familial relationships and how gender decides the way in which a parent's relationship with his or her child is portrayed. Fathers might be shown as having distant or awkward parenting styles due to a lack of time at home, but mothers are demonized for becoming "overly involved" in their work. The root of this disparity can be found in capitalist ideology, which assigns women the role of stable caretakers of the house and family. They are at fault when families fall apart; if fathers are incompetent, it is only because parenting is not a role in which they are supposed to excel. If they did, it might question the convention of the domestic woman.

In *Ferris Bueller's Day Off,* for example, Ferris (Matthew Broderick) convinces his parents that he is ill, and they let him stay home before going off to work. Later Ferris's watchful principal, Ed Rooney, notices that Ferris has been absent nine times and calls his mother to tell her that one more absence will mean that he cannot graduate. Ferris's mother, obsessed with her real estate business, has no idea that her son has

skipped school that many times. “Well this is all news to me,” she says. “It usually is,” he responds smugly.

Ferris’ father does not receive a phone call about his son’s truancy, nor does he receive one when Ferris’ sister, Jeanie (Jennifer Grey) is picked up by the police for making phony phone calls. Again, in that situation, the teen’s mother is called to pick her up. This despite the fact that we never see Ferris’ father doing any actual work, while we know that Ferris’ mother was closing a big deal that day. After picking Jeannie up at the police station, her mother is both agitated and angry, though not with her husband. In fact, once they arrive home, we discover that no one even called him to tell him what was going on. His distance from his family is palpable as his wife angrily relates the story to him: “I just picked up Jeanie at the police station! She got a speeding ticket, another speeding ticket, and I lost the Vermont deal because of her!” In a complete deadpan he responds, “I think we should shoot her.”

But, parents are distracted by more than frequent trips to the office. After being overworked for most of the year, they are often drawn away by the excitement of a vacation. Yet as Americans are uncomfortable with actual leisure time, argues Cindy Aron in *Working at Play*, vacations never completely separate the worker from their work. “Both by choice as well as by compulsion, Americans can inject work into play,” she writes.[7] Contemporary vacations, be they tourist cruises or camping trips, are also packaged as a consumer good to be bought and sold like any other.

Thus, when parents in these films go away on one of their oft-taken vacations, it is just a continuation of their work as well as another commodity that takes them away

[7] Aron, Cindy. *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. p. 258-261

from their teenage children. In nearly half of the films that I viewed, a character mentions that someone's parents are out of town. The reasons for their departure are never relevant, and sometimes films don't even make excuses for parental absences. In *Say Anything*, Lloyd Dobbler's (John Cusack) parents are in Germany for the entire film, missing their son's high school graduation, yet no reason is given. Other times, the fact that parents are away is not even mentioned, the ongoing house party is the only clue given.

Long hours at work and vacations are primarily the domain of the middle and upper classes. In fact, the films point to a correlation between increased income and decreased family time. Not one working-class character has a parent who goes away on vacation, nor are they often portrayed as "work-a-holics." Instead, working class parents are much more likely to simply abandon their children. Again, reasons for this abandonment typically go unexplained, but they always have disastrous affects, particularly if the teen's mother is the one to leave.

In *Pretty in Pink*, when Andie's mother leaves, Andie (Molly Ringwald) must take on the role of wife and caretaker for her father, who has been deeply depressed and perpetually unemployed ever since his wife left him. She cooks, she cleans, she even finds her father job interviews, while he drinks and sleeps and hopes that one day, his wife will return. At the end of the film, Andie reveals that, although she has taken on her mother's role, she is also emotionally distraught by her mother's disappearance. "She left me too, Dad," she cries, before breaking into tears.

In other films where working class mothers leave, and there is no daughter to take up her position, the family falls into complete disarray. In *Vision Quest*, Louden (Matthew Modine) and his similarly depressed father are so unused to having a hot

breakfast that the sight of Carla (Linda Fiorentino) in the kitchen doing so stops them dead in their tracks. Louden's father is also as helpless as Andie's as a parent, lacking the guidance or the strength to stop his son's maniacal mission to wrestle a student two weight classes under him.

In the two films, *Footloose* and *Can't Buy Me Love*, with non-existent fathers (due either to divorce or abandonment) societal blame still comes down on their struggling mothers. In *Footloose*, Ren MacCormack (Kevin Bacon) and his mother are abandoned by his father, so she moves them from Chicago to a small religious town where her sister lives. Though she is forced into her situation, and though she must seek a job, she is still chastised for her actions by members of the community and even her own family. After Ren's actions to end the ban on dancing in the town create unrest, the blame for these conflicts is placed on her. "Maybe if you stayed at home to be a good mother," her brother-in-law starts out, before Ren cuts him off. In *Can't Buy Me Love*, Cindy's divorced mother has no idea what is going on in her daughter's life because she is too busy dating. Cindy (Amanda Peterson) isn't happy with her mother's behavior (as indicated by her "deep" and rather depressing poetry) and she is portrayed as both an irresponsible and uncaring mother. In the first case, Ren's mother is clearly being blamed for seeking economic freedom while in the latter Cindy's mother is blamed for seeking sexual freedom.

Parental Overreaction and Fantasy Fulfillment

Interestingly, ignoring one's children is seen in these films as being distinctly more emotionally destructive than being too involved. Over-involved parental issues are

typically resolved when parents come around to their children's way of thinking. To examine this construct one must also acknowledge the difference between the creators of these films and their audience. The writers and directors are almost entirely male, and much closer in age to parents than teenagers. Thus, while unwilling to put themselves in the same category as absentee parents, the creators of these films could presumably empathize with those parental characters that just don't understand the needs of their children. These films, therefore, provide a fantasy fulfillment for the directors and writers of the film, who wish that they could come to an understanding with their own children as easily as the parents in the film do. They act similarly on the teenage audience, who yearn for parents that can really understand them.

In many films, parent-child conflict related to over involvement is resolved by a parental epiphany. In *Girls Just Want to Have Fun*, for example, Janie's military father forbids dancing and revealing clothing. Yet, for little reason, he comes around to his daughter's way of thinking by the end of the film. Watching his daughter (Sarah Jessica Parker) dance in spandex with a muscle-bound teenage boy, he suddenly realizes that she "looks beautiful out there."

Like this film, most of the others that deal with overprotective parents do so within the constraints of a father-daughter relationship. One of the few slices of destructive over parenting between parents and their sons can be found in *The Breakfast Club*. All three male characters have dysfunctional relationships with their "overinvolved" parents, with only one actually qualifying as mentally and physically abusive. The other two have exaggerated versions of everyday teen/parent conflicts.

Interestingly, both conflicts involve a parent pushing their teenage son too hard. Dorky Brian's (Anthony Michael Hall) parents won't give him a minute's peace about his grades and college acceptances. Jocky Andy's (Emilio Estevez) father can't tolerate "losers" in the family. The teens work desperately to garner the affections of their goal-oriented parents. Andy physically abuses and humiliates a weaker classmate in order to impress his father. Later he becomes guilt-ridden and distraught. The pressure put on Brian causes him to take what he hopes will be an easy shop course as a release. When he is unable to succeed in it, he seriously contemplates suicide. In this way, the films seem to be calling into question, yet again, the work ethic which is so essential to capitalist ideology.

But much as the viewer sympathizes with the way that Andy and Brian have been pushed, being too goal oriented is preferable to having no goals for your child at all. In *The Breakfast Club*, Allison (Ally Sheedy) personifies this "disturbing" possibility. Allison is friendless and practically non-communicative when she first comes to Saturday detention. While the other characters might have been too driven because of their parents over involvement, Allison proves to be far more pathetic than they, when she tells them that she hasn't even done anything to merit detention. She is only there because she had nothing better to do. Andy tries to get to the root of her problem, wondering, "What do they do to you?" (The 'they' must be taken to mean her parents, for in a film of this genre, who else could be to blame?) She responds quietly and purposefully to his question: "They ignore me." No reason is given, no overload of work, no vacation, no one has actually abandoned her or died. But in the context of the times, and, equally importantly, in the context of the other films, the cause for Allison's parents'

abandonment is irrelevant. All that matters is the expected result: their daughter's unstable mental health.

Demolishing the Decadence

Quite often parents have to pay for their perpetual non-involvement. Yet simply losing the respect of their children is not enough in a capitalist society, there must be a dollar value placed on that disdain. Thus these films typically contain the destruction of any number of big ticket items, from houses to clothing. Far from being simply a way to advance the plot or add conflict I would argue that this destruction is a critique by the younger generation of the capitalist system that has left them all but parentless. It is both an attempt to punish parents for their endless consumerism, and an effective way to get their attention.

The number of destructive parties in this genre is overwhelming. Yet what is truly interesting is how much teens seem not to care about the destruction of their homes nor their own enjoyment at their party. In *Pretty in Pink*, obnoxious and snooty Steff (James Spader) has a blow out house party while his parents are in Europe. He tells his friend calmly, "Money really means nothing to me. Do you think I'd treat my parents' house this way if it did?" In *Sixteen Candles*, Jake (Mike Schoeffling) basically ignores the ensuing house party around him. He locks himself in his room and waits for it to be over. In fact, Jake later allows a drunken high school freshman (Anthony Michael Hall), with no driver's license, to use his father's Rolls Royce to drive his soon to be ex-girlfriend home. Even when the freshman can't tell the difference between drive and reverse, Jake still lets him drive the very expensive car.

He isn't the only one; a number of teenage boys drive their parents' cars-only to end up smashing them. After all, what better item to embody capitalism than the car? As Elizabeth Traube points out in her book, *Dreaming Identities*, "In teen comedies the destiny of a parental car is fixed from the moment that a son borrows it."[8] In fact, one film, *License to Drive*, bases its entire plot around the systematic destruction of the family car by a group of teenage boys.

But perhaps the most well-known, and most poignant example of car destruction as a lashing out against capitalism is Cameron's "murder" of his father's prized Ferrari in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. The car has as much importance as any other character in the film. (It even has its own theme song.) Cameron (Alan Ruck) gives an in depth, and rather bleak, assessment of how much it means to his father: "It is his love. It is his passion." At the end of the film, Cameron begins brutally kicking the car when the miles put on it won't come off. He launches into a tirade, explicitly speaking out about all that the car represents. "Seventeen years and I've never taken a stand. Now, I'm gonna do it. I'm taking a stand against my father, against my family, against myself, against my past, my present and my future. I will not sit idly by as events that affect me unfold to change the course of my life. I will take a stand and I will defend it. When my father comes home tonight, he's finally going to have to deal with me. Good or bad, I'm taking a stand."

In this scene, car destruction is also linked to control and domination. By taking control of his father's car, Cameron also sees that he has taken control of his father. After its destruction, his father is going to *have* to deal with him. Yet, as Traube notes, only

[8] Traube, p. 79

sons borrow and destroy the family car, actively putting themselves in a position of power. Daughters are always far more passive about their transportation. Either they are given a car by their parents (In *Ferris Bueller*, Jeanie got a car for her birthday, while Ferris aggressively steals the Ferrari.) or they never drive at all. In lieu of destroying a car though, women too must find a way to show their discontent. And they do, using the "proper" venue: clothing.

In *Can't Buy Me Love*, Cindy acts out against her mother's non-involvement by stealing a thousand dollar dress that her mother has expressly forbidden her to borrow. As with the car, we know the fate of the dress from the moment she takes it out of its protective wrapping. Inevitably, someone pours red wine on it at a house party. Cindy is upset about the dress, agreeing to date Ronald (Patrick Dempsey) for a month so that she can buy another. In the process, she becomes closer to her mother, they talk about how little they see of each other, and her mother realizes that her dating is driving a wedge between them. In the end, Cindy receives permission to borrow the very same dress whose destruction lead to her reconnection with her mother.

Conflicts Arise, but the Cycle Continues

Parents seem to receive nothing but disdain from their children for the way that they follow capitalist guidelines; a constant pursuit of work and increased interest in commodified goods leads directly to their non-involvement. Wood argues that, "What the films do not dare suggest (they would instantly lose their appeal) is that these teenagers will grow up…to be replicas of their parents."[9] I would say that just the opposite is true.

[9] Wood, p. 216

However distasteful teenagers find their parents' lifestyle, teenage characters never end up romantically involved with someone who might stop this cycle from continuing. They continue to seek out romantic partners which will bring about a new generation of capitalist families.

Wood's own theories can be used to suggest the inevitability of the capitalist family in this genre. He states that the tenets of capitalist ideology, namely the work ethic, the subsequent sublimation of the libido, and the importance of a stable marriage and family, create two very different ideals for male and female characters in genre films. Men are supposed to act as, "the virile adventurer, the potent, untrammeled man of action." Women, by contrast, fit into the role of wife and mother, "perfect companion, the endlessly dependable mainstay of the hearth and home." These characters together represent the ideal romance, the one most in keeping with capitalist ideology.[10]

One film did manage to buck these gender roles fairly successfully: *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. While the film is an ensemble piece, one of the main characters is Stacy Hamilton (Jennifer Jason Leigh). Stacy stands out in a number of ways, not the least of which is that she is just as interested in losing her virginity as her teenage male counterparts in most other films. She picks up older, rebellious male characters that closely fits the "ideal." However Stacy eventually grows tired of these shallow men, and finally finds herself happily involved with Mark 'Rat' Ratner (Brian Backer), a dependable, though dorky character.

Fast Times at Ridgemont High stands out in large part due to the young age of the screenwriter, Cameron Crowe, and because the film was directed by a woman, Amy

[10] Wood, "Ideology, Genre, Auteur" p. 34-5

Heckerling. It is a point well taken in how differently the gender roles in these films could have been, if more women had been involved in their creation. But, for the most part, films of this genre follow the patriarchal capitalist system that Wood discusses.

There are many examples of "ideal" couples throughout the genre. Unsurprisingly, these couples are so perfect that they are usually together from the beginning of the film to the end. In *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, Ferris and Sloan (Mia Sara) are one such example. Both represent the ideal for their gender, as dictated by capitalist ideology, and they seem to know it. Ferris repeatedly asks Sloan to marry him, telling the camera that he really is serious about his intentions. For her part, Sloan looks on knowingly, rarely responding to his requests. She seems slightly perplexed that Ferris is getting so serious so fast, but she too knows their fate. "He's gonna marry me," she says with a smile, after he kisses her goodbye at the end of the day.

Yet ideal couples do not exist in a vacuum; they are surrounded by a supporting cast of "shadow" characters. Wood refers to the "shadow" of an ideal man as, "the settled husband/father, dependable but dull." For women, the openly erotic woman, "fascinating but dangerous, liable to betray the hero" provides the "shadow."[11] In genre films, these characters act as possible threats to capitalist ideals. Often they not only represent an alternative lifestyle, but also actively question the subscribed guidelines of their ideal counterparts. The presence of shadow characters is often the only direct critique of capitalist ideologies and gender roles.

Cameron in *Ferris Bueller* is a clear example. He is dependable and sickly, the perfect shadow to Ferris' virile ideal. Everything about Cameron is different from Ferris,

[11] Ibid.

but most obviously how they react to the famous capitalist car. While Cameron is fearful and even hateful toward the car, Ferris repeats time and time again how much he loves it. And when it comes to his "real" love interest, Sloan, Cameron offers a critique of their ideal relationship. Ferris asks why he and Sloan shouldn't just get married. Cameron relates them to his cold and distant parents. "I'll give you two [reasons]. My mother and my father. They're married and they hate each other… It makes me puke. Seeing people treat each other like that. It's like the car. He loves the car. He hates his wife."

Yet these kinds of critiques, while important, are safer than the ultimate rebellion: a shadow/ideal love match. In other words, a shadow can critique an ideal but we never truly believe that an ideal will fall in love with a shadow. From the beginning we know that a shadow/ideal love match is going to end in disaster. It must, for if it succeeds then it would suggest that someone who lives outside of these ideological constraints could be successful. Instead, shadow characters serve the paradoxical dual function of opening up the option of non-conformity, while also teaching over and over again why this option should not be taken.

Often times an ideal male is led astray by a shadow woman. In *Vision Quest*, Louden has guts, drive, and determination. Then he meets sassy, independent Carla, a slightly older and openly sexual woman from the city. Suddenly Louden accepts a ride home from school instead of jogging to prepare for his meet. He can't concentrate on anything but her at school. She even convinces him to take a weekend off. During this weekend, even though he still has to drop more weight to meet his goal of wrestling at a lower weight class, he eats a slice of pizza from out of her hands. "It used to be all I ever

thought about was getting Shoot on the mat," Louden tells his friend. "Now all I think about is Carla."

At the same time, Louden has been all but ignoring his ideal match: dependable, unchallenging, Margie Epstein (Daphne Zuniga). Margie spends much of the movie following Louden around with puppy dog eyes. She is a reporter for the school newspaper, but we never actually see her do anything other than defend Louden after the paper won't print one of his stories. In fact, her character adds nothing to the movie, other than to provide Louden with a more appropriate love alternative.

And, as Wood predicts, Carla does betray Louden, first by going out on what appears to a date with his mentor, and later by leaving him just days before his big meet. But Carla doesn't leave for any petty reason; the day of the meet she shows up in his locker room and tells him, "People ought to do what they set out to do." In other words, she has realized her ill effect on his character. She leaves him, in the end, because she knows that it is better for him. Margie is also in the crowd at the meet, offering support as always. We can assume that the point of showing her there is a message: Louden has finally come around.

Shadow female characters show the upset that an independent, sexual woman can cause, while shadow male characters do not, typically, represent a risk of anything but boredom to their female love interests. This is because, in capitalist ideology, women are given the responsibility of caring for house and home, while men must be the enthusiastic breadwinners. A man who acts as the dependable party threatens that dominant position. Thus film after film teaches women that such dependability is undesirable in lieu of the ideal mystery man of action.

In both *Sixteen Candles* and *Pretty in Pink*, Molly Ringwald plays a high school student who must contend with the annoyance of "shadow" men. At the same time, she is ignored by their ideal counterparts. The poster for the former says it all. In it, Anthony Michael Hall, who plays "the geek" in the film, leans up against Ringwald, while she looks longingly at Jake, the cool rich upperclassman, who is looking away. Jake and Blane (Andrew McCarthy), his counterpart in *Pretty in Pink*, are both men who hold positions of power, due to both social status and money, over Ringwald's character. The shadow characters have no such power, are in fact subject to the whims of Ringwald's, and thus never become attractive to her.

Shadow characters are not necessarily unlikable, they just aren't meant to be identified with, or taken seriously. Cameron in *Ferris Bueller*, Duckie (Jon Cryer) in *Pretty in Pink*, Lynne (Helen Hunt) in *Girls Just Want to Have Fun*, they are the characters that people quote, the ones with the best lines. Like Mercutio, they often threaten to overshadow their ideal counterparts. Yet somehow, our allegiances never really slip from the "ideal" couple. We never want Andie to end up with Duckie, even though he is clearly more fun and entertaining than moody Blane.

Often times likeable shadow characters are portrayed as asexual. Cameron is constantly described as a virgin, someone who will marry the first person who actually sleeps with him. Lynn is fun and rebellious, but for all of her goading on of Janey (Sarah Jessica Parker), her more reserved friend, we never see her interested in anyone. Other times, two shadow characters end up with one another. In *Sixteen Candles*, for instance, the geek ends up with Jake's heavily drunk, sexually carnivorous girlfriend. The more ridiculous the "shadow" couple, the more likely they are to end up together as they make

an even bigger mockery of non-conformist values together than they do apart. The end of the film nullifies any threat that the presence of these characters might have posed to the ideal capitalist couple.

Another way to strangle the critique of teenage shadow characters is for those characters to abandon non-conformist ideology. Usually the change is subtle, and involves changing physical appearances, which is virtually the same as a change of character. According to Thomas Sobchack in his essay, "Genre Film: A Classical Experience," experiencing a genre film is experiencing a known world, where stock symbols and physical appearance count tremendously in terms of how we "know" each character. Once known, he writes, that character can only change in limited ways.[12] Clothing is a common way to show this change.

Allison from *The Breakfast Club* is a classic example of how a shadow character can come closer to the ideal because of physical changes. Despite the fact that Allison, "likes that black shit under [her] eyes," she allows ideal rich girl Claire (Molly Ringwald) to transform her into something that society will find more acceptable. Not only does she put on more generically pleasing makeup but she also sheds several layers of clothing, effectively becoming thinner in the process. Once clouded in androgynous shrouds of black, we discover that she has actually been wearing a cute white frilly tank top underneath all along. The transformation is a success, of course, winning her the affections of jocky Andy.

Clothing is a big part of the change in men as well. Ronald is a huge dork when we meet him in *Can't Buy Me Love.* Due to his clothing, we know this even before he

[12] Sobchack, Thomas. "Genre Films: A Classical Experience," Literature/Film Quarterly 3, Summer 1975. P 196-204

opens his mouth. Later in the film he makes a deal with popular, sensitive, Cindy. He will pay her one thousand dollars to pretend to be his girlfriend for a month. After agreeing, her first action is to make a quick change in his wardrobe. She rips the sleeves off his shirt and gels his hair. Afterwards she states that he's now cool enough to walk with her down the hall. Over the course of the month, Ronald gains some confidence, becomes more and more outlandish and less and less of the "shadow" male. But our first signal that he's really changed is his wardrobe. By the end of the month, he's dressing "cooler" than Cindy ever dressed him in an effort to maintain his distance from his dorky past. In one scene, Ronald's former best friend attempts to speak to him honestly about feeling abandoned and hurt because of Ronald's actions. He stops once he lifts Ronald's dark impenetrable sunglasses, to find that he has been sleeping the whole time.

These films worked on teenage audiences two-fold. First, they commodified personality by linking the way someone looks to how they really are. Companies realized the power of identifying themselves with "cool personas" that would attract teenagers, that teens would think that some control over their lives was only a purchase away. For example, the Ray-Ban sunglasses that signified the change in Joel Goodson (Tom Cruise) from "shadow" to "ideal" male in *Risky Business* became one of Ray-Ban's hottest items soon after the blockbuster's release. Additionally, these physical changes lessened the impacts of shadow characters. Instead of linking non-conformity with a differing set of ideas that might upset the status quo, it became identified with an easily changeable wardrobe. Thus rebellion in these films is not a genuine threat to the dominant ideology as much as purchased spangles and accessories that help one look the part.

However, some changes did occur without any noticeable change in apparel. There are several cases in which women learn the importance of docility and support over the course of a film. In *Ferris Bueller*, Jeanie acts as the "shadow" to complacent Sloan. She is clever, resourceful, determined, and actually questions why her brother is given opportunity after opportunity which she is denied. For this, her parents yell at her and she is told that she has an "attitude." But, over the course of the film, Jeannie learns to stop trying to expose the patriarchal society that lets her brother get away with everything, in part because a cute rebel sways her after she is unjustly incarcerated at an all-male police station. The rebel (Charlie Sheen) tells Jeanie that the problem is not with her brother (and clearly not with any kind of patriarchal system) "The problem is you," he says. "You oughta spend a little more time dealing with yourself and a little less time worrying about what your brother does." In director and script writer John Hughes' notes, it says that Jeanie's reaction is stare at him angrily, "partly because he's so bold and partly because he's so right."[13]

When Jeanie's mother picks her up, she and the rebel are kissing passionately. By the end of the film, she has accepted her role as the "dependable" woman who, quite literally, holds the key to the hearth and home. In one of the last scenes, Mr. Rooney appears to have caught Ferris. Then his sister appears from behind the front door, excuses his actions and welcomes him into the safety of the home. Ferris is surprised by his sister's change, but accepts it with a large grin. By introducing independent female characters, subsequently subsumed by the system, these films taught young women that

[13] http://www.hundland.com/scripts/FerrisBuellersDayOff.txt

rejecting one's own true beliefs is not only the way to get a man, but also the way to restore stability to the home.

Young men, on the other hand, received just the opposite lesson: lash out, act brashly, boldly, and let the chips fall where they may. The films are filled with young men trying to prove themselves worthy in outrageous ways. In *Can't Buy Me Love*, Ronald calls Cindy's house repeatedly in an attempt to win her over. She doesn't answer. He tries to talk to her at school. She ignores him. When all these attempts prove to be too passive, he shows up at her house in his riding lawn mower, screaming at her windows and leading Cindy's mother to nearly call the police. In reality, of course, her mother would have called the police, but in the genre film this display of insanity is the only way for a man to truly prove himself. And it works, as Cindy jumps out of her popular friend's car and rides off into the sunset with Ronald.

These lessons may have ended in romance, but they had real implications on how teens viewed success in general. According to Wood, relationships and sex are shown as being of the utmost importance to the teens in these films. Wood argues that with sex as a top priority, the concerns of young people are minimized.[14] I would say that sex does just the opposite, standing in for any number of unfulfilled desires. Far from being a romantic distraction, sex and relationships teach these gender "ideals" as a means of showing teens how they should act in order to be successful in many realms in the future.

[14] Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. p. 215-217

Who can say, "What the fuck"?

The middle class teenage "rebel" is successful in both romance and business. Yet working class characters have very different ideals to emulate if they want to succeed. They are hard working, reliable and unquestioning. While Traube argues that, by the 1980s, these attributes are out of date, she fails to note that that is only true for middle class characters. All throughout the decade, films dealing with working class characters have male leads that use a strong work ethic and follow leadership in order to get ahead. In fact, if we continue to use these same gender roles, working class male characters (dutiful, dependable and attached to their families) appear to have been "feminized" somewhat by their class.

The difference between working class movies and others in the genre becomes strikingly clear when comparing two 1983 high school films: *All the Right Moves* and *Risky Business*. The two films contain a number of similarities, not the least of which is their leading man, Tom Cruise. In both films, Cruise plays a high school senior whose main concern, when we meet him, is getting into college. Both characters' parents are minor, if not entirely unimportant characters that have little control over their sons' behavior. Both characters have two goals and succeed in achieving both: losing their virginity and getting into the college of their choice. Same actor, same goals, same outcome, yet how these goals are achieved speaks volumes about how the route to success was prescribed in these films depending on the economic class of their main character.

In *All the Right Moves*, Cruise plays Stefen "Stef' Djordjevic, the Polish-American son of a steelworker in Pittsburgh. Stef is a virgin in the film, constantly asking

his girlfriend, Lisa (Lea Thompson) when she will be willing to sleep with him. After what we are to assume is a long relationship, and after Lisa feels truly in love with and trusting of Stef, they have sex. In *Risky Business*, Joel attempts to lose his virginity to a prostitute, but does not when "she" turns out to be a transvestite named Jackie (Bruce Young). Jackie tells Joel to call another prostitute named Lana (Rebecca De Mornay). When he does, Lana is exactly what Joel wants, someone risky and exciting, and he is successful in losing his virginity to her.

In the first case, Stef works long and hard at his relationship with Lisa. Their night together is very meaningful to both of them. Joel, on the other hand, does not want to put forth the effort of having a relationship. He uses his higher economic status to help him reach this goal. And although he took a chance in calling a prostitute and lost out initially, he ended up winning in the end. The differences between when Stef loses his virginity and when Joel does, is remarkably analogous to how they "succeed" in other areas of their lives, particularly how they get into college.

As discussed earlier, the importance of college increased tremendously during the 1980s. Certainly Stef felt these socio-economic changes first hand. But they would have gone largely unnoticed by middle class teens like Joel, the child of white-collar workers, who had surely always planned on going to college. The only thing left up for debate is where his parents will send him. After Joel bombs his Princeton business school interview, he tells a friend that it looks like he'll be going to the University of Illinois. According to Traube, "College admission…may now seem mundane to middle class audiences."[15] But Traube does not indicate how important college admission still is for

[15] Traube, p. 79

working class audiences. Stef will be the first in his family to go to college, and only then because of a full scholarship, and the film places appropriate emphasis on his eventual acceptance.

But, Joel has no reason to believe college is not in his future. Thus, he can safely say "What the fuck" (the movie's catch phrase) without the fear of repercussion. In fact, Joel is actually rewarded for his devil-may-care attitude. The interviewer tells Joel that his grades and SAT scores are a bit low for Princeton, so we can assume that he would not have gotten in had he not displayed the "business sense" that he did by opening up a brothel in his home. It is important to note that Joel is part of a long line of middle-class rule breaking male characters including, most notably, Ferris Bueller and Jeff Spicoli (*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*). The only distinction between Joel and these other two characters is that Joel must slowly learn that disrespect for rules and authority are admirable qualities, while that seems to be inherent for Ferris and Spicoli (Sean Penn).

By contrast, Stef is told time and time again that following the path set forth by those in authority is the only way that he will ever succeed. His father questions his decision to wait before picking a school, telling him that it's dangerous for him to be "too proud." Later, his football coach tells him, "You want to go to college? Then play the way you've been taught." Yet, Stef does not heed his father's or his coach's warning and thus he nearly ruins his entire life. It is only by accepting the coach's offer, and with it admitting to the mistake of free thinking, that his road to success becomes unblocked again.

But it is not obedience alone that assures Stef a successful future. He must also keep striving constantly, working long hours on the football field, in order to make sure

that his game does not suffer. He is pushed, of course, by his coach and by his unwillingness to let his teammates down. He spends extra time working with Vinny, so that not just he, but the whole team, improves. The fact that Stef is emotionally involved in the success of his teammates also differentiates him from middle class characters, who rarely show collectivist tendencies.

Stef's hard work extends to academics as well; he spends hours drafting the various buildings and machines that fill in the spaces on his walls where football awards do not already dangle. There is a large sense of pride in work, specifically manual labor, in his community, and the disgrace of being jobless sends many men to drink.

Stef shares his commitment to hard physical labor with more than just the other men in his community. Louden from *Vision Quest*, is defined largely by his constant striving. Like Stef, he is also planning on going to college via an athletic scholarship. Already working hard to maintain his top position, Louden then goes out of his way to struggle even more. Louden doesn't waste a minute of his day that could be spent working out. He is also virtually starving himself in order to drop the weight that he needs to by the time his school plays Shoot's. Along the way, his health, both mental and physical, are forced into a decline, and girlfriend Carla leaves him because she fears that she is too much of a distraction to his "vision quest."

Aside from the motivation of having a vision quest, which the film defines as trying to find one's place in the system, we never really learn why Louden decides that beating Shoot is something that he has to do. The work seems to be mainly for it's own sake, and only peripherally for the respect and notoriety that he can achieve with it. Louden carries a full course load at school, works late nights as a room service waiter at a

local hotel, and works out regularly even before he starts his quest. The fact that he would try to add more to his already filled schedule is odd to say the least. Louden seems to be using work as a way of defining himself, of having some control over the things that happen to him, of perhaps finding some happiness in his life.

But as Stef and Louden sweat and strain to find their place in a world that has quickly come to devalue manual labor, Joel slides across his living room floor in boxer shorts. "With its vision of limited opportunities and its almost willful refusal to gratify fantasies of individual empowerment, [*All the Right Moves*] runs counter to a dominant ideological tendency," during the 1980s, writes Traube.[16] Yet I would argue that, taken in a larger context that includes a working class teenage audience, *All the Right Moves* is very much a part of the dominant ideology. In fact, the ideology is clearly presented: to be successful, working class characters must work without questioning orders, while their middle class counterparts manage and orchestrate.

Not that that orchestration is not work of a different kind. It takes the right clothing, the right car, and particularly the right impenetrable sunglasses to create what Traube calls, "cool rebelliousness." Traube says that far from being just another personality trait, this rebelliousness "is a highly crafted and effective strategy for dominating others."[17] Traube is speaking in this passage about that schemer extraordinare, Ferris Bueller, but I believe it certainly applies to Joel Goodson as well.

In addition to achieving the "cool rebellious" look through consumerism, as mentioned earlier, Joel cultivates the uncaring attitude needed as well. When talking to potential customers he speaks with the ease of someone who knows that they are in a

[16] Traube, p. 80
[17] Ibid.

position of power. One reason for this may be that we only see Joel speaking to the dregs of high school society, the fat and the dorky. Plausibly these are the boys most likely to require his services, but they are also people that Joel can feel that he has some degree of power over even before he begins his pitch.

Another reason that Joel's cocky attitude develops is that the people around him are nurturing it. Lana is certainly encouraging, taking Joel on one risky adventure after another. While his friends used to mock him for being too straight-laced, since his transformation he has become almost like a god to them. And on top of all that, he finds that through simply acting the part of the cool rebel, he can make close to eight thousand dollars in a single evening, thanks to what could certainly be considered the physical labor of others.

But Joel does not suddenly become blessed by good fortune throughout the course of the film. After all, he does lose all of the money that he made to Lana's pimp. But, much like the rest of his experiences that weekend, we walk away feeling that the incident isn't as much a loss as it is a lesson for the future. Joel learns that by taking chances, he may come out on top sometimes and he may not others, but that he will ultimately be respected and successful in the end. Certainly, there can be parallels drawn to the newly powerful stockbrokers of this period. With his rebellion safely confined to consumerism, his ability to withstand great wins and losses with little show of emotion, as well as dominate and intimidate others into believing him, Joel shows all of the attributes valued by the business world at this time. Is it any wonder, then, that his interviewer offers his recommendation?

Locked in the Closet

Clearly, gender roles are an important part of justifying whom will end up with who, and how to become successful. Therefore, it is unsurprising that homosexuality among teens is never shown, rarely talked about, and even then always disparagingly. In fact as gays and lesbians were receiving some of their first positive portrayals in other mainstream genres during the 1980s, most notably *Making Love* in 1982, they remained decidedly closeted in high school films. Teens may have been shown as sex-obsessed, yet even the possibility of homosexuality was reviled.

Nearly every film that I watched contained anti-gay sentiment of some kind. Typically the word “faggot” was used to describe any male who displayed some degree of vulnerability. Interestingly, the ideal male characters never used such terms. They were, in fact, quite often called “faggots” themselves. In this way, filmmakers acknowledged that homophobia was not an ideal quality, certainly a step forward from previous, openly homophobic main characters. But at the same time, it made homosexuality an insidious perversion that might be found anywhere, even in the most ideal character. It seemed as though the slightest sign of weakness could be an indication of homosexuality.

In *Three O'clock High*, nervous, dorky Jerry (Casey Siemaszko) is forced to confront psychotic Buddy (Richard Tyson) in the bathroom so that he can ask Buddy if he would be willing to be profiled in the school newspaper. Buddy doesn't even let Jerry finish the question before saying angrily, “If you're a fag...” and slamming Jerry's wrist into the wall. When Jerry responds vehemently that he is not, Buddy's next assumption is that Jerry is “a narc.” In this way, the film links undercover narcotics agents, who pretend

to be normal students but are actually hoping to infiltrate the society in an effort to bring the students who befriend him down, with homosexuals.

While Jerry and Buddy have an antagonistic relationship, even best friends could suspect homosexuality given even the slightest indication. In *Teen Wolf*, Scott (Michael J. Fox) tries to tell his best friend, Stiles (Jerry Levine), about the "changes" he's been going through. Stiles looks at him, petrified. "Are you gonna tell me you're a fag? If you're gonna tell me you're a fag I don't think I can handle it." Stiles is visibly relieved, in fact elated, to discover that his friend is not homosexual. He is merely a werewolf.

The changes that Scott is going through (deepening voice, increased aggression, and hair growth) are clearly an allegory for puberty. As shown in the film, these changes can be difficult to deal with, especially when you seem to be alone in experiencing them. But imagine the difficulty for young men whose puberty might awaken homosexual desires. According to Wood, teenage homosexual behavior is "widely recognized as normal phase toward true normality…the phenomenon represents the final struggle of our innate bisexuality to find recognition, before it capitulates to the demands of normality, the nuclear family and the patriarchal order." In other words, Wood believes that teen films insistent emphasis on heterosexual sex is an unconscious way to acknowledge the possibility of homosexuality.[18] Male characters in these films seem to be "protesting too much" when they speak obsessively about sexual involvement with women. Wood, however, neglects to mention that that unspoken insecurity and questioning of one's own sexuality is also the cause of the rampant homophobia in these films.

[18] Wood, p. 216-7

Wood believes that there are no homosexual characters in these films, nor any homosexual behavior. However I would argue that there are instances when the discerning viewer might be able to see characters questioning their sexuality, and the pain that that questioning brings them. Perhaps the best example is Louden in *Vision Quest*. As mentioned earlier, there is virtually no reason for Louden's vision quest to wrestle a student in a lower weight class. But Louden is tormented, by exactly what we do not know, but he lays awake each night for hours thinking about his life. He often worries that he is insane. (A trait stereotypically associated with homosexuals in many mainstream films.) Preparing for the vision quest is obviously a much-needed distraction from his own thoughts.

I would argue that Louden's thoughts are wandering to the possibility that he might be gay. Whether or not he is gay is up for debate, but it is clear throughout the film that *he* thinks it may be a possibility. In one of the first scenes of the film, Louden delivers food to the room of a man who strikes up a conversation with him. Louden seems happy to talk to the man, until he reaches across and touches Louden's leg. Louden jumps up and leaves the room. Once free from the room, Louden starts doing push-ups in the hall while he waits for the elevator to come. In this scene, we can see Louden’s mental link between working out and uncomfortable sexual feelings. It is also interesting that when asked about why he is so infatuated with Carla, he responds, “She’s got all the best things I like in girls and all the best things I like in guys.”

Near the end of the film, Louden asks Carla directly if he might be gay. He recounts a story of when the guys on the wrestling team went to a teammates house and one by one had sex with that teammate’s sister. Louden didn't want to be involved and his

decision has been haunting him ever since. “Does it make me a queer or what?” he implores. Carla's answer, of course, is that it does not, that there is too much emphasis placed on sex when it isn't really all that important. “If you're a boy it counts for everything,” Louden responds.

Conclusion

It would be easy to dismiss movies directed toward teenagers without much in depth analysis. Films in this genre tend to be comedies, they are obsessed with sex, and they are marginalized by the fact that they appeal to a very select audience. But in this paper, I hope I have shown why it would be foolish to dismiss these films without understanding all of their complexities.

Teen films are surprisingly complex in their take on capitalist ideology. On the one hand, as we might expect, teen characters detest the system that their parents subscribe to. They act out in a variety of ways to get their parents attention and punish them for their inattentiveness. On the other hand, they seem to agree with the gender roles dictated by the very same ideology. There is a sense that mothers have no business in the business world, while fathers' attempts to parent can only end in disaster.

In fact, while they may be angry with their parents for following capitalist ideology, they punish those who do not follow those guidelines in their own age group. Teens search out romantic partners that they know will perpetuate the cycle of capitalism, shunning those who are unwilling to conform. They follow dramatically different paths to success, based on the capitalist ideals for their class. And finally, they are made nervous by threats to the dominant ideology, particularly the possibility of homosexuality.

By the end of the decade, so many films dealt implicitly with these complexities that the conditions were right for a perfect send-up: *Heathers*. This 1989 surreal dark comedy exposed and made explicit nearly every underlying trait discussed in this paper. By exposing these traits, *Heathers* also made it possible for new genre constructs to evolve.

To point out the inanity of parental involvement, Veronica (Winona Ryder) has the same empty conversation with her parents over and over again. J.D. (Christian Slater) speaks to his father with the forced joviality of a sit-com and builds bombs in his bedroom with no fear of being caught. His mother didn't simply die or abandon her family; she blew herself up. Veronica and J.D. don't waste time crashing cars and staining dresses to show their discontent, they take the next logical step to murder and arson.

Ideal and shadow characters are taken to caricature proportions. J.D. (It stands for Jason Dean, but clearly the James Dean rebel character is being parodied here.) is meant to represent the ultimate moody dissident, making his stand not with empty wild gestures, but with bullets and bombs. Veronica is, for most of the film, the complacent ideal, letting herself become talked into murder after murder. Fiercely independent and strong Heather Chandler (Kim Walker) is not only demonized, as we might expect, but even killed for her "bitchiness."

The importance of clothing to establish character is also taken to new levels, with each character actually color-coded to show their personality. Heather Chandler is red with anger and power, Heather McNamara is yellow to show her flightiness, and Heather Duke is green with envy. Veronica wears blue to show her depression and J.D. is black with hopelessness.

The film also sends up the importance of getting the "right" college acceptance. One character is so obsessed that he asks the school guidance counselor if he can have a tape of his participation in the ceremony after his classmates' "suicides" so that he can

put it in his portfolio. “I'm gonna need a VHS copy of all this by Monday for my Princeton application,” he says. She quickly agrees, as though his request was typical.

Finally, the film most blatantly satirizes the willingness to blame homosexuality for things gone wrong. Super jocks, and homophobes, Ram and Kurt are murdered, but J.D. easily turns it into what appears to be a suicide with the placement of several “homosexual” items: make-up, a floral shopping bag, and bottled water. According to J.D., “This is Ohio. If you don't have a brewski in your hand you might as well be wearing a dress.” His assumptions about the small mindedness of the town prove to be correct. When police officers find the bag, particularly the bottled water, they know they have all the answers. Even the football players’ parents don’t question their sons’ post-mortem admission of homosexuality. At their funeral, Kurt’s father stands up and says, “My son’s a homosexual, and I love him! I love my dead gay son!” J.D. sniggers, “Wonder how he'd react if his son had a limp wrist with a pulse.”

But just as *Heathers* winks knowingly at the genre that created it, it blasts forward onto new territory with its ending. Veronica fakes her own suicide, rather than allow J.D. to kill her, and then goes after him, demanding that he end his rampage. Her actions give her mother a wake up call about how much they’ve been ignoring one another and save the school from being destroyed by J.D. Later, she does not offer J.D. support when he admits that maybe he’s killed his fellow students because “nobody loved me.” Instead, she stands back, lights a cigarette, and watches him (quite literally) self-destruct. “You know what I want?” she tells him. “Cool guys like you out of my life.” With that, Veronica seems to be rejecting the ideal male that fills so many of these films.

Walking back into the building, Veronica runs into Heather Duke. "Heather, my love, there's a new sheriff in town," she tells her old friend. Whether she maintains control of the school or not, we never know, but her transformation marks the beginning of a new era in high school films.

	License to Drive	Breakfast Club	Girls just Wanna Have Fun	3 o'clock High	Footlo s
shots of high school within first five minutes	X	X	X	X	
films time line follows school events, rather than calander schedule		X		X	X
car used to indicate social and economic status	X	X	X	X	X
followed up with clothing		X	X	X	X
male character (m.c): goofy, intelligent	X	X	X	X	X
m.c. male: rebel with a cause		X	X		X
female character (f.c.): shy, demure		X	X	X	
wacky best friend (male) dorkier than main character	X		X	X	X
wacky best friend(s) (female) more adventerous, self assured than main f.c.			X		
main character attracted to someone on different social, economic level	X	X	X	X	X
Ignore love interest of person on their own social level		X	X	X	
Father (father figure) dominant parental figure		X	X		X
Mother dead or abandoned family			X		
Destructive party		X	X		
Borrowed car driven irresponsibly, damaged	X			X	X
m.c. has opportunities with exciting, more sexually experienced women	X	X	X	X	X
m.c. ends up with dependable woman		X	X	X	
f.c. must ward off dependable guys	X	X	X		X
f.c. ends up with exciting, more rebellious guys	X	X	X		X
		X	X		X